Interruptions

Roland Wenzlhuemer

The concept of dis:connectivity emphasizes the mutually dependent, tense relationship between global interconnectedness, disconnectedness or lack of connection, which only become relevant in relation to one another. The term privileges neither connective nor disconnective processes, but focuses on their changing interplay. It identifies this as a decisive factor in understanding the sociocultural impact of globalisation. This represents a new approach in globalisation research, which calls into question many of the previous basic assumptions of this field and, therefore, needs to be mapped out afresh. To this end, three forms of dis:connectivity, which are of central importance in historical and contemporary globalisation processes, can be taken as a starting point: interruptions, absences (→ **Absences**) and detours (→ **Detours**). While these three should be considered as non-exclusive and, depending on the research perspective, many other forms of dis:connectivity will be discernible, this trio carves first paths into a new research field.

This contribution specifically looks at the role of interruptions in processes of globalisation and, thus, their place within the concept of dis:connectivity. The Oxford English Dictionary defines interruption as '[a] breaking in upon some action, process, or condition (esp. speech or discourse), so as to cause it (usually temporarily) to cease; hindrance of the course or continuance of something; a breach of continuity in time; a stoppage' (Oxford English Dictionary 2024). While the OED's specific mention of speech and discourse as typical contexts of interruption might seem overly narrow as practically every activity or process can be interrupted, this focus on processes of communication and exchange is, of course, particularly pertinent for the context at hand. Within the framework of globalisation processes, interruptions mostly occur as interruptions in global communication or mobility, e.g. in the form of interrupted train or flight services, blockages of important trade routes such as the Suez Canal, severed submarine communication cables or the enforcement of border controls or even border closures for reasons of disease control. These are just a few randomly chosen examples of, to quote the OED, 'stoppages' that we all witnessed in the past few years. Hence, in the context of dis:connectivity, interruption refers to all those aspects of global interdependence and exchange processes that do not unfold at the expected speed and intensity anymore, that break off unexpectedly or are even reversed.

What all the above examples have in common is their temporariness, a key quality of interruptions that the OED also emphasises. There is a before and an after the interruption. There was a time when transport infrastructures, trade routes or communication lines had not been interrupted. And in all likelihood,

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111600345-022

services will resume at some point in the future. Within the framework of globalisation, interruptions refer to the temporary loss of connection – usually with the prospect of its reestablishment. Therefore, the key characteristic of an interruption is the difference to the situation before and (presumably) after. They gain their significance precisely from the fact that a corresponding connection once existed (and presumably will exist again). They have an *ex negativo* effect and derive their formative power from the contrast to the before and after. Interruptions evoke both the experience of loss and the expectation of resumption.[1]

As the examples above already suggest, interruptions are frequent and formative aspects of globalisation processes on practically all levels of entanglement and for a multitude of different reasons. Technical reasons, for instance. Infrastructures (→ **Infrastructure**) age, lose capacity or break. In the nineteenth century, submarine telegraph cables snapped under their own weight, were severed by ships' anchors or roasted with too high electrical voltage by incompetent engineers. Ships can sink or run aground. Sometimes they do so in inconvenient places and clog important international waterways. The 2021 accident of the container ship *Ever Given* in the Suez Canal is a recent and particularly instructive case in point. Pipelines can leak, trains can be derailed and airplanes can crash. And if this happens too often, public trust in this infrastructure and the frequent checks it undergoes decreases as well. Hence, technical failure in global infrastructure is a frequent reason for interrupted global connections. Other reasons are political and/or ideological. Armed conflicts make trade and migration routes unsafe and physically destroy infrastructure. Wars and ideological enmities bring embargos, trade restrictions, or even violent blockages (→ **Blockages**) of international trade routes as we can see in the Red Sea at the time of writing in early 2024. And in less violently charged situations, boycotts, and strikes can also be means to highlight and safeguard the interests of certain groups or communities. Other reasons can be subsumed under social or governmental factors, for instance when governments impose disease control and/or quarantine measures. Or when state or other authorities deal out punishments in the form of imprisonment, house arrest, exile (→ **Exile**) or other travel restrictions. All these measures have a direct impact on mobility and communication and lead to interrupted connections. Then there are – and increasingly so – environmental factors, often in the form of disasters of various sizes. Volcanos erupt and ash clouds impact global airplane traffic. Floods, mudslides or earthquakes damage infrastructure. Snow and ice paralyze airports and railway stations. Or on a less disastrous scale, rivers and canals silt up or shipworms damage submarine cables.

