

Re-Orienting Global Digital Cultures

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Abstract:

This chapter reflects on the Asian perspectives on digital culture offered in this volume. It provides a context for understanding this latest “Asian” turn in theorizing and researching digital cultures. It argues that the implications of the studies anthologized are highly significant, not just for our understanding of Asian communication — but for rethinking global communication in a general sense.

Keywords: digital culture, communication, Asia, internationalizing media studies

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Re-orienting global digital cultures

It is a longstanding paradox of technology, especially the digital, networked technology that emerged from the 1970s onwards, that it has supported an extraordinary growth and intensity of global communication — yet the importance of local, regional, national, and other contexts, locations, and frames of reference has remained decisive. With the rise of globalization as a key concept and field of study, much research was preoccupied with the salience and novelty of transborder communication, and the mixing up of domestic, local, and subcultures with global cultural and media forms, believed to be evident in the rise of digital technologies such as the internet, mobile media, digital broadcasting and new audiovisual economies, digital music, online advertising, and new forms of digital popular cultures. Globalization, narrowly construed, blindsided us to the actual complexity of understanding global digital cultures. Hence there is a stubbornly resistant contradiction that still governs research: on the one hand, digital cultures rely upon global networks, supply chains, trade and economy, transnational communications giants (notably the new social media titans), and international users, producers, and audiences); and on the other hand, global digital cultures are profoundly emplaced in particular cultural, social, and political settings and contexts. As yet, research has largely failed to join these two parts of the digital cultures puzzle.

To understand what’s happening in even a quotidian interaction among users, or between users, technology, media formats, and cultural representations, on a social media platform, one needs to understand the layering and shaping of this digital

“assemblage”. As we are beginning to appreciate, there are considerable differences among, say, QQ, WeChat, and Baidu, in a Chinese context, that do not simply map onto, or are amenable to being deducted, from Facebook, Twitter, or, even WeChat, in a US context. Even the exportation of platforms like Facebook, or, more recently Alibaba, across the globe should cause us to pause — and ask questions about the cultural terms of trade, so to speak. How, for instance, is Facebook introduced into particular markets? How does it relate to, or displace, early social networking systems — Friendster, for instance, in Indonesia, or the Philippines, or Mixi in Japan, or Cyworld, in Korea? (Goggin, McLelland, & Yu, 2016; Hjorth & Arnold, 2013).

As this rich, timely, and rigorous volume shows us, the path to understanding contemporary media and communication, especially the leading and privileged case of digital cultures, involves a profound re-orientation, so to speak, of our stances, positions, theories, concepts, frameworks, and methods, as researchers (Lim & Soriano, this volume). As many scholars have argued, the time has long past when we can assume and apply a shared general approach to media and culture that is based on the worldview, ideas, and experience of one particular group — even a very large and, actually, heterogeneous group that constitutes a “Western” approach to the study of how the “rest of the world” communicates (Curran & Park, 2000; Miike, 2006; Wang, 2011). The proponents of such cross-cultural, intercultural, subaltern, non-Western, cosmopolitan paradigm shifts bring with them distinct suppositions about how the world works, how we should take it, and what the cardinal norms, and coordinating values, should be. One tendency I have subscribed to has been the loose coalition of scholars arguing for an internationalization of media studies (Abbas & Erni, 2005; Goggin & McLelland, 2009 & 2016; Thussu, 2009) but the antecedents and new responses are multifarious indeed, including, for instance, those arguing for a need to understand new regional powers and blocs (Nordenstreng & Thussu, 2015), or the “geo-linguistic” constitution of the world’s regions (Sinclair, 1999).

Expressed in these terms, of course, the call for internationalization runs the risk of not doing justice to the complexity of research. Fair enough, however, when one examines the body of research in a particular area, such as digital cultures, it is hard not to come to the conclusion that we have a long way to go to genuinely, evenly, rigorously, and comprehensively understand the global picture. Further, two major stumbling-blocks are: 1) a lack of research on many of the world’s media and communication systems; and 2) a lack of recognition that media and communication everywhere is shaped by specific local and regional histories, conditions, infrastructures, policies, meanings, and projects. If we were to unpack these difficulties further, we find some important starting points to change the worlds of research — to achieve a necessary, and belated, re-orientation towards the international dimension.

The dominance of English as the language of international scholarship and research, especially in the fields of media and communication, has its mixed-blessings. That researchers are enjoined to publish in English-language journals and books, and, increasingly, participate in the international conferences in the field, in English. English does provide a *lingua franca* for a global communications research community, increasingly diverse in its character, yet wishing to find common ground, and build bridges across its different groups and preoccupations. The status of English as default language, however, means that a very significant amount of research, as well as the meaning-laden traditions of communication, its conceptions, and traditions, around the world, are missing — not only in translation, but indeed

