

compression of world-time and world-space. The Internet (see [Figure A](#)), in particular, has assumed a pivotal function in the expanding global–local nexus. After all, the World Wide Web connects billions of individuals, thousands of civil society associations, and hundreds of governments located at specific places on our planet.

2019 *This Is What Happens In An Internet Minute*



A. What happens in an Internet minute in 2019?

Thus, it makes sense to start our exploratory journey into the heart of globalization with a concrete example that highlights the awesome global impact of digital technology on 21st-century societies. Let us turn to the amazing, yet true, story of a young American journalist whose loss of his cell phone gained him millions of fans in China and around the world.

How a stolen iPhone made a young American a Chinese

Internet celebrity

After a Happy Hour wine binge in an NYC East Village bar in February 2014, Matt Stopera noticed that his iPhone was missing. As a young American journalist working for BuzzFeed—a US-based Internet news and entertainment company with a focus on digital media—the loss of his cell phone was almost tantamount to losing his eyesight. After recovering from his initial shock, Matt did what the millions of global victims of cell phone theft tend to do: he got a new one and tried to forget the frustrating experience as quickly as possible. Most cell phone theft stories end here. But Matt's didn't.

A year later, he was sitting in his small flat in NYC browsing through his private photo stream on his new cell phone when he came across a slew of pictures he had not taken. They included more than twenty images of a young Asian man standing in front of an orange tree. For over a month, daily updates of the 'orange man' pictures kept popping up on Matt's new phone. Trying to solve the mystery, he consulted with an Apple Genius employee who speculated that his lost iPhone was most likely somewhere in China. That's where most stolen cell phones end up—millions each year. The Apple genius also revealed the reason for the appearance of these alien pictures: his current phone and the stolen one were still sharing the same iCloud account. Matt immediately deleted everything on his phone and asked for his former device to be deactivated. Confident that these actions would put an end to the hassle, he left the Apple store.

On second thought, however, Matt decided to get to the bottom of the mystery. To that end, he created a post on BuzzFeed: *Who is this man and why are his pictures showing up on my phone?* Within hours, he received numerous tweets from Chinese people offering him help in finding 'orange man'. But how could there be such a swift and massive response from hundreds of tweeters thousands of miles away? In fact, a famous user of Sina Weibo—a Chinese micro-blogging website and leading social media platform with over 400 million monthly active users—had cross-posted his BuzzFeed post, thus triggering the virtual hunt for the mystery 'orange man' that soon went viral. Told that he had become an overnight Internet celebrity in China, Matt followed the advice of his new virtual fans and joined Weibo. The next day, he had 50,000 followers. Within a week, the number climbed to 160,000. Soon thereafter, he broke through the 1,000,000 barrier.

By that time, the mystery man, Li Hongjun, had been found in the south-east coastal province of Guandong. Paying close attention to this viral explosion, Weibo gave Li the nickname 'Brother Orange' and encouraged the two men to meet in China. Within days, the story skyrocketed to the top of Weibo's trending topics as 60 million users were following along to see if and when the pair would meet.

Many of them began signing up for US-based social networking platforms like Facebook and Twitter, even though these sites were technically banned in China. Matt also responded to numerous requests from his Chinese fans to start teaching them English using video posts. As this tutoring venture took off, he received the Chinese nickname 'Doubi', which translates loosely as 'Mr Bean'. At this point, 'Doubi' and 'Bro' Orange' had been exchanging electronic messages on a daily basis. The enhanced frequency of their interactions revealed more about their respective backgrounds and life-stories. It revealed that Bro' Orange was a married man with four children and owned a successful restaurant called Jade Tea Farm in Meizhou, a thriving city of 4.3 million.

In March 2015, their highly anticipated meeting took place. On Matt's three-legged plane flight from NYC to Guandong, he was recognized and mobbed by several Chinese passengers. Upon landing at Meizhou airport, Matt was greeted by droves of fans who had queued up for hours to welcome their American idol. As Matt put it, 'Basically, I now know what it feels like to be Kim K at LAX with Kanye and Northwest.' Wildly cheering the first hug between the two long-distance iPhoto pals, the fans also applauded the return of the stolen iPhone to its original owner. It turned out that Li was entirely innocent, having received the phone as a gift from a distant relative.

