



**Nina Fürstenberg, Saskia Sassen**

## "Global is Not Always Cosmopolite"

Saskia Sassen on the distinctions between television, internet and the different social relationships they involve.

**Nina Fürstenberg:** Can we trace clear-cut distinctions between traditional television, or broadcasting, and Internet, from the point of view of the social relationships they involve? Can we say that the TV promotes the creation of national communities, whereas the Internet rather tends to create networks, net-patterned relationships, as the name itself suggests?

**Saskia Sassen:** Television programmes are national, but they can also be local, dealing a lot with single cities. In the United States every city has its own local TV network, which will deal with the situation of the community. What is peculiar to television is its being a mass-phenomenon, creating standards, and neutralizing: it is a one-way technology, which assumes a type of consumer. The Internet, on the other hand, allows interactivity, response, interaction, and here lies the essential difference. The Internet itself can be local, as much as television: if we consider for instance Amsterdam's Digital City, we can see that its purpose and effect is a tighter connexion between the various city districts, and this is not all. The gay community in Amsterdam has discovered itself through the Digital City, and many members of such particular groups can do the same through online communities.

**NF:** So there are more complicated relations and comparisons.

**SS:** I think that simplifications, when talking about new technologies, can create problems. Television is much more alienating: a community is created through standardization and homogenization, through the consolidation of mass-trade. But the Internet can have these same effects, and many people use it as a one-way tool, just to look at websites, with no sort of interactivity, if not superficially. On a technological level, this interactivity could be performed, but actually we are still consumers. I see a lot of young people who use the Internet just for random surfing and abuse. But the Net can also create a kind of community, through an interactivity that does not belong to television. They are two types of technology which are rooted in society, but it is what they are specifically rooted in that makes the difference.

**NF:** This then means that the context of their use is crucial?

**SS:** Exactly: I wrote extensively about how the self-same features of the Internet which grant this interactivity can also create power hierarchies, especially in the case of financial trade. But women, for example, use the

Internet in quite a different way. A whole world is being created, between the individual and technology, in terms of the specific cultures and sub-cultures the user comes from.

**NF:** Can the concept of network be a term of description for the social relationships that are created by the Internet?

**SS:** In sociology, the network as a category has been used for a long time. Only recently it has been linked to the new digital technologies, that are in fact called network technologies, but the term had existed before. It does not differ very much from the concept of community, but it is not the same thing. What we have nowadays is an idea of a social network somehow shaped by technology, by the computer webs. But it has a different meaning from the traditional idea of network.

**NF:** In which contexts was the term network used before?

**SS:** In the history of migrations, for instance: here, when talking about network, what is meant is not the strong, dominating image that we have today, but the network of immigrants, the intensity of communications between the departure community and the arrival one, the formation of families; therefore, an ancient social pattern.

**NF:** How do immigrants use and "create" a network?

**SS:** Regarding immigration, the concept has been used in three ways. There are interactions and "webs", within the area where immigrants are, in an arrival city like New York or any other, or between the departure community and the arrival one: this is the first meaning. The second one appeared towards the end of the 1980s, and it defines a very specific dynamics: the continuity of the migration flow, whereby the arrival community keeps on absorbing several relatives and friends from the departure community into their houses. There is a third meaning, linked to the new technologies: by means of these new technologies the network of immigrants of a particular nationality can reach out beyond the country where it lies, thus creating a dichotomy between the community of origin and that of residence.

**NF:** Can a *network*, or various *networks* of immigrants, have a global scale?

**SS:** It is the "one-to-one" communication which we habitually refer to nowadays, with regard to migration networks: a sort of diaspora on a global level where, once you start to use the Internet, the frequency of communications can even promote the launching of projects through the Web. Then, the migration network can really establish itself as global; thus the Greek are not only in Boston, and do not connect only with the Greek in their own country, but also with those in Buenos Aires, or in Italy. Therefore, we shift from a migration network merely linking the country of departure to that of arrival, to a network building up on a global scale. In this case, the new technologies create a specific difference, that I tried to define in my work.

These new technologies render the organization on a global level accessible even to poor people, they allow the formation of global non-cosmopolite subjects. We tend to think of global politics as a form of awareness made possible by the Internet, connecting people all over the world. It is a form of cosmopolitanism, but there is another form of politics enabled by the new technologies, a non-cosmopolite form of global conscience, the sense of

belonging to a planetary commitment: the immigrants can well represent this non-cosmopolitanism on a global level.

**NF:** Just a moment. Can you explain what you mean when you talk about non-cosmopolitan forms of global conscience?

**SS:** The "no-globals", the environmentalists, they all carry out a global work but are not cosmopolitan. Most of what is done in the field of human rights now makes up a network, a global commitment, but activists do not feel cosmopolitan for all that. And the same is with the poor and the immigrants: they are all still involved in extremely localized fights. I think this concept is positive and important. Also the new professionals of the financial world are globalised but are not necessarily cosmopolitan. The category of cosmopolitan is a very elitist, a very special one.

**NF:** Was not this concept already used by Kant?

**SS:** Yes, it comes from Kant and from his longing for a universal citizen and culture. Globalization can allow the taking part to a cosmopolitan culture, but up to a point this is a privilege of the elite. I could mention many other networks of people operating on a global level, establishing an intense communication with each other, somehow constituting a conscience, a political commitment, a global social movement, for the environment, for specific issues of any kind, for human rights. They are not cosmopolites in the sense we have come to give to the term, derived from Kant's concept of everlasting peace. Kant said that we would be able to have peace, not in relation to our own interests, and to circumscribed, specific issues, but rather if we could somehow transcend all this and become more universal. It seems to me so beautiful. But most people are radically and deeply busy with their own local differences, divisions and fights, because they have to get money out of it. If you are rich, educated and can travel, of course you have this option.

**NF:** But then it is so fashionable to talk about "new cosmopolitanism".

**SS:** Many use this term referring to global business and to a range of things that do not represent a perfect view of what Kant had in mind: this new cosmopolitanism is much less refined. But a further category is formed by the people working in global networks and considering themselves global activists. They are involved in very specific issues, sometimes limited to their own areas. But with the difference that these areas are all part of a global network. The case of the immigrants is a very clear example and easy to understand, but we can also think of the environmentalists on a local scale, trying to persuade people to waste recycling in Bombay, São Paulo, Sydney. They consider it a global effort and they know that this effort, in order to be successful, must be made everywhere. But they are not cosmopolitan: they are global, but not cosmopolitan, and it is important that they understand it.

**NF:** Let's consider some other examples.

**SS:** One can be an organization of poor people, such as the SPARC, made of women dealing with the problem of housing. Now that is a global network. These women fight for housing in their own neighbourhoods, they negotiate with the local governments about the local situation, they are not cosmopolitan. But they possess a global conscience and know they are the women from the largest cities in the world, especially in the South of the planet, fighting the exact same battles. They feel part of a global network, set up through the

Internet.

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