1 In practice, an interruption might turn out to be permanent and become a disruption. Still, its key characteristic is that of contrast, in this case to the situation before the inter-/disruption.

Often such environmental factors cannot be analytically separated from technical failures as they bring about infrastructural breakdowns. On a more individual and less grand level, there might be personal reasons for interruptions. People might be indisposed or temporarily lack the money to travel or invest globally. They might lose interest in an international pen pal or lack the time and means to constantly write home when they are away. While these examples might seem small or even insignificant in comparison to infrastructural breakdowns or environmental disasters, they can still lead to interrupted global connections of great significance in certain settings.

These are just some of the sets of reasons and factors that can bring about interruptions in global connections. In all these situations, the actors share experiences of a time before the interruption and will have certain expectations regarding the time after the interruption. Their evaluation and navigation of the current situation occur in relation to both these experiences and expectations, as the following example from the realm of nineteenth-century communication history seeks to demonstrate (→ **Communication Technologies**). The telegraph played a key role in the burst of globalisation that took place at the time. The technology converted short messages into electric impulses and transmitted them along cables and wires with unprecedented speed over great distances. Around the mid-century, the technology had become mature enough to enable transoceanic telegraphic connections between continents. By the turn of the century, a global telegraph network had grown that allowed, as contemporaries put it, 'communication at the speed of thought' and greatly contributed to the 'shrinking of the world'. In most studies of telegraphy in global history, the technology is held to be an archetypal connector (Wenzlhuemer 2013).

However, this is just one aspect of the narrative. Unstable and frequently disrupted connections were commonplace even on the most crucial trunk lines, causing frustration among a clientele that had swiftly grown accustomed to the convenience of telegraphy. A letter to the editor published in the *Times of London* (Anonymous 1870) unequivocally illustrates how the understanding and repercussions of interrupted connectivity were shaped by prior experiences and expectations. In this letter, the author recounts the challenges faced when attempting to send a telegraph from London to Calcutta in the evening. Commencing with the statement, 'I had occasion to telegraph to Calcutta between 9 and 10 in the evening', the author deems this need as entirely ordinary and self-explanatory, requiring no further elucidation or justification. By 1870, the ability to communicate telegraphically with distant locations had become a matter of course for a specific type of actor. However, the first complications were not long in coming.

Expressing uncertainty about which offices would be open at that late hour, the author deemed it prudent to head to the main branch of the General Post Office.

Upon arrival, a sign directed him to the telegraph agency in Cornhill, which operated from 8 p.m. to midnight. At this subsequent location, the author observes the dire understaffing of the agency and the agent's apparent bewilderment at the desire to send a telegram to Calcutta: '"Calcutta!" he said, and looked very much as if I had asked to telegraph to Fernando Po. [. . .] Now, Sir, Calcutta is not an unknown place. I thought it was the capital of British India, and that it was in close and constant communication with the City of London.'

This passage speaks volumes. From the protagonist's point of view, it was only reasonable to expect 'close and constant communication' between Calcutta and London. While we do not know for sure, it seems safe to assume that previous experience – either his personal experience or a more general knowledge of telegraphic communication – has given rise to this expectation.