Talking through translators, and sponsored by Weibo, the pair embarked on a triumphant publicity tour through Li's home province. Their lavish means of transport included a comfortable bus and two special cars that featured big decals of their faces as well as Mandarin characters and English words advertising the tour. Their journey was heavily documented on social media and included a symbolic signing ceremony of a 'Chinese–American friendship treaty' between the two correspondents who were quickly becoming close friends. Followed every minute by a large press contingent demanding constant interviews, the pair interacted with numerous local fans, who held up gigantic welcome signs and were eager to take selfies with their heroes. The publicity tour included many happenings designed to showcase Chinese culture, first by costuming Matt in the clothes of a traditional Chinese girl before setting out on a tour including public tastings of famous Chinese dishes; inspections of large rural tea farms and recently founded wineries; performances of old Chinese folk songs; and even a visit to a local Communist leader's memorial shrine.

The pair's week-long journey ended with a memorable Weibo-sponsored trip to Beijing, where they visited famous landmarks like Tiananmen Square ([Figure 1](#)). Trailed by a growing media entourage and the now familiar throngs of fans, the men found it difficult to escape public attention. Even China's largest TV station, CCTV News, got in on the act and dedicated several minutes of primetime

national coverage to their visit to the capital.



1. BuzzFeed writer Matt 'Doubi' Stopera and Li 'Brother Orange' Hongjun visit Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

After Matt's trip to China, Li returned the favour and paid a highly advertised visit to his American pal. Matt showed off his NYC home turf and also took his Bro' to Las Vegas. Unexpectedly, the celebrity pair was invited to NBC's Emmy Award-winning *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*. Eager to introduce the odd couple to a larger American audience, the famous host jokingly referred to herself as 'Sister Orange' and encouraged American and Chinese followers to exchange messages. Enjoying their superstar status, the pair also attended a Britney Spears concert where they met the pop diva in private session and took loads of pictures that delighted the fans back in China.

Eventually, the astonishing story of how a stolen iPhone made an ordinary American a Chinese Internet celebrity was shared internationally on social media more than 100 million times. And it continued on the same implausible trajectory that it had started out on in 2014. The Hollywood entertainment giant Warner Brothers announced in 2016 that it would co-produce *Brother Orange* for the big screen, with TV sitcom *Big Bang Theory* lead Jim Parsons playing Matt Stopera and noted Chinese actor Dong Chengpeng starring as Li Hongjun. Although the development of the movie proceeded slowly, the project is still alive and slated to begin shooting in 2020.

What the stolen iPhone story can tell

us about the forms, qualities, and dimensions of globalization

The remarkable story of Matt Stopera's stolen iPhone not only makes for fantastic entertainment, but also yields important insights into the complex dynamics of globalization. First, as we noted at the outset of this chapter, the tale demonstrates that the local and global should not be seen as opposites. Rather, they constitute interrelated nodes of expanding social interconnections encompassing all spatial scales. This intensifying local–global nexus was reflected in many ways during Matt's visit to China. Consider, for example, the pictures of him dressed up in traditional Guandong girl's clothing, which were instantly shared on global social media platforms. Or think of Chinese fans welcoming the pair to their local towns and villages holding up hand-painted welcome signs that also featured globally recognizable QR codes. These matrix barcodes are now utilized by millions of individuals and businesses to store commercial information as well as to advertise products and services globally (see [Box 1](#)). Or consider the making of *Brother Orange*, a major feature film intended for global distribution. The venture united four production companies located at specific sites around the world under the commercial umbrella of a transnational enterprise called 'Flagship Entertainment': American-based Warner Brothers and BuzzFeed Studios, China-based China Media Capital, and Hong Kong-based broadcaster TVB.

