Communication and the public: The challenge of investigating global media spaces

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In the official mission of this new journal, *Communication and the Public* seeks to create a forum for intellectual dialogues across boundaries: cultural, national, and geopolitical. Contributors are challenged particularly to help overcome the limitations that have come with a Western analytical perspective. Creating such a journal-based forum by itself should help encourage such an intellectual fusion, but beyond that what kind of research is called for and what are the challenges? What does it mean in the case of this journal's goal to encourage the rebalancing of intellectual interactions? One way is to simply feature *scholars* from under-represented world regions, carrying out research from less familiar areas and gain a more inclusive perspective as a result. That is an important step, but other journals claim to encourage international submissions to appropriately represent scholars working in the field—even if not often successful in doing so. But there are other qualities of the research perspectives themselves that help promote this goal of rebalancing and inclusion, and I outline some of them in this essay.

I have wrestled with these challenges in my own work, as I've sought to "de-Westernize" my thinking and consider new angles on questions that extend beyond my familiar boundaries. I draw examples from my own intellectual journey, as I've attempted

in the last several years to better understand communication in China. Given the bi-national editorial structure of the journal, China has special relevance. Without laying claim to having the definitive answers or an area studies expertise, I see in China an example of how communication research can help penetrate the complexities of this social system. China provides a particularly compelling example of how change occurs in traditionally closed societies, which must adapt to the inevitable flows of information and professional logics that accompany them. These changes are often unpredictable, counter-intuitive, and non-linear, requiring a more nuanced perspective on the expression of power, which by operating through networks creates subnational adaptations from the inside out. China is a society of contradictions: wanting the benefits that come from a functioning legal system but nervous of where lawsuits would lead; wanting economic growth with ecological sustainability—both threatening social stability. These contradictions open space for maneuvering but mean that policy actors can never be sure where the lines

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are. Conceptual frameworks are needed that capture these dynamics.

I have worked with a number of Chinese colleagues over the years at my university and elsewhere, and they have helped guide (and rebalance) my thinking, although (in the usual disclaimer) I don't blame them for any of the shortcomings. For example, I began my conversations about my own China-related research with my former student Jia Dai, now a professor at Tsinghua University, before the Beijing Olympics, when I wondered how the government would be able to reconcile media control with the need to accommodate thousands of foreign journalists from around the world covering the events—and, inevitably, associated social issues. This curiosity about how a specific locality intersects with the global has continued to direct my thinking.

Intellectual rebalancing

Regarding this journal's goals of inclusion and cross-border dialogue, I think of a number of ways scholars in communication research have responded. I will briefly touch on a few of them before exploring in more detail my own approach as it has evolved over the last several years. The most obvious cross-border strategy perhaps is to build in a more comparative international perspective that puts under-represented areas in cross-national context. There are a growing number of such studies that take this perspective, and don't take for granted that Western practices are to be generalized (e.g. Hanitzsch et al., 2011). They treat cross-national differences as the central problematic, but using the nation as typical unit of analysis can level some of the internal dynamics or overlook the global level layers of communication not fully captured by the nation-state. Taking another international level perspective, other studies examine specifically cross-border phenomena, such as flows of media products and resulting imbalances. Prevailing approaches to international news research are not only nation-centric but *media-centric* perspectives that tend to equate a "global sphere" with specific media platforms (e.g. CNN, Al-Jazeera, etc.).

Another less explicitly cross-border step toward inclusion would be to take certain communication models and theories originated in one context and apply them in other settings—testing their applicability and relevance. Some of these models are culture-agnostic (e.g. agenda setting), while others are more tied to liberal democracies. Common vocabulary, in any case, can help with these cross-border research dialogues. In my own work on media sociology, I have been accustomed to thinking of a "hierarchy of influences" operating to shape media output, influences that range across levels of analysis from the characteristics of journalists or media workers at the individual level to features of the larger social system in which media function (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). The literature in media sociology in general has been largely shaped by research in the United States and the United Kingdom, although there is nothing in the *Hierarchy of Influences* model itself that makes it culture-specific. I've been pleased to see it used in a variety of international contexts, but there are still new kinds of cultural awareness that these contexts highlight. The tendency if not careful is to regard the stacking of those levels as a given, in how the social system gives rise to the media institution, which in turn encompasses the various media organizations and professionals they employ.