stranded across geopolitical divides as well as gulfs of difference (Lim & Soriano, this volume). One only has to look at the local terminologies for the mobile phone, or metaphors by which the internet is imagined, to be reminded how much language matters to thinking, and so to research. In recognition of its importance, some conferences attempt bi-lingualism, or tri-linguism — for instance, the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), and also regional communication conferences will feature some presentations in two or more languages (with translation options). For its part, the International Communication Association (ICA), having long been based, and shaped by, North American traditions and interests, has for some time been intensively engaging in an internationalization strategy, with some success (especially through regional conferences). In the case of Asian communication, there are regional journals (such as *Media Asia*, or the *Asian Journal of Communication*) and now well-established research groupings and conferences, such as the annual *Chinese Internet Research Conference*, or various Asian conferences and edited volumes on mobile communication (Chu et al., 2012). Yet there remains an obvious gap between the knowledge and research on digital cultures in non-Anglophone research communities, and the apprehension of, and reflection upon, this literature in the Anglophone academic discourse; it is not simply an oversight, of course, but is bound up with the asymmetric power relations of knowledge production and distribution, and regimes of value (Chen, 2010; Dissanayake, 2009). This is something I have discovered in a collaborative project on histories of the internet in the Asia-Pacific. There are, in fact, substantial histories of the internet and associated digital cultures in countries such as Japan and Korea, in particular. Yet the customary, taken-for-granted understanding of East Asian internet histories still contains myths and preconceptions unalloyed by the existence of research that contests them (see, for instance: Goggin et al., 2016; McLelland, 2016).

Language is a major factor to address, but it also is an index of the complexity, different scales, institutional shifts, resources, and priorities required. There are long-standing concentrations and inequities in the resources available for knowledge, as embodied in educational and research systems, especially universities. Universities take sustained investment, increasingly from private sources, and especially need to attract students and faculty in conditions of increasing (if constrained) global mobility and competition. Universities also need to attract governmental support and funding. So, it is not surprising that there are areas of the world where digital cultures have been intensively studied and research reported and circulated — precisely because countries that provide training, development, and support for advanced research remain relatively few. In the case of Asia, where countries such as Japan and Korea were in the vanguard of conceptions of the “information society”, and early investment in computerization, communication networks, and digital networks, in which technology research capacity was key, it is no surprise that we also see substantial research — from researchers based overseas, as well as local counterparts and custodians of cultural, media, and communication traditions. Now leading investors in universities, teaching, and research are countries such as China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia, as well as India, each with considerable investments in information and communication technology, as well as domestic, household, social, political, educational, and cultural take-up of digital technology. This kind of marked shift in both technology infrastructures and diffusion, as well as universities, provides a pre-condition, as well as major impetus, for a groundswell of change in how we conceive and research digital cultures globally. As T. T. Sreekumar lays it out in his magisterial chapter, these issues of technology are woven into

accounts and visions of Asian modernities (Sreekumar, this volume). Reflecting on these changes, we may draw attention to the way in which some countries receive a good deal of attention, and often figure as the “reference” cases for understanding general considerations of digital technology (and indeed associated cultural formations), where other countries receive little attention and remain overlooked, unremarked, and lacking in prestige or relevance.

What Asian perspectives tell us about global digital cultures

Against this backdrop, the central concern of this book is that Asian perspectives provide important insights concerning digital cultures. As such, we can locate this volume, and its research, alongside the now substantial body of work on Asian digital technologies and cultures. The research literature contains many studies of digital technology in specific Asian countries. It also contains a body of work that takes up the gambit of offering a broader *Asian* perspective, or at least discussion on what an *Asian* perspective might constitute (for instance: Dissanayake, 2009; Donald, Anderson, & Spry, 2010; Ho, Erni & Chua, 2005; Kluver & Yang, 2003; Han & Nasir, 2015; Pertierra, 2008). So, for me, this is the heartland of thinking about media, communication, and digital culture that this volume enters. What is particular to this book, however, is its contention that at the heart of such Asian perspectives are “enduring concepts,” which we might then use to interpret “emerging phenomena” such as new media. This is a very interesting, and extremely ambitious undertaking — and proves very fruitful indeed.

The book contains a number of studies that tackle resonant and apparently well-known “Asian” concepts, thinking them through in relation to digital cultures in the region and potentially globally. Sun Sun Lim and Iccha Basnyat’s nuanced study of online social networking takes up one of the categories of Asian thought best known globally — face. What I found especially suggestive about their discussion of face is that they go well beyond recourse to the Chinese or even Japanese understanding of face, and instead produce a cross-cultural Asian account — including India/Pakistan, Thailand, and Vietnam also. This provides them with a nuanced and precise Asian account of face, that they can then parlay back into the center of Western (especially North American-influenced) communication studies, via a reading of Goffman’s work. As they argue:

A central trope across the different Asian conceptions of face is “social face” that reflects a stronger relational dimension of self than in the Western conception. This pronounced social dimension lends itself particularly well to online social networks that are designed to be deeply social, while allowing for individual introspection ... The Asian concept of face thus sensitizes researchers to different dimensions of social, cultural, and possibly economic capital that individuals can derive while giving, saving, and gaining face via their online network interactions. (Lim & Basynat, this volume)

This is an especially interesting balancing of theoretical considerations across local and regional cultures, and global communications that typifies the studies collected here.

