The Ramifications of Media Globalization in the Global South for the Study of Media Industries

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Abstract:

The globalization of media industries has received substantial scholarly attention in recent years, in terms of both flow from the former metropoles to the margins and contraflow from those margins back to the centers. Despite the acknowledgement that globalization of the media is a multilevel process, academic debates continue to be dominated by perspectives from the global North. The implicit assumption often remains that changes in media industries in the North will have ripple effects across the world, whereas globalization is thought to play out differently in the global South. More attention needs to be paid to how globalization and attendant processes like localization and hybridization play out in contexts outside the media-saturated global North.

Keywords: Economics, Globalization, Political Economy, Regionalism

Media industries worldwide are affected by the globalization of production, distribution, and consumption. The widening reach of global media is the most visible consequence of these processes. It is no longer considered unusual to receive Sky News, BBC, or Al Jazeera in locations around the world or to receive news from far-flung places in one's living room on a daily basis. Social media are ubiquitous and have not only given rise to new constructions of subjectivity (the infamous "selfie" is a case in point) and new forms of political engagement (of which the so-called Arab Spring has now become a popular, if much debated, example) but have also posed challenges to beleaguered traditional media industries (especially newspapers) that now have to adapt business models in response to audiences who migrate online and who increasingly become media producers themselves. Jay Rosen's notion of "the people formerly known as the audience" has become a well-known description of these consumer-producers.[2] But although these processes are by their very nature global in scope, they play out in different ways and have different social and political implications in various parts of the world. While big media conglomerates have global reach, the political economy of communication and historical legacies of news production mean that news discourses are still dominated by perspectives from the global North (although channels like Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya provide some contraflow). Access to new media technologies is also asymmetrical; and while social media platforms on mobile phones may have contributed to the Arab Spring uprisings

(although the extent to which this was a "new media revolution" has also been disputed),[3] Facebook and Twitter remain blocked in China, and mainstream media are under state control.

More attention needs to be paid to how the dynamics of media globalization play out in various parts of the world, especially in the global South. Too often there is an implicit assumption that the changes that media industries in media-saturated countries of the North are undergoing have implications for the future of media—the imminent demise of newspapers or the political power of social media via smartphones, for example, are universally true. Yet the flows and contraflows of global media, and the shifts that media industries undergo as a result, require a more nuanced social reading informed by a study of the contextual factors and dynamics. For instance, while the demise of newspapers in the global North is widely believed to be merely a question of time, the newspaper industry is still vibrant in many regions in the South.[4]

One example that may illustrate the complexity of global media flows and contraflows and their effect on media industries in the global South is that of South Africa.

Perhaps the most significant contextual aspects of the South African media industry are that it operates within a "new democracy"[5]—and therefore in a political climate that is still transitional—and that it is located in a society that is among the most socially and economically unequal in the world and marked by continued political protest and conflict.[6] These sociopolitical factors may at first glance not have direct implications for a study of media industries and technological change. A study of media industries in the South in particular should, however, not be divorced from social, political, and historical developments. At the very least, the inequalities in South Africa have a bearing on the levels of access to media and especially new technologies, while the political and social dimensions have important implications for the role that media industries can play in society, civic participation and engagement, and political change. Access to media in South Africa is unequal, and the skewing of mainstream media's audience has implications for the way media industries develop and seek to cater to a market that rhetorically presents itself as "the public" in political discourse but in fact represents a tiny sliver of society.

The fragmentation and differentiation of audiences in South Africa also has implications for how media industries are globalized, localized, and "glocalized." The opening up of the South African media landscape in the 1990s to the forces of global capital—with international media companies investing in South Africa and South African companies moving outward into the continent and further—coincided with the democratization of the country. Independent News and Media, an Irish publishing group formerly owned by Tony O'Reilly, bought a major South African newspaper company, the Argus Group, in 1994, while the South African media conglomerate Naspers continued to spread its wings on the continent and around the world. The latest and most profitable among the outward moves by this company has been its investment in the online platform Tencent in China.[7]

Although it could be argued that the globalization of media ownership has political implications elsewhere as well (for instance, Rupert Murdoch's changing political allegiances in the UK), the globalization of the media industry in South Africa has been particularly controversial politically. On the one hand, the arrival of the Independent newspaper group in the country in the year that South Africa became a democracy was seen as signaling an attempt by the African National Congress–led government to gain an ally in the press (the deal with Tony O'Reilly was said to have been brokered by Nelson Mandela); and when this group was again sold to the South African Sekunjalo consortium in 2013, the close ties between the latter's

chairman, Iqbal Survé, and the government, as well as the inclusion of a Chinese partner, raised concerns about editorial independence at the group. On the other hand, the Naspers media group, a global conglomerate that was built on Afrikaner capital during apartheid, has seen considerable success as a result of its investment in China. This achievement is often celebrated as an indication of CEO Koos Bekker's business acumen, even if the transnationalization of South African media across the African continent has raised questions of expansionism and media imperialism.[8] These controversies underscore how important it is that studies of media globalization in contexts such as South Africa and other transitional democracies in the global South take heed of the political and historical specificities of the local contexts within which these processes play out.