In 2015, I offered a graduate seminar at Tsinghua, which I called "Media sociology with Chinese characteristics." In looking for examples of research with particular relevance to the Chinese setting, I found a number of applications for a levels-of-analysis perspective being used by China-based scholars. I think it is particularly helpful in exploring some of the boundary issues that accompany rapidly changing social systems. Lee and Chan (2008), for example, show at the organizational level that although Hong Kong has a strong tradition of journalistic professionalism, self-censorship has increased following the handover to the mainland government, bringing greater political pressure on local media. This tension between professional norms and owner control may become more intense with the recent purchase of a major Hong Kong media company by the giant Chinese e-commerce company Alibaba.

This kind of model is also helpful to consider what happens when changes occur at one level without the more familiar associated changes at other levels. Pan (2000), for example, provided an early analysis of institutional change in China from the late 1990s, showing the results of media marketization policies without an associated change (observed in other political systems) in the authoritarian state apparatus. The result for Chinese journalism, as Pan observed, was to create opportunities for journalistic entrepreneurs who found ways to navigate between these twin imperatives of market and state. This kind of system-level analysis helps explain the kind of rapidly emerging information practices of "fact entrepreneurs." Applying the model to China alerts us to the *inter*-level, interstitial spaces where the action is, especially in settings where institutional configurations are still in flux.

In taking a concept more associated with Western democracies, Jia Dai demonstrates the contextualized use the public deliberation idea within the Chinese blogosphere, including both celebrity and top 10 blogs of "social responsibility." In joining her in this work, I began to broaden my own Western idea of what constitutes *deliberative* public processes, in observing her findings that even the less high-minded celebrity blogs contained substantial amounts of deliberative features in both posts and comments (Dai & Reese, 2007). We asked speculatively what if all the discourse surrounding celebrity blogs could be mobilized through a more formalized deliberative process in a sort of "rehearsal for democracy"? The anecdotal evidence at least looked promising. One of the celebrity blog writers, actress Li Yuan, initiated a campaign in her blog to donate books to children in poor areas, a call that produced extensive and active responses nation-wide, with hundreds and thousands of books collected and donated. Another actress, Jinglei Xu, also launched a new website for sale of work and collected a large amount of money by doing so. She promised to the readers that all of the money would be donated to those in need, and she reported in her blog where the money went. Many similar cases have followed in subsequent years showing *how* online discourse might be translated into more tangible deliberative results.

Global concepts

Yet another cross-border research strategy is to examine the global processes in which these under-observed areas participate, the networks that bind them to the rest of the world, and the subnational manifestations of these linkages. These are particularly relevant to the investigations I've undertaken of global spaces. These frameworks and concepts help capture those phenomena that would otherwise be difficult to perceive. Globalization theorists in geography and sociology lead us to seek the workings of the global in specific local places, where the universal becomes particularized, and where the global dimension is articulated. Studies from anthropology have contributed a number of thick descriptions of how globality is expressed locally, and a long tradition of media studies research has examined particular entertainment forms that crop up across boundaries. But as we take up the processes involving communication and the public, network-oriented conceptual frameworks are particularly valuable in accounting for how these groups and places are globally connected.

My colleague Wenhong Chen and I use this guiding framework in our analysis of *Networked China*, an edited volume of new work of emerging international scholars assembled to help analyze what we call *glocalized media space*. This spatial concept helps get beyond conventional focus on authoritarian censorship, so easy for Western observers to fixate on, to consider how the intricate networks of communication in China contribute to civic engagement—particularly as they connect local spaces to global circuits in a *glocalizing* process (Chen & Reese, 2015). Examples within this collection include an analysis of how Chinese netizens join with traditional journalism, forming a *mediasphere* that helps anti-corruption efforts (Dai, Zeng, & Yu, 2015). With their greater trustworthiness in mapping onto personal networks, mobile phones are shown to promote civic activism, helping circulate protest-related messages (Liu, 2015). We argue that digital networks are not sufficient in themselves to bring about radical social change but reveal their impact in more subtle, contingent, and unpredictable ways. They allow new forms of contentious politics and

deliberative media spaces that need to be better understood (for a summary, see Reese, 2014).

Another author represented in that volume and also my former doctoral student, Nan Zheng (now at James Madison University), pursued research on Chinese bridge blogs (Zheng, 2015). I developed further insights of my own from working with her on a follow-up article. Bridge blogs are those current events platforms designated by Ethan Zuckerman for their ability to convey insights from culture, making them available through both linguistic and cultural translation to an international audience. From a network perspective, they serve as weak links that bridge structural holes in the online news eco-system, providing rich insights not available from the international press. Projects like this have helped expand the field beyond the study of traditional news media to consider a more networked eco-system, not confined to professional media and the international flows among them (Zheng & Reese, 2016).

