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Locating HE in the Global Landscape

John Urry

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It is widely believed that we are currently living through some extraordinary times, times involving exceptional changes to the very fabric of social life. This sense of transformation has been described by academics, journalists, management specialists, educationalists, politicians, media commentators, computer experts and others. One way to characterise these transformations is through the claim that there is a globalisation of economic, social and political life.

Analogies have been drawn with the period at the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth centuries. A somewhat similar restructuring of the very dimensions of time and space took place. New technological and organisational innovations 'compressed' the time taken to travel across, and to communicate over, large distances. Some of the innovations that changed these dimensions of time-space included the telegram, the telephone, steamship travel, the bicycle, cars and lorries, skyscrapers, aircraft, the mass production factory, X-ray machines and the development of Greenwich Mean Time. Together they had the effect of 'compressing' time and space (Lash and Urry 1994).

Today something similar seems to be occurring. New technologies are producing 'global times' in which distances between places and peoples again seem to be dramatically reducing, redrawing the very categories of time and space. Some commentators have suggested that time and space are 'de-materialising' (Urry 1998).



The term 'globalisation' however is somewhat confusing since it refers both to certain global processes (from the verb, to globalise) and to certain global outcomes (from the noun, the globe). In this talk I mainly use globalisation in the first sense. Many of the processes discussed are incomplete and there is nothing approaching a single global society. What then are these global processes? (see the Table below; Waters 1995; Albrow 1996; Eade 1997).

MAIN FORMS OF GLOBALISATION

strategy	used by transnational corporations which operate on a world-wide basis and involves a lack of commitment to particular places, labour forces or governments
image	images of the 'earth' or 'globe' used in the advertising of products (airlines for example) and for recruiting people to join groups protesting about the environment
ideology	those with economic interests in promoting capitalism throughout the world argue that globalisation is inevitable and national governments should not intervene to regulate the global market-place
basis of political mobilisation	characterising an issue as 'global' makes it likely that a wider range of individuals and organisations will mobilise for or against the phenomenon in question
scapes and flows	people, information, ideas and images 'flow' along various 'scapes' organised through networks within and across different societies

I mainly concentrate upon the last of these, namely 'scapes and flows' (Brunn and Leinbach 1991; Lash and Urry 1994; Castells 1996). Scapes are the networks connecting together machines, technologies, organisations and documents. Together such networks produce sets of nodes that inter-connect together. The following are the main global scapes:

- the system of transportation of people by air, sea, rail, motorway roads, other roads
- the transportation of objects via postal and other systems
- the wire, co-axial and fibre-optic cables that carry telephone messages, television pictures and computer information and images
- the micro-wave channels used by cellular phones
- the satellites used for transmitting and receiving radio and television signals

Once such scapes have been established, then individuals and especially companies will try to become connected to them, to become nodes within a particular scape. Examples include how towns try to get connected to the motorway network, or have flights organised to major 'hub' airports, or get their local schools plugged into the internet.

Various flows occur along these scapes:

- people travelling along transportation scapes for work, education and holidays
- objects being sent and received by companies and individuals which move along postal and other freight systems
- information, messages and images flowing along various cables and between satellites
- messages travelling along micro-wave channels from one mobile phone to another



These scapes and flows create new social inequalities, of access. Some groups are well 'plugged-in' to these scapes (such as those universities with good internet access). While others can be excluded. What has become significant is the 'relative', as opposed to the 'absolute', location of a particular social group or town or university in relationship to these scapes. These telecommunication and transportation structures reshape the very nature of time and space. Scapes pass by some areas while connecting others along information and transportation rich 'tunnels', which in effect compress the distances of time and space between those places (the so-called 'Golden Triangle' in the UK).

The metaphor appropriate to capture these scapes and flows is not that of a structure, which implies a centre, a concentration of power, vertical hierarchy and a formal or informal constitution. Manuel Castells argues that we should employ the metaphor of network:

Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power, and culture ... the network society, characterized by the preeminence of social morphology over social action (1996: 469).

A network is a set of interconnected nodes, the distance between social positions being shorter where such positions constitute nodes within a network as opposed to those outside the particular network. Networks are dynamic open structures so long as they can continue to effect communication with new nodes (Castells 1996: 470-1). Networks thus produce complex and enduring connections across space and through time between peoples and things (see Murdoch 1995: 745). They spread across time and space. Otherwise, according to John Law: 'left to their own devices human actions and words do not spread very far at all' (1994: 24). Different networks thus possess different reaches or abilities to bring home distant events, places or people, to overcome the friction of space within appropriate periods of time.