The opportunities to branch out into the continent and internationally afforded South African media companies as a result of the ending of the country's isolation did not, however, mean an immediate, radical transformation of South African media internally. Debates about racial representation in the media industry and the industry's transformation of ownership and control started soon after democratization and continue twenty years into democracy;[9] the South African media industry remains characterized by an "elite continuity."[10] The media continue to be criticized for presenting a "view from the suburbs"[11]—catering to the small percentage of the population that represents lucrative audiences for advertisers. That section of the population has benefited most from media globalization, as its members have access to the broad array of media consumption and production opportunities offered by the influx of international media as well as the cornucopia of social media and online platforms that are now within their reach. Globalization of content has, however, not only been limited to the exchange of media capital and content for the elite. Interesting manifestations of glocalization in platforms and formats—for instance, the adoption of the red-top tabloid newspaper format for a mass readership consisting of black working-class readers that continue to be marginalized by mainstream newspapers[12]—have made their mark on the South African media industry.

The South African example—which has been discussed only very briefly here—illustrates how media globalization is a multi-levelled process that plays out within specific social and political contexts. When flows and contraflows in global media industries are studied, it remains important to pay attention to these contextual specificities, especially within the global South, where patterns often look very different from those in the media-saturated global North. Moreover, globalization of media industries should not only be seen in terms of flows and contraflows between countries and regions, but should also telescope down to domestic contestations that play out internally in local media industries but are a result of global processes. The study of media industries can therefore benefit from greater attention to those regions of the "Rest"[13] that are too often neglected in contemporary debates about the changes impacting on media industries as a result of globalization.

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[2] Jay Rosen, "The People Formerly Known as the Audience," Press Think: Ghost of *Democracy in the Media Marchine* (blog), last modified June 27, 2006.

[3] Martin Hirst, "One Tweet Does Not a Revolution Make: Technological Determinism, Media, and Social Change," *Global Media Journal* 12, no. 2 (2012): 1–29. See also Herman Wasserman, "Mobile Phones, Popular Media, and Everyday African Democracy: Transmissions and Transgressions," *Popular Communication* 9, no. 2 (2011): 146–58.

[4] Conway-Smith, Erin. "Read All About It: Newspapers Are Thriving!" *Global Post*, October 20, 2012.

[5] Katrin Voltmer, *The Media in Transitional Democracies* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013); Herman Wasserman, "Freedom's Just Another Word? Perspectives on Media Freedom and Responsibility in South Africa and Nambia," *International Communication Gazette* 72, no. 7 (2010): 567–88.

[6] See, for instance, Hein Marais, *South Africa Pushed to the Limit* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 2011); Patrick Heller, "Democratic Deepening in India and South Africa," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 44, no. 1 (2009): 123–49; Edgar Pieterse and Mirjam Van Donk, "Local Government and Poverty Reduction," in *State of the Nation, 2012–2013*, ed. Udesh Pillay et al. (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2013), 98–123.

[7] Herman Wasserman, "South Africa and China as BRICS partners: Media Perspectives on Geopolitical Shifts," *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, published electronically December 16, 2013, doi:10.1177/0021909613514191.

[8] Fackson Banda, "The Media in Africa," in *Media Studies*, vol. 1, ed. Pieter J. Fourie (Cape Town: Juta, 2007), 59–86.

[9] See Nelson Mandela, "Address to the International Press Institute's Congress" (speech, February 14, 1994); "Report on the Transformation of Print and Digital Media," Print and Digital Media Task Team, last modified September 2013.

[10] Colin Sparks, "South African Media in Transition," *Journal of African Media Studies* 1, no. 2(2009): 195–220.

[11] Steven Friedman, "Whose Freedom? South Africa's Press, Middle-Class Bias and the Threat of Control," *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies* 32, no. 2 (2011): 106–21.

[12] Herman Wasserman, *Tabloid Journalism in South Africa: True Story!* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

[13] Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World*, updated and expanded ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011).

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