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Convergence and Disjuncture in Global Digital Culture: An Introduction

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Convergence and Disjuncture in Global Digital Culture: An Introduction

Abstract

In the 1980s and 1990s, the question "Is there a global culture?" fueled heated debates as intellectual opponents debated the social, political, economic, and cultural consequences of globalization. Guest-edited by Marwan M. Kraidy, this Special Section of the *International Journal of Communication* by global communication scholars revisits the discussion on global culture in light of the digital revolution. Originally presented at CARGC's second Biennial Symposium in April 2016, these articles do not pretend to provide a comprehensive answer to the existence or lack thereof of a global digital culture. Rather, they consider this question as an intellectual provocation to revisit how the universal relates to the particular, the global to the local, the digital to the material. Questions guiding these articles include: How do networks transmute individual autonomy and the sovereignty of the body? How is digital culture fomenting disjuncture across the globe in dissident, marginal, or rogue formations? How is the digital affecting the ways people work and play, how they experience and judge beauty, and how they protest? Most fundamentally, does digitization herald a new chapter in how we understand ourselves?

To read this special issue of *International Journal of Communication* in full, visit http://ijoc.org.

Keywords

global culture, digital media, politics, aesthetics, violence, digital labor, platforms, global media studies

Disciplines

Communication

Comments

This is the introduction to *Convergence and Disjuncture in Global Digital Culture*, a special issue of *IJOC* edited by Marwan Kraidy.

Convergence and Disjuncture in Global Digital Culture

An Introduction

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The question "Is there a global culture?" fueled heated debates in the 1980s and 1990s, when intellectual opponents grappled with the sociopolitical and cultural consequences of globalization. Deploying notions of dependency, imperialism, homogenization, and hybridization, dueling thinkers espoused rival scenarios of cultural domination, mixture, and resistance. A quarter century later, with the explosion of digital expression around the world, it is time to revisit the debate and ask: Is there a global digital culture?

Keywords: global culture, digital media, politics, aesthetics, violence, digital labor, platforms, global media studies

The question "Is there a global digital culture?" animated discussions among contributors to this special issue, when they presented initial versions of these articles at the second Biennial Symposium of the Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication (CARGC) at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. An institute for advanced study that produces and disseminates advanced research in global communication germane to public life, CARGC serves as an incubator for scholarship that blends theoretical sophistication with methodological rigor and regional expertise in a comparative, translocal approach that seeks to shed light on enduring questions. The notion of global culture and the passions that it elicits have been salient at least since French Enlightenment and German Romanticism advanced different versions, scales, and objectives of culture and identity. In the 1990s, the question animated parlays and spawned important publications by social scientists (Featherstone, 1994) and humanists (Jameson & Miyoshi, 1998). And, of course, issues of global cultural homogenization and hybridization have been at the heart of global communication studies and the polemics surrounding modernization theory and cultural imperialism, spilling into the public realm with the New World Information and Communication Order debate and the withdrawal of the United States and the United Kingdom from UNESCO in the 1980s (for a critical summary, see Kraidy, 2005).

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It is time to revisit the discussion on global culture in light of the digital revolution. The articles that follow, revised from papers presented at the CARGC symposium, do not pretend to provide a comprehensive answer to the existence or lack thereof of a global digital culture. Rather, they tackle important challenges raised by digital media, and together, they construct a global, comparative framework that I hope will point to paths that can be followed for a comprehensive reevaluation of theories of global communication and culture. CARGC has already made contributions toward understanding what technological changes mean for global knowledge construction (Appadurai, 2016; Kraidy & Krikorian, 2017), and the movement of people around the world (Sheller, 2016). The articles to follow continue this tradition.

