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## Research and Pedagogy in Intercultural New Media Studies

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**Abstract:** New media are ubiquitous, changing the landscape of intercultural communication. Intercultural new media studies (INMS), first introduced and conceptualized by Robert Shuter in 2012 in his article in the *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, is an exciting new field of study which explores intercultural and international communication in a digital age. It promises to contemporize existing intercultural communication theories by exploring their relevance and salience in a mediated world. INMS also offers the prospect of developing 21<sup>st</sup> century theories of intercultural communication that include new media platforms. Finally, by exploring the relationship between culture and new media, intercultural new media studies details how culture affects the social uses of new media, and how new media affects culture. This article, and the nine studies in this special issue, are an important step in further developing intercultural new media studies and realizing its' promise. [China Media Research. 2012; 8(4): 1-5]

**Keywords:** Intercultural new media studies, intercultural new media research, intercultural communication, social media, new media and culture

New media are ubiquitous, changing the landscape of intercultural communication (Shuter, 2011). Communicators throughout the globe have access to new media which connect them electronically in ways unimagined until the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Social media, smart phones, Skype, text messaging, computer mediated communication, virtual worlds and multi-player on line games are revolutionizing the ways communicators interact across cultures and, as a result, challenging 20<sup>th</sup> century knowledge and theory about intercultural communication gleaned from a face-to-face paradigm. This essay further develops Intercultural New Media Studies (INMS), a new field of inquiry first introduced and defined by Robert Shuter (in press), and it also previews nine studies in this special issue that offer intercultural new media research.

In his ground breaking article, *Intercultural New Media Studies: The Next Frontier in Intercultural Communication*, Shuter (in press) conceptualizes this new field which consists of two major areas: (1) new media and intercultural communication theory, and (2) culture and new media. New media and intercultural communication theory is the primary area of INMS, exploring the impact of information communication technologies (ICTs) on communication *between* people from different cultures in virtual and physical worlds. In addition to critiquing the salience and applicability of 20<sup>th</sup> century intercultural communication research in a digital world, this area aims to develop new knowledge and theories of intercultural communication that include new media. Although of secondary importance, culture and new media is also a crucial component of INMS since it explores the impact of culture on the social uses of new media within and across societies as well as the ways in which new media affect culture. With scant research on both areas, except for Shuter's (2011) guest

edited forum in intercultural new media research, INMS promises to alter our understanding of intercultural communication in a new media age.

### *Intercultural New Media Research and Intercultural Communication Theory*

Major intercultural communication theories developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century may need to be revisited and modified to ensure that they are salient in a digital world. After reviewing available intercultural new media research, Shuter (in press) posited that theories of cultural identity, acculturation, intercultural dialogue, third culture, and intercultural competence require reconceptualization for the digital 21<sup>st</sup> century. For example, three essays in this special issue suggest that cultural identity, which is grounded in social identity theory and presumed to be negotiated and co-created (Collier, 2002), may be influenced by other factors in a virtual world where intimacy and engagement are more limited, new identities develop rapidly, and existing cultural identities from the physical world are both challenged and reinforced (Shuter, in press).

In Roy's provocative essay in this special issue on how Indians in the US and India manage their cultural identities via Facebook, she argues that social media provide communicators with greater control over construction, negotiation and interpretation of their identities than they may have in the physical world due in large part to the architecture of Facebook and the dynamics of virtual communities. Kurylo's important essay on Jeremy Lin and the construction of Asian social identity demonstrates the speed at which on-line exchanges on discussion boards can generate stereotypical identity attributions for minority sports figures in the US, both reinforcing and challenging their identities in the physical world. In their cogent

examination of power asymmetries in physical and digital worlds, Loewing and Motter speculate on how new media transform traditional processes of identity construction and circulation within the context of co-culture and counter-public research. These three articles demonstrate that the unique properties of new media, be they computer mediated or social media, may augment previous thinking about the construction and maintenance of cultural identity in physical and virtual worlds.

Knowledge and theory on acculturation and adaptation, much of which were gathered in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, need to be revisited to determine their salience in a new media age. Since major theories of acculturation were developed before the advent of most new media, they do not theorize about the impact of information communication technologies (ICTs) on acculturation (Kim, 1994; 2001). Although mass media are generally included in acculturation theories and studies, ICT's differ radically from traditional mass media in mobility, interactivity, and personal access and signature, posing critical questions for acculturation research.

