Starting off
We all interact with many groups, from family and friends right up to the level of nations and peoples. Which groups are most important to you now? Which groups do you think will be most important to you ten years from now? Form groups of three and compare your choices.

It's a Small World
Our world is not such a big place anymore. Today, thanks to global telecommunications, computer networks, expanding travel and a thriving world economy, most of us can have almost immediate access to ideas, goods and people no matter where we are in the world.

In the old days
To get an idea of the fantastic changes that have taken place, think of what it must have been like a hundred years ago. Imagine sending a package to your relatives in New York for Christmas. Back then, to guarantee its arrival on time, you’d probably have to send it the Christmas before! Even as recently as twenty years ago, getting a parcel across the Atlantic could take weeks. Today, you can do your Christmas shopping on the Internet and have your gifts delivered to almost anywhere in the world within 24 hours.
A hundred years ago, travel was for the very rich – or the very poor. Most people didn’t venture any further than their neighboring towns, but those that did used weeks or months to get where they were going. Today, air travel will take you from New York to Paris in a matter of hours and almost everybody can afford it. Honeymooners, grandmothers, families, business people, students of all nationalities make up the 1 billion passengers that fly the world’s airways each year. Every day about 3 million people fly from one place on the planet to another, visiting exotic or not so exotic places, tasting strange cuisine, trying out each other’s languages and exchanging ideas.

A hundred years ago, news events, information and new ideas were weeks old before most people heard about them – if they heard about them at all. Today, even the most remote village has access to a mind-boggling array of television and radio programs coming in by satellite on dozens of channels. News and information reaches us as it is being made. People in far-flung nations can swap ideas through voice-mail, e-mail and faxes. The Internet enables us to jump borders and cultures “at a single mouse click”, and offers unlimited resources for information of any kind and flavor. Social networking services such as Facebook and Twitter have changed the ways in which we communicate. Cellular phones can keep us in touch with people we never want to hear from again.

**A global lifestyle**

One result of increasing international communication and exchange is that the world is becoming a single market and is sharing a new international lifestyle. We are acquiring international identities – we are becoming commercial pilots, computer programmers, international bankers, media specialists, oil riggers, entertainment celebrities, ecology experts, accountants, professors, athletes – none of whom belong to any specific religion, culture and nationality. We are drinking café latte and Perrier, eating sushi and burritos, furnishing our apartments with IKEA, and talking into Nokia phones while hurtling down the road to McDonald’s on our kickboards. Fashion conscious teenagers in London, New York, Tokyo and Oslo are more similar than teenagers living in Manhattan and the Bronx in New York itself. Europeans, Asians and Americans are enthusiastically swapping and borrowing food, fashions and entertainment – the stuff of everyday life – and their lifestyles are taking on similar (some would say disturbingly similar) characteristics.
Now of course, there is nothing basically wrong with sharing a similar lifestyle. For one thing, the more we have in common, the more likely we are to succeed in achieving international co-operation and peace. But a number of important issues have to be addressed:

- First, what about the uniqueness of individual cultures and languages? As our lifestyles grow more similar, can we or should we try to preserve our religious, cultural, national, linguistic and ethnic identities? Or are these things becoming irrelevant?
- And second, what does this new global lifestyle represent? Are the images, products, ideas and values that it contains really international or are they the products of a few interest groups and nations? Who really defines and controls this lifestyle? And are the best interests of the world served by it?

These are large questions, which we cannot possibly answer in this article. But we can provide you with certain information that can help you make up your own minds.

**One “McWorld”?**

The world is being mesmerized with fast music, fast computers, and fast food – with MTV, Microsoft and McDonald’s, pressing nations into one commercially homogeneous global monoculture – one *McWorld* tied together by hamburgers, Starbucks, coke and Play Stations. More and more places are starting to look and feel like everyplace else, with the same restaurants and hotels, the same clothes, the same malls and superstores, the same streets choked with cars and the same universal materialistic values. The guiding principle of this new world is ever-increasing consumption, and the primary pursuit of its citizens is the acquisition of goods – better known as “shopping”. Some cynics have even said that the recent revolutions in Eastern Europe have had as their true goal not liberty and the right to vote but well-paying jobs and the right to shop (although the vote is proving easier to get than consumer goods). Is this the kind of world we want? Who will benefit and who will not?
In theory, anyone is allowed to participate in the international market and to compete for favor and profit amongst its billions of potential customers. But in reality, it is the largest and most powerful transnational companies and media industries of the largest industrial lands that dominate and control the market.

Of the world’s forty best known transnational companies (TNCs), seventeen are American, fourteen are European and nine are Japanese. Many of these companies, which include such household names as Ford, Toyota, Exxon, Shell, IBM, Nestle, Sony and Disney, have larger corporate sales than some developed countries. The ten largest TNCs have had a total income greater than that of 100 of the world’s poorest countries. These companies have become world brands and their products are outfitting our global lifestyle. What we wear, eat, listen to and watch is to a certain extent defined by what these companies are willing to offer us.