We can make some general observations about interactions between "the global" and "the digital," while remaining steadfast in our refusal to fetishize one or the other, or to use them as conceptual equivalents or substitutes for each other. On the one hand, it might be tempting to see digitization as a steamroller of difference. From that perspective, the advent of global platforms, and the onset of algorithmic culture and data analytics, have dramatized the rise of new kinds of communicative power. The articulation of technological determinism and market celebration in the digital area reflect a banal universalism and cast local specificities as antiquated holdovers or data points. From a different vantage point, we could protest: But the digital has also enabled the proliferation of digital cultures across the globe! How do we understand this phenomenon? Is it akin to a religious conversion, as the historian and theorist of digital culture Milad Doueihi (2008) has argued? Is it the harbinger of bodily emancipation, as a series of corporate advertisements and breathless journalistic encomia to the digital have maintained? Are the contemporary convergences and disjunctures between the global, the cultural, and the digital best grasped through a twinning of cultural pessimism and technological determinism? To complicate matters further, the advent of the digital has intensified our preoccupation with the posthuman. Are artificial intelligence, machine learning, and algorithmic culture tantamount to a transfer, however partial, of agency from humans to machines?

In this context, the question "Is there a global digital culture?" is meant as an intellectual provocation to revisit how the universal relates to the particular, the global to the local, the digital to the material, and the human to the posthuman. In the original symposium, participants grappled with the problematic notion of global digital culture, exploring dynamics of convergence and disjuncture in the digital era. Discerning readers know that our title is inspired by Arjun Appadurai's canonical essay, in which he argued that disjunctures among politics, culture, and economy on a global scale shaped worldwide formations—he called them, famously, "scapes"—of people, media, technology, finance, and identity (Appadurai, 1994). Questions contributors grapple with include: How do networks transmute individual autonomy and the sovereignty of the body? How is digital culture fomenting disjuncture across the globe in dissident, marginal, or rogue formations? How is the digital affecting the ways people work and play, how they experience and judge beauty, and how they protest? Most fundamentally, does digitization herald a new chapter in how we understand ourselves?

Some contributors to this issue address enduring issues in global media studies from new angles; others introduce new elements brought about by the impact of digitization on global media production, dissemination, and uptake. Jin explores how the rise of global and regional platforms transform the

longstanding problematic of global media and cultural flows, concluding that exchanges of media and culture remain deeply unequal in an era in which Facebook is an increasingly dominant global platform. Casilli addresses global media inequities through the prism of digital labor, a relatively new phenomenon that nonetheless reinforces lopsided relations between Western centers and the rest of the world. Committed to the task of making invisible labor visible, an established impetus of critical political economic research, Casilli nonetheless warns against using tropes such as neocolonialism and dualism, proposing instead a broader rubric of coloniality to embed the study of digital labor in global communication studies. Šisler, Švelch, and Šlerka's comparative study of two unusual loci of cultural production—Czech Republic and Iran—using the framework of critical transculturalism, is a dual exploration of cultural production and its social reproduction in industry and in online fan magazines. In this translocal research, they show that cultural hybridity is not necessarily a symptom of empowerment, and they expose gaps in our understanding of cultural and media industries in the world's "margins."

Although it has not historically been a central issue in international communication research, violence is a key dimension of several of these articles. In two articles from a panel on "rogue digital cultures" that initially featured three presentations (the third being my own, on Islamic State's digital productions, see Kraidy, 2017), Amaya and Fattal explore the role of violence in shaping how actors, dominant and subaltern, engage in hegemonic and rogue media production. In doing so, they underscore that violence in its physical and embodied forms in addition to symbolic types is—unfortunately, but unavoidably—now an important dimension of global media research (see also Kraidy, 2016; Rodriguez, 2011). Violent contexts, Amaya and Fattal show, enable artful agents whose creations enter the transnational circuitry of global digital culture: A blogger performs a cagey but poignant negotiation of anonymity and heroicity (Amaya); a guerilla group produces music videos, quintessential promotional forms, in spite of that group's ideological opposition to media commercialization, and circulates media from Stockholm basements to Havana artists' meetings to rural communities in Colombia (Fattal). Violence, attempts to avoid it or take advantage from it, and aspirations to exit it—the Gramscian shift from a war of maneuver to a war of position—play ambivalently and intermittently on a spectrum of visibility ranging from hypervisibility to total invisibility.

