Traveling without moving: Foreign news and boundary-crossing in Cyberspace

Jeremy Edwards

University of Texas at Austin

Introduction

Thanks to the Internet, the world is getting larger and larger. True, the cliché of the digital age is that the world is shrinking—and in many ways, the cliché is accurate. But in another way, the world is growing. The Internet enables a person to virtually visit cultures and countries that, before, would have been inaccessible because of distance, time, and expense. In Cyberspace, our personal horizons are always expanding, if we care to expand them. Even someone who never leaves his hometown has the power to circle the globe six times before breakfast.

If the online world is full of undiscovered countries, then who are the intrepid adventurers who discover them? Who is reading the news from Ulan Bator every day, sending instant messages to friends in Tegucigalpa, emailing colleagues in Mumbai and checking Usenet groups about Kazakhstan? Are these the same people who have passports full of stamps and a beaten-up suitcase in the closet, or are they, instead, the new armchair adventurers of the twenty-first century? The present study hopes to pin them down long enough to find out.

Acculturation and the Internet

Cultural studies scholarship has traditionally suggested that mass media have a homogenizing influence on culture. Benedict Anderson's (1991) historical analysis of the rise of nationalism found that mass-produced print media played a crucial role in consolidating ideas about language, ethnicity, history and geography along national lines. Anderson characterized nations as "imagined communities" separated from each other by imagined boundaries. Even where a physical obstacle (such as a mountain range) exists, it does not represent a boundary except by the consensus of two imagined communities living on either side of it. Within the confines of such a boundary, the mass media tend to reinforce cultural myths and rituals of one particular community.

Thompson (2002) extended this analysis, documenting the special force of visual media (i.e. television and film) in promoting nationalism in India and South Asia. He further noted the force of these media to tie together “diasporic” populations of expatriate Indians around the world and help them maintain an ethnic identity in the midst of media-saturated host cultures such as the United States and United Kingdom. He suggested replacing the “melting pot” metaphor of pluralistic culture with the image of the “salad bowl,” to capture the sense that expatriate populations maintain much of their cultural integrity. He acknowledged, however, that this characterization fails to convey the sense of cultural exchange and adaptation which inevitably takes place in such situations. “Stewpot” might be a more accurate metaphor.

The rise of the Internet has only made it easier for expatriate or diasporic populations to connect with their cultural roots. Boczkowski (1999), studying an online discussion group for Argentine expatriates, found that the group members tended to express and discuss elements of Argentine culture that, at home, would be taken for granted. Boczkowski concluded that the group members did this to reinforce their sense of belonging to a culture from which they were physically separated.

This kind of connectivity has led some observers to describe Cyberspace as a kind of borderless wonderland where cultures exist unfettered by physical space. However, research has shown that the Internet, like the real world, is a stewpot—not a melting pot. Halavais (2000) showed that web links tend to be constrained along national lines: most of the time, they point to a page hosted in the same country as the linking page. Mitra (1997) examined an informational website about India, and found that it was constructed with a particular “in-group” constituency in mind—cultural outsiders not welcome. The online world, it seems, has the same kind of geographic and cultural borders as the real world.

Virtual travel and boundary crossing

Culturally speaking, it makes sense to view these Web sites and mailing lists as virtual “places” inhabited by different cultures—places with boundaries that can be crossed, geographies that can be explored, and inhabitants that can be met. On the Internet, a person living in Texas can read the newspaper from Tokyo and chat with friends in Berlin, all without ever leaving the house. But is virtual travel comparable to physical travel? And if so, how?

Social science research suggests that physical travel—crossing cultural or national boundaries and getting to know the locals—leads to “acculturation,” a gradual internalization of the new culture. However, there has been little research done on acculturation effects from virtual travel—and those studies that do exist focus on expatriate populations using the Internet to “go back home.” For example, Melkote and Liu (2000) studied Chinese graduate students who lived in the United States and subscribed to a Chinese online discussion group. Their study found that the students who used the online group the most were likely to acculturate in terms of behavior (e.g., clothing, eating habits), but *unlikely* to acculturate in terms of values (e.g. sense of respect for elders). Physical travel, then, seems to affect behavioral acculturation, whereas virtual travel seems to affect value acculturation.

What about people who still live in their home country but are experiencing other cultures virtually over the Internet—reading foreign news websites or communicating with friends or relatives who are abroad? Based on Melkote and Liu's study, one might expect to see value acculturation in this group, but not behavior acculturation. That is, the virtual travelers might change some of their *ideas* after exposure to the foreign cultures, but they would be less likely to adopt foreign modes of dress or eating habits.