Box 1. Glocalization in action: the magic of QR codes

'QR' stands for 'quick response' and refers to those square-shaped, black-and-white barcodes made up of hundreds of shapes of 'bits' that nowadays adorn most products and advertisements. By using a cell phone and a QR readers app, scanning a QR code might yield the price of the product, make a payment, track a shipment, identify documents, display a text, connect to a wireless network, or open a webpage in the cell phone's browser. Or, as was the case with the QR code placed on handmade signs welcoming Matt and Li to cities and villages in Guandong province, it might yield a globally accessible website advertising the local event. Invented in 1994 by the Japanese company Denso Wave to track vehicles, the largest QR codes can store up to 15,000 bits that can be arranged in 2.817960879631397637428637785383222308241674912977296 ×

10⁴⁵¹⁵ different ways—a number larger than all traceable items on Earth combined.

Another important insight emerging from our stolen cell phone story suggests that globalization should not be seen as a monolithic social process. Rather, it assumes several distinct, but interrelated, *social forms* that contain a number of different qualities or characteristics. We can identify at least four major forms of globalization that overlay each other in complex patterns of practice and meaning.

The first social form, *embodied globalization*, involves the movement of people across our planet. As we shall discuss in [Chapters 2](#) and [3](#), this is the oldest form of globalization and remains enduringly relevant in the contemporary movement of refugees, migrants, travellers, entrepreneurs, temporary workers, tourists, and so on (see [Box 2](#)). Concrete 21st-century examples include African political refugees crossing the Mediterranean into Europe and Central American migrants trying to trek across the Rio Grande valley into the United States in search of more sustainable lives. Matt Stopera, the young protagonist of our iPhone story, embodied globalization as a privileged tourist who completed the 7,894-mile trip from NYC to Meizhou in less than twenty-four hours in the comfort and security of an aeroplane cabin. Only a century ago, the same journey would have taken several gruelling weeks spent on ships, trains, motorcars, and horse- or oxen-drawn carriages, forcing the traveller to make his way to China in much less luxurious and safe circumstances.

Box 2. Embodied globalization: where on Earth do you want go?

Travel has never been more popular. Last year there were 1.4 billion overseas arrivals throughout the world. The total number of international and domestic trips taken is a staggering 7 billion! And experts predict an increase to 8 billion by 2022. Travel is the second fastest growing industry worldwide; manufacturing is still slightly ahead. In 2018, travel injected a whopping US\$12.33 trillion into the global economy.

The second form, *disembodied globalization*, is characterized by the extension of social relations through the movement of immaterial things and processes, including words, images, and electronic texts, and encoded capital such as crypto-currencies like Bitcoin. As demonstrated by Matt's story 'going viral' on global social media platforms, this form has taken an enormous qualitative leap with the

digital revolution. In fact, disembodied globalization is emerging as the dominant dynamic of the 21st century. The latest available data on digital global flows show that the amount of cross-border bandwidth in 2016 has grown to be forty-five times larger than in 2005, making the world more digitally connected than ever. Thus, commentators have heralded a 'new era of *digital globalization*', an observation which seems powerfully confirmed by the 100 million electronic shares of the Brother Orange story.

The third form, *object-extended globalization*, refers to the global movement of objects—in particular traded commodities—as well as those ubiquitous early objects of financial exchange such as shells, coins, and notes. It takes us from the goods travelling on the ancient Silk Road from China to the Roman Empire to the development of modern shipping containers crossing the world's oceans. Moreover, it includes the digitally controlled delivery system of Amazon.com that will offer drone-operated services in the near future as well as traded global commodities like Matt's stolen iPhone making its illegal way to China; pre-loved pairs of Levi's jeans produced in the sweatshops of Bangladesh and destined for the coolest fashion temples of Milan; and the relics and treasures of antiquity sold at skyrocketing prices at international Internet auctions.

The fourth and final form, *organization-extended globalization*, corresponds to the global extension of social and political institutions such as empires, states, corporations, NGOs, clubs, and so on. Its history can be traced back at least as far as the expansionist empires of Egypt, Persia, China, and Rome, and the proselytizing of the agents of Christendom more than a millennium ago. More recent examples include the half-million US military personnel stationed around the world, the global franchises of fast food enterprises like Subway or KFC; and China's mind-boggling 'One Belt One Road' initiative—a monumental infrastructure project designed to extend Chinese economic and political influence across Asia and deep into Europe. As reflected in Matt's amazing adventure, other examples of organization-extended globalization include Weibo's successful organization of his China visit (as well as Li's America visit); the transnational promotion of 'traditional' Chinese cultural institutions; and Warner Brothers' ability to reach across the Pacific to find eager co-producers for their *Brother Orange* venture.