Aesthetics is another issue that has historically not been central to global communication, but is now an important dimension of global media studies. Goriunova and Marks provide fascinating takes on aesthetic and affective dimensions of global digital culture. Taking the figure of the lurker as a conceptual persona, Goriunova argues that global digital culture is not abstract or transcendental, but rather real and ideal. Whether as inactive members of a social media platform, a bot, or an algorithm, the lurker provides an entry point into dynamics of visibility and invisibility and the interactions between human and machinic intentionalities. Marks takes the notion of media convergence head on, calling it "an idealist fantasy that almost nobody lives in practice," reminding us that the poor infrastructure prevalent worldwide conjures up communities of scrappy digital bricolage of "tinkering, bootlegging," rather than glossy high-end practices. Deploying an enfolding-unfolding analytical aesthetic cobbled from Deleuzian, Neoplatonist, and Shia philosophy, Marks seeks to uncover what is perceptually hidden in global digital culture, emphasizing mediation as physical and affective connection between people and objects, in practices that combine production and archiving.

The Contributions

In "The Cultures of Anonymity and Violence in the Mexican Blogosphere," Hector Amaya analyzes the famous Mexican website El Blog del Narco as symptomatic of the type of publicity common in contemporary Mexico and the manner in which violence has structured the "citizen journalism" sector of the Mexican blogosphere. The article interrogates how the blog's mode of production and its reliance on anonymity has propelled the bloggers, in particular an anonymous blogger who refers to herself as "Lucy," to the level of civic heroes and how a global community of sympathizers made sense of her actions. In this violent context, Lucy has used anonymity as a necessary mechanism to construct a place of trust and safety. In the process, Lucy has embodied the contradictory figure of the anonymous hero. The analysis is indebted to Seyla Benhabib's classic interrogation of Hannah Arendt's notions of publicity, in particular ideas of heroicity and self-disclosure.

In "Uploading the News After Coming Down From the Mountain: The FARC's Experiment with Online Television in Cuba, 2012–2016," Alex Fattal describes how between 2012 and 2016, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) negotiated a peace agreement in Havana, Cuba, with the Colombian government. Over those four years, the group experimented with media production techniques to try to redefine itself and access new publics. Central to the FARC's media operations was an online news program. This article parses the aesthetics of that online broadcast and analyzes it within the context of a historic peace accord's uncertain unfolding. The FARC has been anticipating a Gramscian "war of position" in the postconflict period, and has prepared for a form of mediated political contestation that absorbs and refashions the intensity and tactical patterns of the guerrilla conflict. Beyond the Colombian context, the article argues for a dynamic understanding of publics and counterpublics, and for scholars to scrutinize the ambivalences of militant actors' usage of social media to counteract their exclusion from oligopolistic mass mediation.

In "Video Games and the Asymmetry of Global Cultural Flows: The Game Industry and Game Culture in Iran and the Czech Republic," Vit Šisler, Jaroslav Švelch and Josef Šlerka offer a comparative study of video game production in unusual places. As they argue, video games are a global phenomenon that pervades much of society, irrespective of age, gender, or social status. Despite the global nature of game development, the industry is controlled by a relatively small number of publishing corporations. The global video game culture is inherently asymmetrical, with games produced in particular regional centers dominating the markets. As a result, local video game production and consumption are intrinsically hybrid cultural practices that accommodate cross-cultural encounters. This article analyzes the personal, institutional, and cultural dimensions of video game production and consumption in two increasingly important, yet under-studied, regions: Eastern Europe and the Middle East. To do so, it uses case studies on the Czech and Iranian gaming scenes as examples. Beyond the politico-economic aspects of video game production, the article empirically analyzes the manifestation of Czech and Iranian gaming cultures on social networking sites and their connections to global game culture. Overall, the article anchors local video game mediascapes in broader historical, cultural, and political contexts and offers a more nuanced picture of gaming across diverse global contexts.