One recent study (Edwards 2004) combined the idea of virtual travel with the idea of physical travel to create a composite construct called "boundary crossing." This was defined in terms of whether or not a person had crossed different types of national/cultural boundaries—by physically traveling to another country, by using the Internet to communicate with people outside the country, or by reading news Web sites produced by foreign news outlets. Building on Alwin and Krosnick's (1991) demonstration that young people under 25 are more likely than older people to change their political affiliations—as well as work by Valentino and Sears (1998) and McDevitt and Chaffee (2002) suggesting that attitude change in young people arises due to external stimuli and not necessarily just from parental influence—this study surveyed college students to explore the relationship between boundary crossing and political socialization in young people. In the 25-and-under age group, students with more boundary-crossing experience were more likely to describe themselves as politically liberal (and less likely to describe themselves as conservative), but for older students this relationship disappeared.

The present study seeks to explore this issue further by revisiting the data from the boundary-crossing survey. It will investigate the interrelationships among the three boundary-crossing measures: foreign travel, international communication, and foreign news reading. One research question and one hypothesis will be tested:

RQ1: How strong is the relationship between the three measures of boundary-crossing? Are the most well-traveled students the same ones who read online news, or are they different groups?

H1: Because boundary crossing in general seems to be a liberalizing influence, each individual measure of boundary crossing should have its own liberalizing effect—but only for students in the 25-and-under age group.

Research Method

The data was gathered through an email survey conducted at a large university in the Southwestern United States. 10,248 randomly selected students were sent an email containing a link to the Web-based questionnaire. After two days a reminder email was sent to the sample. Data was collected for one week, November 4 to November 10, 2003.

The questionnaire (which was designed in conjunction with several other studies conducted by a graduate research class) contained 56 questions. Of these, four were directly related to measuring boundary crossing:

• “How many countries have you visited?”

- "Do you communicate online with people outside the U.S. often, sometimes, or never?"
- "Do you read online international news often, sometimes, or never?"
- Students who said they read international news "sometimes" or "often" were asked: "Is your source of international news mostly from a U.S. source such as the New York Times or from a non-U.S. source such as the BBC?"

In addition, students' political socialization was measured by asking, "Do you consider yourself Conservative, Moderate, Liberal, or Other?"

In the original study, the boundary-crossing variables were recoded into a one-dimensional yes-no format, which then was used to create the composite boundary-crossing variable. However, for the purposes of the present study, the variables were recoded into a three-point, ordinal format. The question about countries visited was recoded with the following response groups: Zero countries, 1 to 3 countries, more than 4 countries. The question about international communication was already in an ordinal three-point format, so it was not recoded.

The two questions about international news were combined and recoded this way: students who answered "never" to the first question were put into a "never/seldom" group. This group also included those who said they read international news "sometimes" or "often," but that they did not read it from a foreign source. Then, students who said they read news mostly from a non-U.S. source were divided into two groups: those who read international news "sometimes" and those who read it "often." This recoding functions as if the original question had been "How often do you read online international news from a non-U.S. source: often, sometimes, or never/seldom?" ("Never/seldom" was used instead of “never” because the “other” category of news sites might contain sites where foreign-sourced news appears, even though the site is not primarily dedicated to foreign news.)

Also, the political ideology variable was recoded into a three-point ordinal format so that the trend of “liberalization” could be examined. This was done in the previous study as well. The “other” option (which accounted for only 5 percent of the total responses) was recoded as “missing” so that ideology could be treated as a conservative – moderate – liberal spectrum.

There was one more way in which the data was filtered: international students were excluded from the analysis (the previous study did not do this). This was done because, when international students read a foreign website or communicate with someone in another country, they may not actually doing boundary crossing. As suggested by the work of Boczkowski and Melkote and Liu, they may in fact be virtually “going home.” Of course, it is also possible that they are visiting websites or emailing people from other cultures besides their own… but since there is no way to tell, these students were excluded from the analysis. The resulting sample (students who answered yes to the question “Are you a U.S. citizen?”) can be reasonably expected to be well-socialized to American culture, so that Internet “travel” actually does involve boundary-crossing for them.

Once the data was processed in this way, each pair of boundary-crossing variables was crosstabulated to examine the relationships between them (RQ1). Since any foreign travel must have taken place in the past, “countries visited” was always treated as an independent variable. Finally, to investigate H1, the three boundary-crossing variables were crosstabulated with the political ideology variable, and this relationship was controlled for the age of the students for comparison with the results of the previous boundary-crossing study.

