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Blogospheres: Identity, Politics and Blogging around the World

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I.

This book is part of an increasing effort in media studies to address the parochialism of contemporary scholarship by considering media practices and products developed throughout the world. In 2000, citing corporate-led globalization, developments in geopolitics, the rise of the Asian economy, the emergence of new centers of media production and the growth of media studies as an academic field, James Curran and Myung-Jin Park called the narrowness of media scholarship “transparently absurd.” (2000:3) In the years since, proliferation of new forms of digital media and the related rise of the audience as a major participant in the production of online content extends even further the range of media products and practices developing world-wide and the absurdity of theory elaboration based on isolated Western case studies.

The aim of *Blogospheres* is to broaden consideration of blogging, a now major worldwide new-media practice, by emphasizing the significance of context. We have included contributions by scholars from nine countries that testify to the complex set of factors that shape national and language-based blogospheres. Over the past decade, blogs have become a significant part of the transnational media environment, the most popular of so-called 2.0 or second-wave web applications. Yet analysis of the form generally reflects the traditional limits of the field. The fact is, new-media scholars by and large perceive and assess blogs around the world according to a particular perception of the form’s qualities. This is an updated version of the mistake we made with old media. Early champions of the potential of television as a tool in international development, for example, imagined that TV everywhere would act among viewers the way TV does generally in the United States. But more recently communications scholars such as Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes (1993)¹, have demonstrated, for example, that people watch TV and relate to TV in different ways, that they look for different things from it depending on cultural contexts and that they likewise make different meanings of the things they see. Blogs such as the popular one produced by “riverbend”² in Baghdad suggest blogging as a form may or may not be fostering political representative democracy in Iraq, but it is definitely strengthening traditional forms of communication there, such as oral-style micro storytelling as the key ingredient to larger cultural conceptions.³

To many, the spread of the American blogging model around the world—including its norms and practices and modes of operation—effectively represents the spread of

¹ Their work on cross-cultural readings of American primetime soap “Dallas” is still an influential and persuasive example.

² For more on “riverbend” see: Aziz Douai’s chapter on the Arab blogosphere.

³ On the oral versus writing cultures see, for example, Walter Ong’s *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982).

democracy. The rhetoric that surrounds blogging essentially describes the liberating potential of a new (American) cultural product, created and distributed globally through inherently democratizing digital tools and networks. More specifically, a rash of recent works outlines the emergence of a new more horizontal politics and journalism driven by blogs and the networks blogs seem to engender.⁴ These works mostly derive from compelling anecdotal evidence but also mostly overlook or ignore the ways power dynamics offline influence developments online. There remains generally a crucial lack of integration in new-media studies between online and offline realities. The theoretical links scholars have been forging, myself included, between democracy and the internet generally and blogs in particular form the great bulk of popular as well as official thinking, obscuring variable contexts and hemming in larger realities.

One of the images on the cover of this book was taken in Tunisia in November 2005 at the United Nations World Summit on the Information Society.⁵ The event was charged with the tension between the summit delegates, who were promoting increased access to and openness toward new media, and the Tunisian government, which was overtly repressing media freedoms across the board. There is a metaphorical quality to the fact that while the delegates in the summit hall considered the potential of the internet to foster development and democracy, the people just outside the hall were living with the ability of the government to foster repression. During the summit some of what was going on in Tunisia included a hunger strike staged by eight Tunisians over human rights violations, including indefinite detentions for posting or viewing “subversive” material online; visa authorities prevented the head of Reporters sans Frontiers from entering the country; a human rights reporter from the French daily *Libération* was beaten on the street while nearby police refused to intervene; and state communications agents blocked or took down Tunisian protest and political websites. Defending the selection of Tunisia as the site for the conference, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan told the BBC that he personally discussed the issues of censorship and human rights abuses with the country’s president. “Sometimes,” he said, “organizing these conferences in places like Tunisia,

⁴ *Blog: Understanding the Information Reformation (That’s Changing Your World)* (2006) by Hugh Hewitt, *Crashing the Gates: Netroots, Grassroots, and the Rise of People-Powered Politics* (2006) by Jerome Armstrong and Markos Moulitsas Zuniga; *Blog!: How the Newest Media Revolution is Changing Politics, Business, and Culture* (2005) edited by David Kline, Dan Burstein, Arne J. De Keijzer, and Paul Berger; *An Army of Davids: How Markets and Technology Empower Ordinary People to Beat Big Media, Big Government, and Other Goliaths* (2007) by Glenn Reynolds; and *The Blog Ahead: How Citizen-Generated Media is Radically Tilting the Communications Balance* (2006) by R. Scott Hall.)