In "Digital Platform as a Double-Edged Sword: How to Interpret Cultural Flows in the Platform Era," Dal Yong Jin provides a new argument in favor of global cultural counter-flows. Cultural flows have been some of the most significant issues in globalization. From television programs to films, the cultural flows of these popular cultural products have been the subjects of either cultural imperialism, emphasizing a one-way flow, from the West to the East, or countercultural imperialism, focusing on the arrival of pluralism and the emergence of local cultural industries. In the era of digital platforms, the nature of cultural flows has changed because several digital platforms, such as social media, including both Social Networking Sites and user-generated content (e.g., YouTube), have become the new outlets of popular culture. Due to the increasing role of digital platforms, several media scholars argue that platforms shift the traditional notion of cultural flows. Digital platforms indeed play a key role in distributing popular culture, from non-Western to Western countries. This article critically examines the role of digital platforms as the new outlets of popular culture. It maps out whether digital platforms resolve global imbalances in cultural flows. It also analyzes whether digital platforms themselves cause the emergence of new disparities between the West and the East due to the dominance of these platforms by the U.S. The article grapples with the question of whether digital platforms have deepened asymmetrical power relations between a few Western countries, in particular the U.S., and non-Western countries.

In "Poor Images, Ad Hoc Archives, Artists' Rights: The Scrappy Beauties of Handmade Digital Culture," Laura U. Marks examines the unpolished aesthetics of digital art. Case studies of media artworks and collections in the Arab world focus on two factors that arise from uneven access to media technology. First, the informal media economy relies on retrofitting, bootlegging, and creative making do. The beauty of many media artworks arising from this economy lies not in an isolated perfection, but in the material and energetic connectivity of perceptible human tinkering and laboriously human-built databases. Second, most media images in circulation are low resolution, glitchy, or otherwise "poor." This audiovisual poverty draws attention to the patterns of circulation and invites a critique of the ideologies implicit in media compression. These artworks and archival practices draw attention to the agency of individuals, artists' organizations, and archival materials themselves. At the same time, many organizations go to great lengths to respect the rights of the artists whose work they manage, putting "propriety rights" above property rights.

In "The Lurker and the Politics of Knowledge in Data Culture," Olga Goriunova explores the practice of lurking, developing the figure of the lurker as a conceptual persona. The lurker is a sage of the digital era, constructing a form of "private" knowledge. Not involved but performative, constative but only in a manner of probability, the lurker produces frameworks for private truth-production through self-adjustment. A mode of knowing and a method of being, the lurker is about the poiesis of the embedded self and the power to establish conditionality in digital networks. A lurker maps out a plane that is occupied today by big data analytics. It is data algorithms that lurk, operating with sagacious data wisdoms, rather than technical knowledge, constructing partial and probabilistic propositions. The article concludes by enquiring into the consequences of the current digital technical condition in which the conceptual persona of the lurker is fulfilled by algorithms and its mode of knowing becomes a new mode of governance.

In "Digital Labor Studies Go Global: Toward a Digital Decolonial Turn," Antonio Casilli elucidates the global dimensions of digital labor. The field of study touching on platform-based activities has scaled up to reflect the increasing reliance of digital economies on supply chains outsourcing tasks to developing and emerging countries. To what extent an economy predicated on data and value transferred from the Global South to the North can be construed as "neo-colonial"? Theoretical parallels with slavery, imperialism, and colonization fail to assess the historical peculiarities of new global inequalities. The point made in this article is that the germane notion of "coloniality" (by relating to existing works at the intersection of race, gender, postcolonial, and subaltern studies) better addresses the dynamics of social exclusion and exploitation at play in Western and non-Western countries. He concludes by arguing for a "digital decolonial turn" pursuing the chief goal of digital labor studies: making invisible work visible.

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