Results

842 students responded to the survey, of which 790 were U.S. citizens (577 of these were 25 or younger). The vast majority of the American students (of all ages) had at least some travel experience. 49 percent had traveled to 4 or more countries, and 43 percent had visited between 1 and 3 countries. Only 8 percent had not been outside the United States.

In terms of virtual travel, however, the students were much less experienced. 51 percent said that they “never” communicated internationally on the Internet; 39 percent communicated “sometimes”; and only 10 percent reported communicating “often.” Students who read foreign news websites “never or seldom” comprised 80 percent of the sample; 14 percent read foreign news “often,” and 6 percent read it “sometimes.”

Despite these discrepancies, crosstabulations of the three variables showed that they were strongly related to each other, and that in each case they tended to increase together (within the standard margin of error—plus or minus 3.5 percent for a sample size of about 800). Students who had traveled to more than 3 countries were twice as likely as non-travelers to say they used the Internet for international communication. (See Table 1.) Tellingly, there were almost no readers of international news who had not been abroad; and students who had traveled to 4 or more countries were about twice as likely to read foreign news as those who had only traveled to 3 or fewer (see Table 2). And in a similar vein, students who "often" communicated internationally were four times more likely to read foreign-source news than the non-communicators (see Table 3.) All of these results were significant at the $p < .001$ level.

H1, which proposed that the three boundary-crossing measures would be correlated with a liberalization of political attitudes in students under 25, was supported. The age effect was quite clear: For each crosstabulation, the relationship was significant for the 25-and-under age group, and non-significant for the older students. Young non-travelers were 24% conservative and 35% liberal, shifting to 12% conservative and 50% liberal among the most well-traveled group (see Table 4). Heavy foreign news readers (Table 5) were clearly less conservative (4%) than non-readers (21%); meanwhile they were more likely to be liberal (60%) than non-readers (39%), but slightly less so than those who read foreign news "sometimes" (68%)—though this difference is within the margin of error for the 25-and-under sample size (plus or minus 4.2 % for N=548). Finally, among students who "never" communicated internationally, 21% identified as conservative and 38% identified as liberal, compared to 5% conservative and 49% liberal among those who communicated "often" (see Table 6).

Discussion

This study started out by asking whether boundary crossing is one phenomenon, or three. Is it fair to describe people as "boundary crossers," whether the boundaries are online or in the real world? Or are there, instead, three distinct groups—travelers, foreign news readers, and international communicators—all of whom happen to cross boundaries in their own realms?

The tight relationship of the various boundary-crossing variables suggests that, in fact, boundary crossing is a phenomenon unto itself, and that people who cross one type of intercultural/international boundary are likely to cross others as well. Specifically, international travel seems to play an important—and probably causative—role. There were few non-travelers among the sample (which is probably a peculiarity of college students)—but it bears mentioning that, among the non-travelers, there were very few international communicators, only one foreign-news reader, and *nobody* who did both. Almost everyone who was a boundary-crosser was also a traveler; and from the logic of the questions, since the travel question was phrased in the past tense and the others were phrased in the present, it seems likely that international travel generally precedes use of the Internet for foreign news-reading or international communication.

Meanwhile, each form of boundary crossing seems to encourage the others. Most boundary-crossers are travelers, and the more countries they travel to, the more likely they are to be foreign-source news readers or international communicators. The more often they communicate internationally, the more likely they are to read foreign news, and to do it often.

Finally, the liberalizing effect shown previously for the composite boundary-crossing variable appeared again in this study. The previous study looked at the liberalizing effect of *multiple layers* of boundary crossing experience—that is, travel plus foreign news plus international communication—without regard for the liberalizing effect of each variable. The present study demonstrates that, for each variable, as the intensity increases (i.e., number of countries, frequency of reading or communication), the students are more likely to be liberal and less likely to be conservative. As suggested by Alwin and Krosnick's work on political socialization, this effect occurs only in younger students.

It should be noted that, although the change in ideology is interesting in its own right, political identity is probably not the best measure to use for studying acculturation. For one thing, "liberal" and "conservative" are heavily freighted terms, especially in the United States, and they may mean different things to different people. Also, it's unlikely (though possible) that the liberalization of young students represents an acculturation to a more politically leftist culture outside the United States. Students were not asked what countries they had traveled to, but it's unlikely that someone who has traveled to 29 different nations (as one student had who scored very high on all three indices of boundary crossing) has only visited ones to the political left of the United States—or even that she has visited a higher percentage of liberal countries than someone who has only left the United States once or twice. A more plausible explanation is that repeated exposure to different cultures at a young age—especially when real-world travel is reinforced through international communication or foreign news-reading—is itself a liberalizing experience, whether or not the countries are themselves politically liberal.