⁵ According to the United Nations, 19,401 people participated in the event, representing 174 national delegations, 92 international organization (like UNESCO or UNICEF), 606 non-governmental organizations, 226 business entities, and 642 media outlets. The conference was one of the best-attended UN conferences of the decade. (http://www.onecountry.org/e173/e17306as_WSIS_Tunisia_Story.htm)

putting the spotlight on them, where these issues of human rights and others are discussed, it's extremely helpful, it helps push the cause forward" (BBC 2005).

Annan's remarks reference for me the problem with the way a lot of scholarship and related bureaucratic writing imagines the power of digital media—the idea, that is, that digital media's just being somewhere “helps push the cause forward.” In his remarks Annan was talking on one level about drawing media attention to rights abuses and even about provoking oppressive heads of state. On another level, however, he was drawing on a theoretical tradition that promotes the benefits of exposure— of exposing people from oppressive countries to people and institutions from the lands where democracy reigns, the idea being that just getting the UN and democratic thinkers on the ground would create a force, born from example, that would move life in “places like Tunisia” closer to something like life in the West. This theory of exposure has thread its way through media studies for a long time, shaping academic research as well as government policy, and, I think, is enjoying a rebirth in communication and digital-media studies today, tied in particular to the world of blogging.

Recent writing on the liberatory potential of digital media constitutes the latest chapter in the promotion in the West of media as perhaps the key tool in the spread of democracy. Theories of international communication were an integral part of Cold War discourse—the primary function of international communication being, according to Western thinkers at the time, to promote democratic government, freedom of expression and financial markets. (Thussu 2000) Cold War-era or second-wave modernization theory⁶ arose from the notion that, in the global ideological battle against socialism, international mass communication could be used to transfer the social, economic and political models of the West to the newly independent countries of the South. One of the earliest exponents of this theory, Daniel Lerner (1958), proposed that contact with the media facilitated societal evolution from “traditional” to “modern” because the flickering presentation of modern ways spurred members of traditional societies to reassess their ways of life.

Subsequent research thankfully “problematized” modernization theory, in part by breaking down the simple dichotomies at the heart of much of the writing. Case studies demonstrated that, despite tireless efforts at modernization through media, traditional cultures and values endured, even as people throughout the non-Western world adopted and adapted the latest communication technologies.⁷ In the late-sixties, proponents of

⁶ See for example Lerner, Daniel and Schramm, Wilbur L. (Fwd. by Lyndon B. Johnson) *Communication and change in the developing countries* (East-West Center Press, Honolulu, 1967); Schramm, Wilbur L. (ed.) *The impact of educational television: selected studies from the research sponsored by the National Educational Television and Radio Center* (University of Illinois Press, 1960); and Schramm, Wilbur L. and Atwood, Erwin. *Circulation of news in the Third World: A study of Asia* (Chinese University Press, 1981).

⁷ See, for example Annenbelle Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ali Mohammadi's *Small Media, Big Revolution* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994), for example, on how

media imperialism theory directly challenged modernizationists with the argument that American media aid to developing countries, rather than freeing people of the traditions alleged to inhibited development, created increasing dependency within the already imbalanced global economic system, serving mainly to spread Western consumer values and tastes around the world. (Schiller 1976; Mattelart 1979; Boyd-Barrett 1977)

International communication theory and research has developed a great deal of nuance in the decades since, underlining, for example, the way U.S. media practices have been remade by users around the world to better suit their needs (Appadurai 1996); the fact that people interpret media texts differently depending on, among other things, their gender and cultural identity (Ang 1985); the general preference for regional and national media over global media products (Turnstall 2007); the fact that there are significant flows of media from the global south to north (Thussu 2000); and that media technologies are as often used as tools of oppression as of liberation (Sreberny-Mohammadi 1994, Lim 2003, Downing 2000).

And yet something fundamental to the Cold War discourse has been reanimated. Digital communication in general has been touted for its independence relative to mass communication, its lack of gatekeepers, its mostly unmediated network qualities. (Rheingold 1993, Turkle 1997, Negroponte 1996) Discussion of blogging takes this thinking to new levels. Blogging is celebrated as extended public journaling, pure multimedia freedom of expression, produced anywhere in the world there is internet access and available for eyeballs the world over to take in. The democratic character of blogging is accepted as inherent, the very essence of both the act and the product, the starting point of any larger discussion.