Indeed, all four forms of globalization are on clear display in our stolen iPhone tale. Moreover, they possess distinct qualities or characteristics. First, they involve both the *creation* of new social networks and the *multiplication* of existing connections that cut across traditional political, economic, cultural, and geographical boundaries. As Matt's publicity events in China demonstrate, today's media combine conventional TV coverage with multiple streaming feeds into digital devices and social networking sites that transcend

nationally based services.

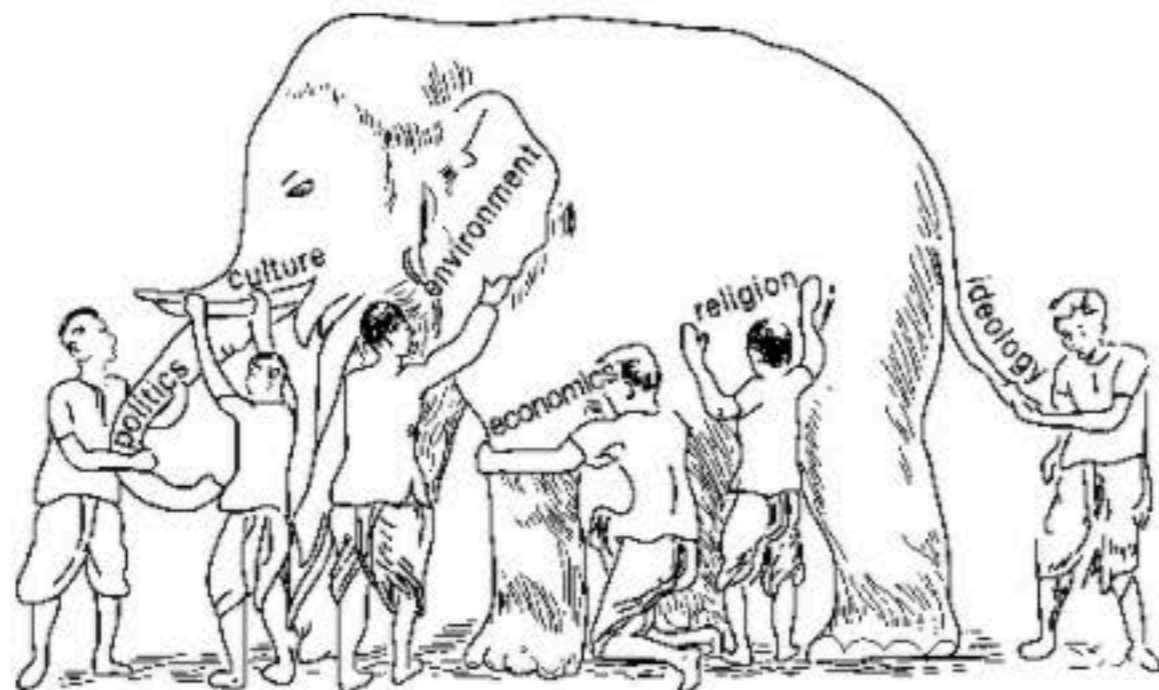
A second quality inherent in these four principal forms of globalization is the *expansion* or *stretching* of social relations, activities, and connections. Today's financial markets reach around the globe, and electronic trading occurs around the clock. Gigantic and virtually identical shopping malls have emerged across the globe, catering to those consumers who can afford commodities from all regions of the world—including products whose various components were manufactured in different countries. This process of social stretching applies to commercial enterprises like Warner Brothers eager to make money off Matt and Li's experiences; non-governmental organizations dedicated to aiding people living in poverty; exclusive social clubs frequented by the wealthy 1 per cent; and countless regional and global institutions and associations: the UN, the EU, ASEAN, APEC, the OAU, MERCOSUR, and the WEF, to name but a few.

Third, all forms of globalization also involve the *intensification* and *acceleration* of social exchanges and activities. As the Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells has pointed out, we have witnessed the creation of a *global network society* fuelled by what he calls *communication power*. As demonstrated in our tale of Brother Orange, this new form of power draws its strength from technological innovations that are reshaping the social landscape of human life.