Globalization of mediated spaces

Since 2000, I've been thinking more deliberately about the *global* part of the *global public sphere*—more specifically the idea of *media globalization* and the *global journalist* (Reese, 2001, 2010). Although skeptics of media globalization call it a "myth," the globalizing process more accurately takes place through media and the people connected to them, organized into overlapping, crosscutting networks of communication. Underlying the circuits of global flows are structures of people in professional and institutional roles. In more concrete terms, these are the agents who form the infrastructure of the "global." Thus, in my own theorizing, I have wanted to get beyond the traditional cross-national news comparisons and media content–based analysis of international communication (of which the literature is full) to examine the more difficult to discern subnational global dynamics. I argue that transnational elites represent an important source of influence and social change, as they insert themselves into and connect local settings. They participate in global networks, bypassing at times official state channels and introducing their own logic into

national spaces as they interact with local journalistic cultures, media systems, and civil society.

By turning the media-centric telescope around, I start with a more clearly defined transnational network (in my case, environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs)) and explore how it engages with local settings. This became a turning point in my thinking and takes the network society ideas of Manuel Castells, with the *space of flows* and *space of places*, and examines them via a specific network of social actors. Then, the "mediated spaces" to which they contribute can be better identified and their "globalization" evaluated. My most recent 2015 article in the *International Journal of Communication* reports on an empirical project exploring that line of thinking (Reese, 2015). In this study, I use the guiding concept of *mediated spaces*, which I consider a space of issue discourse supported by the engagement of officials, media professionals, activists, and citizens, pictured as a less hierarchical and linear communication flow. These key actors create "communicative structures" organized around social issues and give rise to "mediated spaces." They are not as easily predicted as traditional institutional structures but emerge and retreat depending on changing configurations—making theoretical precision more difficult.

Based on multiple visits to China, where most of the interviews took place (with the help of local colleagues), my list also included key environmental experts in Washington, DC (Wilson Center) and London (*China Dialogue*). Relying on case-study details and depth interviews, I show how international environmental NGOs exemplify a network through which norms are circulated and which serve to *globalize* mediated spaces in a particular national setting. Global actors bring a transnational leverage to Chinese contexts, not just by interacting with any specific news organization or specific activist campaign—or doing their own social media—but through engaging with a network of stakeholders and policy activists (necessarily the government but also grassroots NGOs, and policy experts, and of course traditional media). As carriers of a global logic, transnational NGOs exert influence on two levels: the content of their advocacy and specific

plans, but also through their connections themselves, their way of doing business, encouraging transparency, professionalism, and the value of global expertise. Recent headlines about China's unprecedentedly dangerous code-red levels of air pollution in Beijing and the climate change conference in Paris show how urgent these issues have become, and how international environmental advocates can play a role in their alleviation.[1]

Conclusion

In this brief essay, I have tried to suggest some questions and issues that may be well suited to the mission of *Communication and the Public*. The journal will not only bring scholars together in a new forum but will encourage the careful application of theoretical concepts to less well understood areas of the world, including those rapidly changing and emerging social systems. Those concepts themselves are evolving to better capture the global processes that bind different parts of the world together. The conceptual and methodological tools of communication have not always been helpful in handling paradoxes and contradictions, but that is often what we encounter in emerging social systems.

A recent case in China provides an illustration of this challenge. An early 2015 environmentalist message produced by well-known former professional CCTV journalist, Chai Jing, created a media phenomenon when her technology, education, design TED-talk-style video-documentary went viral inside China and was widely seen outside as well. Before long, however, the video was ordered taken down by officials and media commentary controlled. The ministry of Internet management was said to be in favor of the program as a test case of managing its ability to regulate expression within manageable boundaries. This proved to be a failure, however, when officials greatly underestimated the influence of the video, which at the same time risked hijacking the agenda of the party congress—and making it appear that it was responding to public opinion. The case shows that as we gravitate toward the sociology of networks, it is tempting to overstate the utopian impulse of technology and understate the role of the

State, which will continue to be an active participant in managing the media space.

The rapid transition of this "citizen" journalist from officially endorsed message to anathema is over-determined, but just the kind of case study that sheds light on the complexities of the Chinese information eco-system. Although the program itself was quickly removed from that eco-system, digital traces remain for study at the epicenter of the media event. A media space was created as a function of the program itself, official responses, activist support, and viral online commentary (even if in many cases finding fault with the journalist-producer's techniques and personal motivations). And to the extent that the program was widely disseminated around the world, so was the media space globalized outward. These are the kinds of dynamics that need better understanding, through the efforts of future contributors to this journal forum.

Note

1. A recent official response to the "Airpocalypse" in Beijing acknowledges that "We must accept supervision from the public and *the media*, in order to win the battle against the imminent heavy air pollution" (Wong, 2015).

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