Shuter (in press) reported after reviewing available research on acculturation and new media that ICT's can either accelerate or decelerate acculturation depending on the platform. For example, the limited data on virtual worlds and computer-mediated communication suggest that both platforms may accelerate acculturation (Ye, 2005; Jiali, 2006). However, available social media studies find positive and negative effects of this platform on acculturation (Croucher, 2011; Croucher and Cronn-Mills, 2011). In this special issue, Lee and Kim found that university students participating in an international student exchange program used Facebook to reduce stress and reinforce their native cultural identities, which the authors argue eased adaptation. Given the importance of acculturation to intercultural communication, it is crucial that scholars conduct considerably more research on the effects of new media on the adaptation process.

Research on intercultural dialogue and third culture building, important components of intercultural communication, has also been driven by a face-to-face paradigm, with scant investigations on the effects of ICT's on either component (Shuter, in press). Empathy and deep understanding are requisite for intercultural dialogue (Ganesh and Holmes, 2011), and are also crucial for third culture building, which is defined as "...conjoining of separate cultures" into a more exclusive culture "... that is not merely the result of a fusion of two or more separate entities, but also the product of a harmonization of composite parts into a coherent whole." (Casmir, 1989, p. 294). It's unclear whether research on intercultural dialogue and third culture building in face-to-face encounters is applicable

to a virtual world or whether either one is possible in mediated intercultural communication.

Shuter (in press) reported that intercultural dialogue and third culture building may be difficult to achieve in virtual communities in large part because empathy and deep understanding appear to be in short supply in the virtual world. However, it is quite possible that intercultural dialogue and third culture building may be regulated differently in virtual communities than physical ones (Shuter, in press). According to limited ICT research, anonymity and controlling social distance, both commonplace in virtual encounters yet obstacles to achieving dialogue in face-to-face interactions, may actually enhance third culture building and dialogue in a virtual world (McGowan and Sobre Denton, 2011). In this special issue, two studies support the supposition that intercultural dialogue and third culture building are not easily attained in a virtual intercultural community.

Herold found in his intriguing study of chinaSMACK, an on-line cross-cultural community dedicated to improving understanding between Mainland Chinese and non-Chinese, that the interactive website actually hindered intercultural dialogue, exacerbating cultural differences between Chinese and non-Chinese participants. In fact, he argues that given the nature of on-line exchanges, intercultural communication may suffer, not improve, in mediated encounters.

Although Chattopadhyay's study of Japanese and US on-line news coverage of the tsunami in Japan does not focus on intercultural dialogue in an on-line community, it does offer important insights into why dialogue may be difficult to achieve in an on-line environment. She discovered, unexpectedly, that the two cultures framed the same disaster event differently, which suggests that despite journalistic attempts to be objective, culture affects in non-conscious ways the interpretation of data, which appears to hinder intercultural dialogue in virtual and physical communities. In fact, Shuter (in press) posited that many of the same factors that are obstacle to intercultural dialogue in the physical world, like stereotyping, biases, and misperceptions, may also negatively affect dialogue in on-line intercultural communities.

This section of the article has explored possible effects of new media on selected intercultural communication theories, weaving into the analysis relevant essays contained in this special issue. However, in addition to the ICC theories examined here, there are many additional intercultural communication theories that may need to be refined or modified based on available intercultural new media research, particularly intercultural competence (Shuter, in press), stereotyping (Chia-I, 2008; Nakamura, 2009), high context/low

context communication, (Richardson & Smith, 2007; Wirtz, 2005), culture shock/stress (Martinez, 2010), intercultural relationship development (Tokunaga, 2009; Young-ok & Hara, 2005), and intercultural conflict (Mollov & Schwartz, 2010; St.Amant, 2002). In fact, to ascertain whether 20th century intercultural communication theories adequately explain intercultural transactions in a digital era, it is important that scholars turn their attention to intercultural new media studies and research. Focusing on the secondary area of INMS, this article next explores the impact of culture on the social uses of new media.