Fourth, globalization does not merely unfold on an objective, material level but also involves the *subjective* plane of *human consciousness*. Without erasing local and national attachments, the compression of the world into a single place has increasingly made the whole planet the frame of reference for human thought and action. In other words, globalization involves both the macro-structures of a global community and the micro-structures of global personhood. Mediated by digital technology controlled by large TNCs that mine human experience for commercial profit, the global extends deep into the core of the personal self and its dispositions and facilitates the creation of multiple individual and collective identities like 'Bro' Orange', 'Doubi', or the Manchester United football fan club.

Finally, these *four forms* and *four qualities of globalization* infuse simultaneously the major social dimensions of everyday life: economics, politics, culture, ideology, and so on. Yet, globalization has often been analysed and explained by various commentators in a rather one-dimensional manner. The ancient Buddhist parable of the blind scholars and their encounter with the elephant helps to illustrate the academic controversy over the significance of various dimensions of globalization. Since the blind scholars did not know what the elephant looked like, they resolved to obtain a mental

picture, and thus the knowledge they desired, by touching the animal. Feeling its trunk, one blind man argued that the elephant was like a gigantic snake. Another man, rubbing along its enormous leg, likened the animal to a rough column of massive proportions. The third person took hold of its tail and insisted that the elephant resembled a large, flexible brush. The fourth man felt its sharp tusks and declared it to be like a great spear. Each of the blind scholars held firmly to his own idea of what constituted an elephant. Since their scholarly reputation was riding on the veracity of their respective findings, the blind men never ceased arguing over the true nature of the elephant (see [Figure 2](#)).



2. The globalization scholars and the elephant.

The academic quarrel over which dimension contains the essence of globalization represents a postmodern version of the parable of the blind men and the elephant. Global Studies scholars who equate globalization with a singular process clash with others over which aspect of social life constitutes its primary domain. Many experts argue that economic processes lie at the core of globalization. Others privilege political, cultural, or ideological aspects. Still others point to environmental processes as being the essence of globalization. Like the blind men in the parable, each globalization researcher is partly right by correctly identifying *one* important dimension of the phenomenon in question. However, their collective mistake lies in their dogmatic attempts to reduce such a complex phenomenon as globalization to one or two domains that correspond to their own expertise.

To make matters even more complex, globalization is a geographically uneven process that not only connects but sometimes also disrupts existing relations. This means that people living in various parts of the world are affected very differently by this gigantic compression of space and time. Unsurprisingly, then, scholars not only hold different views with regard to primary dimensions of globalization, they also disagree on its scale, causation, chronology, impact, trajectories, and policy outcomes.

For this reason, they have raised a myriad research questions that run in all directions. How does globalization proceed? What is driving it? Does it have one cause or is there a combination of factors? Is globalization a continuation of modernity or is it a radical break? Does it create new forms of inequality and hierarchy? Notice that whenever researchers try to bring their object of enquiry into sharper focus, they also heighten the danger of provoking scholarly disagreements. Our subject is no exception.

Towards a *very short* definition of globalization

Fortunately, our examination of the forms, qualities, and dimensions of globalization reflected in our stolen iPhone story have prepared us to tackle the academic task of assembling a digestible working definition of a contested concept that has proven notoriously hard to pin down. Surely, a central task for the new field of Global Studies must be to devise sophisticated yet accessible ways for gauging the relative importance of each dimension of globalization without losing sight of the whole phenomenon. Despite the existing differences of opinion on the subject, it should be possible to come up with a *general definition* that satisfies most experts. Drawing on the insights that have emerged from our discussion, let us close this chapter by compressing our initial findings into a single sentence that yields the following *short definition* of globalization in seventeen words:

Globalization refers to the multidimensional and uneven intensification of social relations and consciousness across world-time and world-space.

Given the subtitle of our book, however, we ought to do even better by cutting our word count even further. So here is a *very short* definition of globalization in six words:

Globalization is about intensifying planetary interconnectivity.

From: Manfred Steger's *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford UP, 2020.