So far I have outlined some general developments in the global landscape, resulting from various scapes, flows and networks. In the next section I consider four developments directly related to HE, information, branding, desires and states (and see Smith and Webster 1996; Scott 1998).

TRANSFORMING THE HE LANDSCAPE

Most obviously, the new global landscape is being transformed by what Manuel Castells terms, the 'informational society' that especially developed within north America in the 1970s (1996; Gibbons 1998). Some of its features include:

- bits of electronically transmitted information are the building blocks
- such technologies are pervasive since information has become integral to almost all forms of human practice
- there are complex and temporally unpredictable patterns of informational development occurring in a distributed fashion in very specific localities
- technologies are organised through loosely organised and flexibly changing networks
- different technologies gradually converge into integrated informational systems (especially the once-separate biological and microelectronic technologies)
- these systems permit organisations to work in real time 'on a planetary scale'
- such instantaneous electronic impulses, or 'timeless time', provide material support for the development of new scapes

Contemporary technologies and social practices are based upon time-frames that lie beyond conscious human experience. Tom Peters talks of the 'nanosecond nineties' (1992). The new "computime" represents the final abstraction of time and its complete separation from human experience and the rhythms of nature. This instantaneous time stems from the shift from the atom to the bit; that the information-based digital age 'is about the global movement of weightless bits at the speed of light' (Negroponte 1995: 12). The information can become instantaneously and simultaneously available more or less anywhere, although not of course



everywhere. Knowledge has become dramatically 'de-territorialised' and turned into bits of information (Delanty 1998) resulting in what John Keane calls 'information blizzards' (1991).

These blizzards can leave HE with its relatively slow-moving curricula and traditions of scholarly work badly placed to compete with new faster-moving competitors in information-producing and handling. HE is organised in terms of a daily cycle of unchangeable time-tabled classes, a seasonal cycle of weeks, terms and years, a lengthy cycle of degrees, and traditions and ritual that hark back to Mediaeval Europe. Compared with these relatively fixed and medium term times, some contemporary organisations are more able to mimic the instantaneous time of the informational revolution (Urry 1998). HE will have to develop new ways of organising themselves in these global times.

Second branding. New products are produced in predictable, calculable, routinised and standardised environments. These global companies presuppose enormously effective networks stretching across the globe. Such networks depend upon allocating a very large proportion of resources to branding, advertising, quality control, staff training and the internalisation of the corporate image in each country wherever that company operates. These aspects of the brand cross societies in standardised patterns so sustaining the global image, even where there is franchising and not single ownership. McDonalds is the paradigm case of such branding, as George Ritzer describes (1998). It has resulted in new ways of organising companies on a global scale with a minimum of central control. It has produced new kinds of low skilled standardised jobs for especially students (McJobs), generated new products (Chicken McNuggets) and encouraged the eating of standardised fast food bought from take-out restaurants (hence students' 'grazing'), and of course established its own 'university'.

No HE institution has established a brand with such widespread recognition – mostly HE institutions are relatively poor at establishing and sustaining its networks which ensure that the same product is delivered in the same way at the same standard (OU as partial counter-example). This is so even within a region, let alone across the globe. Part of this of course stems from the intensely complex character of the academic product and the degree to which that product presumes face-to-face social interaction of students with particular scholars. Can those scholars be replaced by cheaper replacements or by their visual images? Do those core scholars ever have to be present within the distant parts of the institution in question? This leads us to consider just what in the end is the core characteristic of the brand of a HE institution in a world of intense global brand competition. How much is face-to-faceness part of that core and what is the relationship between those face-to-face 'moments of truth' (as the former MD of SAS put it) and the overall brand? How does this relate to the 140,000 students now doing UK degrees without being at a UK institution (see Macleod 1998)?