Indeed, the global telegraph network of the time exhibited a specific structure that reinforced such perceptions. Beyond the Mediterranean and European coastal areas, initial efforts to lay subsea cables in the 1850s and 1860s focused on a transatlantic connection and a cable to India. The first major overland projects, such as the 'Siemens Line' (Bühlmann 1999), extended from Europe towards South Asia, influenced by the imperial interests of European powers, especially the British Empire. This gave rise to a robust east-west axis in the global communication network, linking Europe (particularly Great Britain) at the centre with North America in the west, traversing the Mediterranean, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean to reach India in the east. This axis extended further eastward to Oceania by the 1870s (Wenzlhuemer 2013, 105–123). For this reason, it is understandable that a London businessman in 1870 might anticipate easy and routine communication with Calcutta and be astonished to discover potential complications.

As the letter in the *Times* continues, the distressed author was directed by the telegraph agent to the office of the Falmouth, Gibraltar, and Malta Telegraph Company on Broad Street. It was there that he discovered the cable to India was currently inactive. '[The clerk] informed me that the Falmouth line was broken between Lisbon and Gibraltar, that it would consequently take five or six days to telegraph to Calcutta, and that his company advised the public for the present to send their messages through Persia by the Indo-European Company, whose office was in Telegraph-street.' Only upon reaching the telegraph agency on Telegraph Street did the author successfully transmit his telegram to Calcutta.

The protagonist expressed little understanding for the situation in his letter: 'I confess I thought it odd that in the centre of the heart of the British Empire a man should thus be sent from pillar to post, according to the hours of the night, in order to find the right end of the electric wire which is now the very nerve of the social body.' The idea of sending a telegram to British India in the late evening did not register as a concern for him. He took global connectivity for granted, even though

obstacles and interruptions naturally remained. In this specific instance, the outcomes were not notably severe. Despite the clerk's initial astonishment at the first office and a technical malfunction at the second, the author successfully sent his message using an alternate route. The telegram ultimately made its way to India overland because the undersea cable was out of service.

Although not particularly dramatic in the example provided, outages and interruptions were frequent incidents during the 1870s and 1880s, often leading to more significant consequences, as indicated by numerous mentions in the annual reports of telegraph companies. In 1881, the undersea connection between Great Britain and India was entirely nonfunctional for over a month in July and August. Four years later, the cable experienced downtime from June to October (Administration Report 1874, 1883, 1890). The Administration Report of the Indo-European Telegraph Department for the fiscal year 1882–83 highlighted that '[t]he Suez route was either partially interrupted or defective in one or more of its cable sections for nearly the entire official year' (Administration Report 1883, para. 31). Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, disruptions to undersea-cable connectivity were a regular occurrence, and overland lines to India were not significantly more reliable (Bektas 2000, 692).

This little episode and the more general evidence from official reports highlight that even the telegraph – probably the most iconic global communication technology of the nineteenth century and a global connector *par excellence* – was frequently ridden with breakdowns and interruptions that irritated customers and at times could have much more severe consequences. The example also shows that previous experience and the expectations derived from it are decisive factors that shape the specific character of interruptions and their *ex negativo* relation with processes of globalisation and, in a more conceptual way, with the idea of dis:connectivity.

References

Administration Report of the Indo-European Telegraph Department for 1889–90. 1890. British Library: Oriental Collections, IOR/V/24/4290.

Administration Report of the Indo-European Telegraph Department for 1882–83. 1883. British Library: Oriental Collections, IOR/V/24/4289.

Administration Report of the Indo-European Telegraph Department for 1873–74. 1874. British Library: Oriental Collections, IOR/V/24/4289.

Anonymous. 1870. "The Post Office and the Telegraphs." *The Times,* December 7.

Bektas, Yakup. 2000. "The Sultan's Messenger. Cultural Constructions of Ottoman Telegraphy, 1847–1880." *Technology and Culture* 41 (4): 669–96. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/tech.2000.0141.

Bühlmann, Elisabeth. 1999. *La Ligne Siemens. La Construction Du Télégraphe Indo-Européen 1867–1870*. Peter Lang.

Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “interruption,(*n*.), sense 4”, January 2024. https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9928378003.

Wenzlhuemer, Roland. 2013. *Connecting the Nineteenth-Century World. The Telegraph and Globalization*. Cambridge University Press.