Other contributions to the volume also take up major, widely invoked Asian concepts, and use these to theorize media and communication: Jun Liu looks at the Chinese notion of “guanxi” in explaining mobile communication in recent protests; Cheryll Soriano and Sun Sun Lim take up a number of important, less well known Filipino concepts, alongside the widely known “people power”, to elucidate ritual and

community in mobile phone communication; and Ganga S. Ganesh offers an especially interesting, long historical view of the traditions of corporate social responsibility in contemporary Indian companies, drawing on the resources of ancient philosophical, religious, and social thought. Other contributions discuss notable cultural phenomena, now reconfigured in digital forms. Manuel Victor J. Sapidula joins Soriano in an examination of the online, “translocal” forms of piety found in the highly popular *Perpetual Help Devotion*. Liew Kai Khiun uses the Chinese cosmological concept of ying hun (影魂) (“shadow and soul”) to discuss the luminous uses of holographic technologies in the posthumous projects of Hong Kong and Taiwan transnational Chinese celebrities.

It is important to emphasize that there are major implications for how we approach media studies that arise from the studies in this collection. This is explicit in two chapters in particular that engage the “super” or “classic” theories of culture, communication, and media in Asia. Consider that a major challenge in research on global communication and culture in media studies in particular has been making head-way in the face of “macro-level” theories about societies and how they differ — including across the West, and East. Thus the sweeping accounts of Geert Hofstede, in particular, still hold sway, offering comparative accounts at scale that characterize cultures as “high-context” or “low-context”, more or less collectivist (Hofstede, 1980, & 1991), or characterized by particular configurations of gender (such as the “masculinity dimension” (Hofstede, 1998). Despite their popularity, it can be contended that, at this juncture especially, these are at best, grand accounts that offer little purchase for understanding the cultural dynamics and social functions of media and communication in actually existing societies. The kind of reification of culture to be found in Hofstede, and other theorists of relatively “undifferentiated” culture is only matched, in an odd way, by more garden-variety, and yet still common, invocations of “Asian culture,” or “cultural values”, as a handy weapon in concrete political and cultural contests (Avonius & Kingsbury, 2008; Barr, 2002). Such accounts of culture fly in the face of the work undertaken in the area of Asian cultural studies (e.g. Chen, 2005; Iwabuchi, Muecke, & Thomas, 2004), as well as — for the most part — the body of research on Asian media and communications already alluded to here. Indeed, these debates about the nature of culture and technology have been a feature of Internet studies, and mobile communication studies, as newer fields, and there is a rich heritage to be acknowledged, and drawn upon here — as, for instance, the Cultural Attitudes towards Technology and Communication conference series (see Ess, 2016).

These still influential Western theories of communication undergird the dense and contentious arena deftly negotiated by Yeon-Ok Lee in her thoughtful study of the highly constructed and mediating melding of “news values” and “Asian values”, evident in how the new, culturally salient and valorized category of “Power Twitterians” play a pivotal role in South Korean new discourses. In her chapter, Lee makes the subtle and powerful argument that:

By no means does this study seek to argue that Asian values trump the news values identified by Western scholars like Galtung and Ruge (1965) and Harcup and O’Neil (2001). Instead, this chapter demonstrates the constructivist nature of media logics and the extent to which local values contribute to the construction and operation of such logics. (Lee, this volume)

In carefully considering and rejecting the still dominant theories of Hofstede, as stepping through the minefields of the ever-green “Asian values” (or in this case, “Korean values”), Lee’s chapter helpfully points the way to more productive avenues

for future inquiry and conceptualization of digital cultures. In a quite different treatment, Michael Prieler also engages these overarching theories of global communication. Prieler examines “face-ism” (that is, the presentation and prominence of face, and its implications for gender) in relation to online dating sites across two Western sites (US, Sweden) and two Eastern sites (Japan, South Korea). In doing so, he plumps for the conceptual yield of Confucianism over Hofstede’s “masculinity index”.

As is hopefully evident from this brief discussion, this is an important volume at this point of time in the field. The studies collected genuinely offer fresh and challenging perspectives on digital cultures — not just as we find such emergent media and social practices in “Asia”, however we approach and define this resonant, handy, and strategically useful concept. Rather, the volume provokes us to rethink how we approach global digital cultures — not just as objects of study, but in terms of the fundamental ways we frame, conceptualize, and theorize such deeply cultural, social, and political phenomena. As such, it is important to consider the Asian histories of technology, something raised by Sreekumar, but to a large extent not so well canvassed here. Given the contribution of science and technology studies to media and communication studies, more future work on Asian theories of technologies could be helpful to take the agenda of re-orienting global digital culture research in new directions.

Finally, the volume builds purposely, creatively, and tellingly on the last two decades of work towards Asian theories of communication and media, as an integral part of de-Westernizing, decolonizing, and internationalizing the field. It turns out that this is not simply a worthwhile endeavor for communication and media scholars. If we take seriously this latest Asian turn, as part of a global re-orientation, there is a real prospect we can at last re-frame the fundamental coordinates of how we see communication — and finally dislodge the distorting and profoundly problematic accounts of communication that still govern popular, policy, and scholarly conceptions.

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