Third, desires. Globalisation allows people new opportunities and desires to develop (Urry 1998):

- to travel overseas so permitting something of a global market for students and to facilitate a great deal of 'academic tourism' (that is, academic conferences)
- to buy consumer goods and life-styles from across the world (Mexican food, Harvard T-shirts, south American coffee, Scandinavian furniture, McDonalds hamburgers and so on)
- to communicate with people in many countries via the internet and to form 'new social groups' often opposed, or providing alternatives, to aspects of globalisation
- to participate in global cultural events such as the World Cup, 'world music' and so on
- to develop local identities, as in the re-discovery of many ethnic traditions and identities (such as Scottish nationalism)

Global enthusiasts see these processes as producing a new world order, a kind of cosmopolitan 'borderlessness' (Ohmae 1990). This offers new opportunities, especially to overcome the limitations and restrictions that societies and states have exercised on the freedom of corporations and individuals to treat the world as 'their oyster'. HE institutions are of course much more rooted in place and are unable to roam globally. However, potential students and staff do have much greater mobility and will be motivated by various desires, for



learning certainly but also travel, friendship, leisure based groupings, learning English and so on. HE institutions have to respond energetically to this mobility and to how they are part of a system of global tourism, for both academic staff and prospective students. This will almost certainly involve the capacity of HE institutions to act 'glocally' – to connect such global processes with appropriate aspects of local economy, culture and identity.

Fourth, states. Territories are less obviously subject to governance by national states while many traditional domains of state action cannot be fulfilled without international collaboration. These flows across societal borders make it hard for states to mobilise clearly separate and coherent nations in pursuit of societal goals. The breaking down of the coherence of 'national economies' has been combined with an increased political unwillingness of most states to increase taxation and spending (and of taxpayers to pay). States are shifting to a regulative rather than a direct production/ employment function, such a shift being facilitated by new forms of information gathering, storage and retrieval (as with data on student dropouts, for example). As has been said of Japan: 'network-type systems emphasise a type of human control that involves inducement or persuasion by manipulating information rather than a method of control that depends upon power-based or contractual political action' (cited Dale 1997: 33).

Both within countries and especially across the EU there has been a massive increase in the 'regulation' of how goods and services are produced and of certain environmental and other consequences (Majone 1996). Less emphasis is placed upon ensuring that some particular service remains in public ownership and more is placed upon establishing effective statutory regulation by supposedly independent agencies. The EU is the regulatory state par excellence; there are now more rules introduced each year by the EU than are initiated by the typical European state (Majone 1996: 57). Other global regulators include UNESCO, World Bank, IMF, the World Intellectual Property Organisation, the International Air Transport Association, the Olympic movement, the Rio Earth Summit held in 1992, WHO, the Association of Commonwealth Universities, many international academic associations and so on.

There are two implications for HE:

- attempts to defend their position as 'publicly' owned and funded bodies will mostly fall on deaf ears and one can expect further uneven privatisation
- an increased regulation of HE somewhat comparable to that experienced by many other industries and occupations, such regulation being enhanced by new modes of information gathering which enable individuals, departments and institutions to be endlessly compared with each other, often across national borders. The production of information and knowledge and the regulation of those conditions of production will increasingly be separated from each other

More generally, global processes problematise the notion of a society that is, in and of itself, able to mobilise for action. These configurations weaken the power of the society as a system of governance to draw together its citizens as one, to govern in its unique name, to endow all with national identity and to speak with a single voice (Rose 1996). Global processes weaken the notion of a shared national culture that is produced exclusively through higher education that has exhaustive rights to determine that national culture.

Indeed societies were once organised through public debate occurring within a relatively delimited public sphere. The information and knowledge produced by its few institutions of HE centrally formed those debates and delimited possible outcomes. HE was particularly implicated in contributing knowledge to such a public sphere, and indeed in part constituting that sphere. But there are now many other providers as information becomes much more widely produced, circulated and of course traded. The outputs of the academy compete with the outputs of many other entities, including the media, private research establishments, companies and so on.

In particular such a public sphere has become globalised through mediatisation. It is not so much that the mass media reflects what goes on elsewhere, so much as what happens in and through the media is what happens elsewhere. HE is part of that mediated and partially



globalised public sphere that is no longer confined and reproduced within national boundaries. The sphere of public life that has historically provided the context for knowledge that is produced within the academy is now increasingly mediated.