Blogs are seen as part of, even perhaps fueling, a trend toward more outspoken, unruly, and mobilized publics, even if the manner in which these publics are being received is accepted as highly contextual (Jenkins 2006, Benkler 2006, Russell, et al, forthcoming). There is, at base, still a tendency to presume the existence of positive affinities rooted in artifacts. As Luke (2006) puts it: “Everyone on the Net allegedly wants unconstrained and free connectivity to something, but sharing access to, and the use of, a set of telematic tools may not automatically create a free and equal fraternity of meta-nationals.” (175) On the contrary, a “global village” does not spontaneously occur. To the extent that it exists at all in the blogosphere, the global village is engineered through projects like the Harvard Berkman Center’s Global Voices Online, a “citizens’ media” outlet that aggregates blogs, translates content, rallies around persecuted authors, organizes conferences and solicits funding and support.

Through aggregator sites, activist tool-kits that include “how-to” guides, and financial support, blogging advocates such as Global Voices promote particular practices and serve as de facto gatekeepers of the blogosphere. In the *Handbook for Bloggers and Cyber-*

during the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, radical groups depended on audio-cassettes to promote their theocratic anti-western ideology.

Dissidents published by Reporters sans Frontiers, Mark Glaser contributed a chapter entitled “What Really Makes a Blog Shine” in which he compiles a list of recommendations for bloggers from countries where “the government is watching their words very carefully and the world is watching them as well.” He suggests bloggers from these countries use their own voice, post frequently and about current events, involve readers in the conversation, and include “good old-fashioned reporting.” His suggestions are clichés indiscernible from those you will find in contemporary U.S. business or journalism textbooks on new media; they are in fact recommendations about how to make your blog palatable to American readers, extolling American-style individualism and drawing on traditional American news practices that insist on timeliness and truth-claims based on the observations of reporters and their sources.

Global Voices anoints “bloggers who shine” as what it calls “bridge bloggers,” adding them to the ranks of its list of “the most influential or respected and credible bloggers or podcasters” from around the world. Global Voices aggregates these “A-list” blogs and serves as a sort of watchdog, reporting cases of persecuted authors, garnering international support for them, guarding them against isolation. Indeed, Global Voices is just about equally split in its content between bloggers who are bringing mainstream media to task or unearthing new journalistic information and those who have been the target of censors and/or jailers and whose fate is dependent on their ability to capture the attention of an international audience, beginning of course with popular bloggers and their readers.⁸ The tension at the heart of laudable projects like Global Voices is the one at the heart of the blogosphere today, one so obvious as to go rarely remarked upon, a recognizably Western tension that runs between free speech and democracy on one side and marketing and public relations on the other. Clay Shirky, in his popular essay “Power Laws, Weblogs, and Inequality,” (2005) argues what most of us take for granted, that these inequalities are not a failure of the system but rather an inevitable side effect of freedom of choice: “In any system where many people are free to choose between many options, a small subset of the whole will get a disproportionate amount of traffic (or attention, or income), even if no members of the system actively work toward such an outcome.” The organization of the blogosphere is largely shaped by the fact that some members have been actively working toward that outcome for some time. The blogosphere star system is evidence that digital networks reflect offline power dynamics, the same dynamics that gave rise to theory of media imperialism. In the blogosphere, as on the internet more generally, new forms of gatekeeping have arisen and new sets of skills are becoming established practice, the prerequisites for entree into the realm of those with power on the web.

Yet bloggers around the world producing material for local and national audiences seem to be developing in ways that are distinct from the U.S. model. For international communication scholars, these authors and their products have much to say about what lies beyond the hedgerow of A-list bloggers, calling into question assumptions that form

⁸ Global Voices is sponsored by *Reuters*, which often picks up stories from the site.

the base of much of what we read on blogging and by extension on global amateur or DIY media.

II.

Each of the case studies included in this book address network-era questions about the uniquely universal-particular and global-local qualities of our variously digital realities. Two distinct but overlapping themes have emerged from the authors' work—the use of blogs, first, to negotiate and articulate identity and, second, to resist political pressures. We have organized the chapters according to how closely they address the two broad categories, identity and power. The first half of the book consists of case studies that highlight the ways bloggers in France, China, Russia and in a generalized Muslim cultural space negotiate, maintain and exhibit identities online. The case studies that make up the second half of the book more directly address the ground being staked out by bloggers in traditional political communication spheres in China, Israel, Italy, Singapore, Australia and on the so-called Arab Street.