**Global television**

The globalization of the television industry is surely the most effective means ever for transmitting Western images and commercial values directly into the lives of most of the world’s population. Television may not be the only media with a significant impact on audiences, but it is probably the most powerful of all tools, and the most widely spread. Today, 99% of all households in the western world own a TV set, 60% own two or more.

Television is explosive and controversial because it conveys deeper values in much the same way as literature does. The film and television media deliver the same powerful images throughout the world, and these images are for the most part western and American. Keanu Reeves, Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt are role models for millions of people, their behavior is sometimes mirrored and copied. The norms and values they represent are taken over. If they drink coke and smoke Salems, their followers do the same.
We have experienced an enormous expansion in broadcast technologies, from satellite to cable, and now we have digital television which has increased the number of television channels many times. Who is going to produce the material to be shown on all these systems? Who is going to make the programs for all these new channels? At the moment, it’s mainly the Americans. Other countries are big producers of entertainment: India, for instance, makes more films each year than America, and the Mexican Televisa network is helping to launch digital television in South America. But the giants of American media, such as Time Warner, Disney and Viacom, dominate entertainment export markets and are the leaders in creating new television businesses around the world.

American television series such as *The Wire, Six Feet Under, Friends, West Wing, Simpsons* and *South Park* have or have had some of the highest viewer ratings in Europe and Asia. “American-style” popular programs – game shows, talk shows like *Oprah* and soaps are copied and produced as local entertainment around the world. All told, Europe buys about $2 billion a year of American television programs; Britain, the only European country with sizeable program exports, sells a meager $85 million worth to the entire North American market.

The threat of American domination in the television industry has not gone unanswered. Many European governments want quotas on the proportion of foreign programming that national channels show. After a long debate, the European Union agreed that half the programming shown on European television is to be made within the EU, “where practical”. Unfortunately for the European Union, most homes have access to hundreds of digital channels, and such restrictions will have little effect. Of course, it will mean there will be more local and national broadcasting in absolute terms. We can choose to watch these programs if we want, or the BBC or French or Japanese TV direct from these countries. Or we can choose not to.

The potential of global television, along with the massive export of American television shows, raises many questions that we have never had to deal with before. Will global television lead to cultural uniformity? Or will it provide more choice and promote diversity? Will it allow powerful counties like the United States to impose their lifestyle and values on Third World countries, or, for that matter on other developed nations? Or will the threat of American dominance create a new and revived interest in local and national culture?

There is no doubt that we are moving towards a form of world culture. For the most part this is probably a good thing. For one thing, the technology that is powering the globalization train provides the means for communication and an easy and regular flow and exchange of information that fosters open societies. Satellites do not respect national borders; telephone wires penetrate the most closed societies. When photocopying, then fax machines and finally computers with modems started to become common in Soviet universities and literary circles in the eighties, *glasnost* could not be far behind. Today, just about everyone has access to the Internet and its millions of
websites and this medium is being used actively by cultural, ethnic and other special interest groups to profile and promote their needs and interests. Never before have individuals and groups had such control over the spread of information and communication. Modern technology is shrinking the world and giving every person on earth access to whoever and whatever they want. The potential is enormous. But it remains to be seen how this potential will be used.

ACTIVITIES

1 Focus on the text

Write brief answers to the following questions:

a) How have travel and communication changed in the last 100 years or so?
b) What technological innovations have made this possible?
c) What do we mean by a global or international lifestyle?
d) Who controls and dominates the international markets?
e) Why does television play such an important role in spreading international lifestyles and values?

2 Going deeper into the text

The article you have just read made a number of strong statements which you may have opinions about yourself. Sit in pairs and consider the following extracts from the text. Do you agree or disagree with them? Why?

a) “More and more places are starting to look and feel like everywhere else, with the same restaurants and hotels, the same clothes, the same malls and superstores, the same streets choked with cars and the same universal materialistic values.”
b) “The guiding principle of this new world is ever-increasing consumption, and the primary pursuit of its citizens is the acquisition of goods – better known as ‘shopping’.”
c) “These [transnational] companies have become world brands and their products are outfitting our global lifestyle. What we wear, eat, listen to and watch is to a certain extent defined by what these companies are willing to offer us.”
d) “The film and television media deliver the same powerful images throughout the world, and these images are for the most part western and American.”
3 Talking

Sit in pairs or groups of four and discuss the following questions:

a) Many European families today have cable TV, which means that they have access to a wide variety of television programs. Children and young people can choose between up to 20–100 channels, many of them American. How much of the television you watch each day is American? What are your favorite shows and why?

b) Many aspects of your everyday life (food, clothes, music, television etc.) are international or American. But certain things are still very Norwegian. What aspects of your daily life are most Norwegian? Make a list. Can you explain this? How have they “survived”?

c) Do you as a Norwegian consider yourself to have an “international” youth image? How would you define this?

d) Is there such a thing as a Norwegian youth culture? How would you define it? How is it different from the European and American youth culture?

4 Writing

An exchange student from somewhere in Europe (you choose where) is going to be visiting your school and staying with your family next semester. He or she wants to know what Norwegian young people are like – what sort of clothes, music, food, entertainment and other spare time activities are “in” amongst young people here. Write a letter to this person in which you describe a “typical” Norwegian young person in your part of the country.