To give an example of this, consider how oppositional environmental groups have developed the very effective employment of media images. The media have become an integral part of the cultural process by which environmental information and debate is created, circulated and consumed. Andrew Ross summarises:

In recent years we have become accustomed to seeing images of a dying planet, variously exhibited in grisly poses of ecological depletion and circulated by all sectors of genocidal atrocities. The clichés of the standard environmental movement are well known to us all: on the one hand, belching smokestacks, seabirds mired in petrochemical sludge, fish floating belly-up, traffic jams in Los Angeles and Mexico City, and clearcut forests; on the other hand, the redeeming repertoire of pastoral imagery, pristine, green, and unspoiled by human habitation, crowned by the ultimate global spectacle, the fragile, vulnerable ball of spaceship earth (1994: 171).

In such a public staging of environmental issues globally circulated media images play a major role in the forming of public debate. The findings of science and the philosophical branch of aesthetics are not irrelevant to this public sphere but they are only part of what it is that helps to develop debate. And such a debate is concerned as much with image, meaning, and emotion, as it is with written texts, cognition and science (Macnaghten and Urry 1998). The global economy of signs is transforming the public sphere into an increasingly visual and emotional public stage; and in a world in which 'seeing is believing' such media images may be far more persuasive than the abstract ideas and information historically associated with the academy.

Some commentators have described these developments in highly dystopic terms - that globalisation has many of the characteristics of the pre-Enlightenment mediaeval world (Cerny 1997). Such a neo-Mediaevalism can be seen in a number of contemporary characteristics:

- powerful empires such as Microsoft, CNN, Virgin, Manchester United, and CocaCola roam the globe and are major competitors in the development of new kinds of information and meaning
- competing city-states, such as London, New York, Sydney, develop and use HE as part of their global branding and place-marketing
- individual societies are unable to do sufficient to reform themselves and to improve the conditions of their home population since with globalisation 'there is no such thing as society'
- there is an increasing dependence of societies and indeed of HE upon imperial patronage (Bill Gates as the most powerful of contemporary emperors, as the University of Cambridge knows)
- large numbers of wandering intellectuals (academic mercenaries?) with relatively few links to particular national projects and willing to go where resources happen to be best located - something incidentally which contradicts the UK RAE emphasis upon assessing very localised research cultures

IVORY TOWERS?

How to conclude? First, it is clear that there is not a unified global society but that there are exceptional levels of global interdependence. Huge flows of information, images, peoples, objects and dangerous wastes circulate around the globe along various networked scapes. The scapes of information flow include HE institutions but by no means exclusively. While HE is also cross-cut by these other global scapes and flows.

Thus any one institution of HE is wholly dependent upon the systems of global communications and transportation since its contribution to the global stock of information is tiny. HE institutions are hugely dependent upon each other and many other knowledge



providers. No ivory tower remains. So just as the world is being organised through the generalisation of global competition so HEIs are forced into global co-operation both with other HEIs and with numerous other information and image-producers. There is a shift away from a culture of individual authors working within separate disciplines located within a given nation-state, to a culture of multi-author, multi-disciplinary, multi-national and multi-institutional 'research' (Delanty 1998; Gibbons 1998).

The new global landscape is thus hugely heterogeneous. No single social group controls the globe – there is intense competition between global capitals, organisations of professional experts, work or leisure-based global networks, countless groups opposed to aspects of globalisation, various powerful institutions including those of HE and so on (Castells 1996, 1997). The resulting global order involves unpredictable shock waves that can spill out chaotically from one element to the system as a whole (Mann 1993).

The internet provides a powerful model and metaphor for such a world (Castells 1996; Urry 1998). It has developed into a system enabling hugely extensive horizontal communication that cannot be controlled or effectively censored by national societies. It is also perhaps the best example of how a technology invented for one purpose, military communication within the US in the event of a nuclear attack, chaotically evolves into meeting desires which are wholly unintended by those inventing it. By the end of the twentieth century the internet is a metaphor for social life as fluid. It involves thousands of networks, of people, machines, programmes, texts and images in which quasi-subjects and quasi-objects are mixed together in new hybrid forms. Ever-new computer networks and links proliferate in unplanned and mixed forms. In such a fluid space it is not possible to determine identities and cultures once and for all, since a fluid world is a world of mixtures. Messages 'find their way'. Such networks are not solid or stable and are hugely contingent.

Thinking of HE as unstable, contingent, fluid-like and comprised of diverse glocal hybrids may well be a challenging set of metaphors and conceptions for the locating of HE within this chaotic mobile landscape possessing various emergent global properties. As Kierkegaard once said in a very different context: 'Look only at the movements' (cited Shields 1997: 1).

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