Future boundary-crossing studies could look at more accurate measures of acculturation, such as those used by Melkote and Liu in their survey. They could also be conducted in other countries outside the United States; to the extent that it is genuine, the boundary-crossing effect should occur anywhere and everywhere that people cross boundaries. They could also look at other populations besides college students—it would be interesting to find out the percentage of international travelers in the general population, because it is probably smaller than this sample's 90 percent. And other measures of boundary-crossing could be studied besides those used here. Any form of exposure to foreign communication or media products—movies, music, language lessons—could be considered a boundary-crossing experience. The defining characteristic seems to be that information is crossing a cultural/national boundary, whether or not a person is actually doing so.

Finally, this study suggests a kind of hierarchy for boundary crossing: travel seems to come first and foremost, and the other types of boundary crossing seem to reinforce or build on the initial boundary-crossing experience. This relationship could be explored further. Does extensive foreign travel give rise to a desire to "travel" online for its own sake? Or are online news-readers and communicators simply keeping up with events and people in the places they've been—not unlike Melkote and Liu's Chinese graduate students using the Internet to "go back home"? Does exposure to foreign media products encourage non-travelers to start traveling? Or is travel a necessary precursor to developing an ongoing interest in things foreign? Future boundary-crossing studies will have to address these questions.

Conclusion

The great virtual bullet trains of Cyberspace are full of empty seats, and the cruise ships are sailing half full. This study finds that online boundary crossers are, by and large, the same people who cross boundaries in the real world. The Internet makes it possible for us to travel without moving—but, seemingly, it's only those who already have stamped passports and stickered suitcases that are doing the traveling. The promise of the Internet "stewpot" or "salad bowl" is that it makes everyone's culture available to everyone else; but even though the boundaries are low, they are still boundaries after all. In some ways, the Internet has given us a larger world, and in some ways it has given us a smaller one. In terms of taking ourselves outside our own boundaries, however, the Internet gives us a world about the same size as the one we already have.

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Table 1. Foreign travel and international communication among American college students (N = 790, Tau-c = .21, Gamma = .41, p < .001)

	Countries Visited		
International Communication	**0**	**1-3**	**4 or more**
Never	69%	61%	38%
Sometimes	23%	35%	46%
Often	8%	4%	16%

Table 2. Foreign travel and foreign-source news reading among American college students (N = 792, Tau-c = .13, Gamma = .46, p < .001)

	Countries Visited		
Foreign News Reading	**0**	**1-3**	**4 or more**
Never/Seldom	99 %	85%	72%
Sometimes	1%	5%	9%
Often	0%	10%	19%

Table 3. International communication and foreign-source news reading among American college students (N = 790, Tau-c = .14, Gamma = .43, p < .001)

	International Communication		
Foreign News Reading	**Never**	**Sometimes**	**Often**
Never/Seldom	88%	75%	62%
Sometimes	5%	7%	9%
Often	7%	18%	29%

Table 4. Foreign travel and political ideology
in American college students by age group

25 and Under	**Countries Visited**			
	Political Ideology	**0**	**1-3**	**4 or more**
(N = 548, P < .01	Conservative	24%	21%	12%
Tau-c = .12,	Moderate	41%	40%	38%
Gamma = .21)	Liberal	35%	39%	50%
Over 25				
	Political Ideology	**0**	**1-3**	**4 or more**
(N = 199, n.s.)	Conservative	0%	15%	15%
	Moderate	67%	32%	34%
	Liberal	33%	53%	50%

Table 5. Foreign-source news reading and political ideology
in American college students by age group

25 and Under	**Foreign News Reading**			
	Political Ideology	**Never/Seldom**	**Sometimes**	**Often**
(N = 548, P < .001	Conservative	21%	7%	4%
Tau-c = .11,	Moderate	40%	25%	36%
Gamma = .44)	Liberal	39%	68%	60%
Over 25				
	Political Ideology	**Never/Seldom**	**Sometimes**	**Often**
(N = 199, n.s.)	Conservative	14%	12%	21%
	Moderate	37%	41%	21%
	Liberal	49%	47%	58%

Table 6. International communication and political ideology
in American college students by age group

25 and Under		International Communication		
	Political Ideology	**Never/Seldom**	**Sometimes**	**Often**
(N = 547, P < .05	Conservative	21%	17%	5%
Tau-c = .10,	Moderate	41%	34%	46%
Gamma = .18)	Liberal	38%	49%	49%
Over 25				
	Political Ideology	**Never/Seldom**	**Sometimes**	**Often**
(N = 198, n.s.)	Conservative	14%	14%	25%
	Moderate	43%	28%	35%
	Liberal	43%	58%	50%