In the opening chapter Nabil Echchaibi analyzes the intersection between mainstream news media and blogging in France. By focusing in particular on the banlieu blogging of French of North Africans decent, he underscores the work young authors are doing to provide a “more accurate” presentation of their daily life for French readers and to negotiate their identity as French citizens within France. Bloggers tell vivid stories of social discrimination, cultural ghettoization and poor schooling, for example, that are seldom reported in the mainstream media. In “Theorising the Muslim blogosphere: Blogs, Rationality, Publicness and Individuality,” Eugenia Siapera examines the impact of blogging on the dynamic process of contemporary Muslim identity construction. Her chapter looks at how blogs provide an alternative understanding of the ways Muslims engage today's caricature topics such as the West, modernity, secularism and Islam. Kim DeVries, in her chapter, considers how bloggers express a distinct ethnic and cultural identity for an audience perceived as simultaneously local and international and the ways communication practices between the bloggers and their readers also reflect this perception. Her analysis of five blogs written from China in English suggests that contrary to concern that they serve primarily as another conduit for Western cultural imperialism, the blogs have helped to define a robust national identity and undermine stereotypical images. Karina Alexanyan and Olessia Koltsova analyze Russian use of LiveJournal.com, a popular American blogging and social networking site with more than 400,000 users—one of the largest aggregates of Russian-language activity online. Their analysis of angry and fearful reactions on the part of users to LiveJournal's recent licensing deal with a Russian media company demonstrates how the ability of technology to foster the emergence of new transnational cultures is tempered by traditional geopolitical concerns and the enduring cultural histories and identities.

Several authors also underline the fact that the effectiveness of blogging as a political tool varies from locale to locale. Axel Bruns and Debra Adams use IssueCrawler, a Web-mapping tool, to identify and plot the issue networks among Australian bloggers and related sites on a number of key political issues. They argue that, contrary to received wisdom, political blogs in Australia act nothing like political blogs do in America: rather

than mixing with mainstream media, they remain almost entirely apart from more conventional forms of political coverage. Similarly, in examining blogging in Israel, Carmel L. Vaisman concludes that unlike the American and Arab experience, where local bloggers have had direct impact on the political system and traditional media, mainstream journalists in Israel largely ignore political blogging, prompting bloggers to make direct contact with politicians. In a chapter exploring politically influential Arab blogs, Aziz Douai leans his analysis toward events in Morocco, suggesting that blogging has been effective there because it has been set in the context of a solid social movement that mobilized the “Arab street.”

The final two chapters provide material on the populist power of the form. Giovanni Navarria explores the rebirth as a celebrity political blogger of blacklisted Italian comedian Beppe Grillo. Navarria demonstrates that Grillo has well-harnessed the power of the web to promote innovative modes of political participation, but he warns that Grillo, like other leaders who have emerged outside the traditional channels of institutional politics, are as prone to populism or demagoguery as they are to high-end democratic debate. Yasmin Ibrahim uses the 2006 elections as a case study to explore the impact of blogging on political discourse in Singapore. She argues that political blogs have had symbolic as well as “performative” impact, suggesting that they have worked to re-mediate the political landscape by constructing new forms of civic participation, thus disrupting and displacing the dominant discourses of the nation through personal narratives.

III.

More than simply pointing toward the variability of blogging practice and product, the articles in this book suggest that blogging, like digital communication more generally, is being conceptualized differently in distinct cultural contexts. A blog can be more things than we are presently imagining, a vehicle of democratic expression, yes, but also a means to revive tradition, to explore identity, to conduct public relations, and so on and on. By looking at local contexts, we can develop more nuanced assessments of how blogospheres variously serve communication needs, how they exist in relation to one another, where they exist apart as well as where they overlap and how they interact with other forms of communication in the larger media landscape.

In 1996 Sandra Braman and Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi considered how the internet might influence international public discourse: “Today the internet genuinely—at least for the moment—offers autonomous production processes for those with the ability to surf it. The Net in fact may offer the opportunity for the creation of a public sphere or public spheres genuinely outside of the bounds of any single nation-state or organizational entity.” (1996:38)

More than a decade later, however, the globalized online public sphere is being shaped by many of the same factors that shaped the nation-based mass-media public sphere, the most notable factor being a persisting tilted international cultural power dynamic. In the current environment the global blogosphere is engineered by traditionally powerful groups of people in the developed world. The criteria set by these people from which to

select sites for translation and promotion are being increasingly absorbed around the globe, ratcheting up the number of blogs that identifiably conform and pushing aside those that do not, paring down the blogosphere both online and in the mind.

But from the time of its nineteenth-century formulation, the notion of an overarching public sphere has always been problematic. Nancy Fraser's version (1992), which describes a landscape of smaller "subaltern" public spheres that push back against dominant deliberations, seems a more viable way to envision a positive network-era reality. To arrive at a richer understanding of blogging in particular and of digital-era expression more generally, media studies scholars must work to move beyond the notion that communication practices and products should be valued according to the democratic values supposedly embedded within them. We should be attempting instead to develop theories of international communication that can see variation as something other than non-modern and (therefore) non-democratic.

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