### ***Culture and New Media***

Although there is limited research on the effects of ICT's on intercultural communication, there is more data available on the social uses of new media in specific cultures as well as how new media changes culture. An important line of research, new media investigations on specific cultures began in the 1990's with exploration of computer mediated communication (CMC), especially country differences and CMC (Yoon, 1996) and the emergence of a digital global village spawned by CMC (Ess, 2001). In more current research, cultural differences are investigated for additional new media platforms like mobile phones (Baron & Af Segerstad, 2010; Campbell, 2007), text messaging (Shuter & Chattapadhyay, 2010), social media (Barker & Ota, 2011), virtual worlds (Diehl & Prins, 2008), and multiplayer on line games (Chia-I, 2008). This special issue contains three studies that explore cultural differences in the social uses of new media.

Wei, Willnat, and Shao examined the effects of individualism and collectivism on the use of Web 1.0 and 2.0 in China and the US. Interestingly, they found that Chinese and American students had different cultural values which appeared to influence their use of social media rather than their on-line news consumption. Cultural values and social media were also the focus of Lo and Water's stimulating study which examined whether the Facebook pages of Chinese nongovernmental organizations reflected traditional Chinese values. Consistent with Wei, Willnat, and Shao's intriguing investigation, this study found that Chinese frequently deviated from traditional cultural values when they used social media, which prompted the authors to suggest that new media may affect the expression of Chinese cultural values. Curiously, Boase and Kobayashi also found mixed support for the impact of traditional cultural values on social uses of new media. In their compelling study of Japanese and US voice calling patterns on mobile phones, they discovered, unexpectedly, that interpersonal collectivism in Japan only partially explained Japanese mobile phone behavior, which led the authors to conclude that new media may be governed by global

technology values in addition to indigenous cultural values. Not only do these studies provide insight into the social uses of new media in specific countries, but they suggest there is tension, even conflict, between new media and traditional culture, which is another essential component of intercultural new media studies.

There is limited but growing research on the impact of new media on culture. Shuter (2012) and Shuter and Chattopadhyay (2010) explored the role of text messaging (SMS) in India and found that it challenged traditional gender values particularly when a woman, either single or married, used SMS in the presence of men. Chen & Dai (2012) examined the Western bias of the digital world and argue that it challenges traditional identities and values of Eastern societies in large part due to an asymmetrical power relationship in the social uses of new media that privileges Westerners. In fact, Cheong, Martin, and Macfadyen's (2012) book on new media and intercultural communication takes a critical perspective, arguing that power, hierarchy, and stereotypes flourish in virtual worlds, which both reflect and impact culture in myriad ways. Critical new media research is a fruitful and viable dimension of intercultural new media studies.

### ***Intercultural New Media Studies and the Intercultural Communication Curriculum***

In addition to inspiring intercultural new media research, INMS has practical pedagogical implications, particularly for intercultural communication. While research on INMS is not abundant, there appears to be sufficient intercultural new media data to include this topic in current classes on intercultural and international communication. Inclusion of INMS in an existing class would entail introducing content on both intercultural communication theory and new media as well as culture and new media, the two major areas of INMS. It may also be possible to develop a new class called Intercultural New Media Studies which explores the intersection of new media and intercultural communication.

To develop intercultural new media content for an existing class or a new class, Shuter's (in press) article on intercultural new media studies is a valuable resource because it defines the parameters of INMS, critiques the digital salience of current theories of intercultural communication, and offers a comprehensive bibliography of intercultural new media research. Moreover, with the publication of Cheong, Martin, and Macfadyen's (2012) edited book titled *New Media and Intercultural Communication*, the first on this topic, there is textbook now available for current classes on intercultural communication or a new class on intercultural new media studies. Finally, the Center for Intercultural New Media Research ([www.intercultural](http://www.intercultural)

newmedia.com) is a worthwhile digital resource for curriculum and class development in this area, offering pedagogical assistance as well as access to an extensive worldwide research network of intercultural new media scholars and their studies.

Intercultural new media studies is an exciting new field of inquiry which explores intercultural and international communication in a digital age. It promises to contemporize existing intercultural communication theories by exploring their relevance and salience in a mediated world. INMS also offers the prospect of developing 21<sup>st</sup> century theories of intercultural communication that include new media platforms. Finally, by exploring the relationship between culture and new media, intercultural new media studies conceptualizes how culture affects the social uses of new media, and how new media affects culture. This special issue is an important step in further developing intercultural new media studies and realizing its' promise.

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