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My (Global) Media Studies

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Abstract

What we commonly refer to as “global media studies” or “global communication studies” still struggles to live up to its name. Mercifully, the field appears to have exited the suffocating paradigmatic monoliths of the past, opening up space for theoretical and methodological experimentation and for studies grounded in a geosocial locus but without predetermined outcomes. At the same time, the field is painstakingly coming to terms (to speak optimistically) with its Western ethos and location. Most parts of the world contribute mainly case research framed by Anglo-American, French, or German theory. Other approaches rarely become theoretical guideposts, with the notable exception of Latin American cultural theory (itself with unequivocal European influences). This “weak” internationalization is clearly caused by the precariousness of institutions of knowledge production in much of the world and the lack of (required) instruction in languages other than English (sometimes French or German) in the West, especially in the United States. “Strong” internationalization would require the integration of theoretical ideas and historical experiences from the non-West in knowledge production not only in the West but also about the West, with corresponding linguistic and cultural competences. As I have argued elsewhere (Kraidy 2005), if American studies has managed to make this issue central to its development, a field that calls itself “global communication studies” has no excuse not to.

Disciplines

Communication

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My struggle to develop meaningful approaches beyond the field’s Eurocentric premises has profoundly influenced my current book project. *Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life* (Kraidy forthcoming-a) is a deliberate attempt to broaden the theoretical repertoire of global communication studies. Designed as an exploration of broad social, political, and communication issues, it is grounded in a regional locus—the two dozen Arab states, linked by a common language and a vibrant transnational satellite television industry. Examining a series of controversies that first erupted in 2003 in various Arab countries over format adapted reality TV shows, I attempt to map out forces that shape Arab public life. Drawing clerics, politicians, journalists, intellectuals, media moguls, and activists of all ideological stripes, the Arab reality TV wars focused on defining “reality” by regulating a volatile mix of political, economic, religious, and gender issues.

In line with its commitment to a global conceptual and historical foundation, the book attempts to energize a south-to-south theoretical dialogue.¹ My central argument is that the pan-Arab reality TV wars are best understood as a social laboratory where rival visions of modernity are elaborated. Modernization theory has little to offer to that endeavor. Arabs today scorn Daniel Lerner’s stark choice “Mecca or mechanization,” toting “Islamic mobile phones” with a compass pointing to Mecca and alarms going off at prayer times. More illuminating of contemporary Arab culture is the *tiempos mixtos* framework of Nestor García-Canclini, Jesús Martín-Barbero, and others who grappled with the dynamics and dilemmas of Latin American modernities. But helpful as they are, applying these ideas in the Arab world *mutatis mutandis* would reiterate modernization theory’s ethnocentrism. Contextualized in Arab societies, however, these ideas resonate, conceptually and historically. For example, the “modernity wars” that rocked Saudi Arabia in the 1980s and 1990s, pitting poets, literary critics, journalists, and clerics in fierce battles conducted through poetry, cassette-tape recordings, mosque sermons, and newspaper columns, centered on what it meant to be at once Saudi, Muslim, and modern (Al-Ghazhhami 2005). How to deal with Western influence was a concern obsessively shared by rivals in those wars. Indeed, the centrality of the West as a potent normative space to be scorned, emulated, or negotiated—modernity as an “elsewhere,” as Arjun Appadurai once put it—binds the postcolonial Arab-speaking and Spanish-speaking worlds in equivalent, though dissimilar, historical experiences, marked by ambivalent relationships with the Western imperial-colonial metropolis. Concerns over *ikhhtilat*, the illicit interaction of unmarried and non-blood-related males and females that emerged in the Arab reality TV polemics, resonate with *la malinche*, the iconic woman figure who represents colonial contamination in Mexico. Both notions are animated by a historical memory of colonial subjugation, but they differ in how they approach the trope of miscegenation, with *mestizaje* becoming official ideology in much of Latin America, while cultural impurity remains anathema to the most conservative Arab societies, Saudi Wahhabiyya being an extreme case in point.

Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life (Kraidy forthcoming-a) does not pretend to provide answers to the myriad questions bedeviling scholarship on global media and communication. Rather, it begins to address issues that challenge the field to live up to the “global” in its name. The book raises more questions that it can answer. Some will be addressed in another book project already in process (Miller and Kraidy forthcoming); others I hope that we as an intellectual community will take up. Is it time for us to go beyond globalization as a guiding framework, as the international relations scholar James Rosenau (2003) has argued, and

give due attention to regional, national, and even local mediations? How to retool the comparative media systems methods that is growing increasingly less attuned to realities of both geopolitics and transnational media industries? More narrowly, are the models and central concerns of reality TV studies—liveness, individual authenticity, neoliberal “schooling”—in the English-speaking world specifically and more broadly in the West, keeping in mind differences within these spheres, universally salient? Ongoing research suggests otherwise (see, among others, Jacobs 2007; and ongoing work by Punathambekar in *Indian Idol*; Kraidy forthcoming-b). Clearly, the most productive path is one of mutual engagement rather than theoretical chauvinism. Nonetheless, provincializing Europe is an essential step if the *global* communication studies label is to be meaningful.

Notes

1. South-to-south intellectual exchanges have concerned Patrick Murphy and I for several years. See the introduction in Murphy and Kraidy (2003) and more recently Kraidy and Murphy (2008).
2. Which is what Joseph Straubhaar (2007) explores in *World TV: From Global to Local*.
3. One creative way of doing global, comparative research can be found in Curtin (2007).

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