



# Going South and Engaging Non-Western Modernities

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## **Going South and Engaging Non-Western Modernities**

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Do we really need another journal theorizing media? While the quick response might be to say, “not really, we have too many,” I want to say that “we do.” From my perspective as a postcolonial scholar, who is concerned with what I will loosely call the Global South, and with mediated spheres of Non-Western modernities, I remain sensitive to the fact that while we have a plethora of journals on various aspects of media, it is the case that we still know too little about media in the Global South. And we also know too little about media’s functioning in spheres of Non-Western modernities. When I use the term Global South I do not of course mean territories that are South of the equator – that is, a territorial approach is not what I am discussing. Rather, I approach the South (and thus North) as a matter of power structure. The South constitute sites of gross economic inequality (too often due to histories of colonialism) in relation to the affluence of the Global North. Such economic inequality is intertwined with historical, geopolitical and cultural disempowerment. Further, the South and North are not binaries; even in nations and contexts (say Bangladesh) that we may designate as South, relations of the privileged (capitalistic) North are constantly circulating. That is, the South and North are intimately proximate. In Mumbai, in India (as in many other metropolitan cities in Africa or Asia), for instance, we see the power structures of North and South intimately working together, or existing together in one city, rupturing the neat binary through which they are often framed.

The reader will note that along with Global South I am also using the term “Non-Western modernities.” This is because I would like to also see a focus on Non-Western modernities and they are not always in the Global South or cannot be positioned as being the same as the Global South. Singapore, Dubai, Seoul, cannot be seen as the South if we understand the South to be sites of gross economic disempowerment. Despite having spheres of the Global South within them, these are for the most part affluent sites. Yet, they manifest mediated relations of modernity that require attention because of their very different functioning and logics that exceed North Atlantic frames of modernity through which we are so habituated to engage media. Such sites constitute mediated relations of Non-Western modernities about which we also know too little. And they too require attention if we are to understand modernity as not just being the province of the North (or West).

What I want to note at this point is that sometimes when the Global South (or Non-Western media spheres) is focused on in media studies (especially in the Communication discipline from which I work), there is often an “invisible West”<sup>1</sup> underlying our frames of reference and assumptions (and sometimes we do not even recognize that). Two examples come to mind here. One is the “comparing media systems” approach that has now become popular, especially after the works of Hallin and Mancini (2004; 2011). Despite the numerous merits of this approach, it is worth asking whether mediascapes in the Global South (or even many parts of the Non-West) can be studied through the neat frame of “systems” (and the predictability and dehistoricization suggested in the term). In the Global South, media spaces are extremely heterogeneous; their usage is very unpredictable. Access to them by diverse populations is not only grossly unequal but often situated in illiberal, illegal (and hence invisible) spheres. This, for instance, has been brilliantly demonstrated in Ravi Sundaram’s (2009) work on pirate modernity in India. Here, among other things, he focuses on illicit, “illegal” (and we could also say “illiberal”) and pirated use and circulation of media commodities by the urban poor in Delhi (which are deliberately overlooked by the State or others in positions of authority). But side by side also exist “legal” media circuits, flows and practices that are under the State’s regulatory power and are part of the formal, capitalist, consumerist media economy. The utilitarian functionality and seeming transparency embedded in the notion of

“systems” does not work in the Global South (as in this example), or even in spheres of Non-Western modernities. In such modernities and mediaspaces, multiple temporalities, histories, and spatialities constitute mediascapes and their “modern” logics (see Shome, 2016 for further elaboration). Where then is the “system” in such sites and media cultures? The question it seems to me is this: What is at stake in attempting to think of media in terms of “systems”? (see also critiques by Terhi Rantanen [2013] and Wendy Willems [2014])? From what gaze or epistemological vantage point are we even able to identify something as a media *system*?

Another example is the huge “media/communication and development” literature, or approach. Even outside of university spheres, this approach is common; in big NGOs, such as UN organizations or the World Bank, for instance. More recently, one is seeing the term “communication and social change” also used as substitute. This approach, with its focus on a developmental logic (“building up,” making “progress”) focuses a lot on the Global South indeed. But it implicitly ends up placing a lot of faith in media and communication as sites and instruments for social change or empowerment in the Global South. This is simultaneously a faith in the logic of (western) liberalism (and its naturalized association with democracy, empowerment, and liberation). But whether the logics of (western) liberalism, as they are attached to our engagements with media in the Global South, or in Non-Western spheres of modernity, can accurately tease out the numerous complexities of those mediascapes, is the question to be asked and examined. Eminent postcolonial scholar, Ashish Nandy (2015), once noted that we often assume that “the ideology of secularism [which is the inherent logic of media liberalism] is prior to the goals it is supposed to serve” (p. 241) [insertion mine]. But secularism can also sometimes betray elitist logics and be mobilized to secure particular social hierarchies.

My assertions in the discussion that I have offered thus far should not be seen as being the same as moves that have been made about “dewesternizing media studies” that are currently in vogue. While such calls have been important indeed, the concept of “dewesternization”, however, often positions the Global South, or Non-Western media, as an “opposition” or “difference” to/from the North or the West. Or sometimes, as Wendy Willems (2014) notes, such calls proceed in a manner that indirectly ends up suggesting that media, and media studies, are originally rooted in

the West [and *now* we are looking at them in the Global South, producing thus a notion of what Harry Harootunian in many places has called the “time lag” – that is, the perception that the Global South or the Non-West is always behind “our modernity” (i.e. Western modernity).] Further, such calls can sometimes end up suggesting that there are no histories of media studies in the Global South, when in fact scholarship has existed but has been unrecognized in globally dominant circuits of knowledge (Willems, 2014; Wasserman, 2010).

Given this huge “assymetric ignorance,” to use Dipesh Chakraborty’s (2000: 28) pithy phrase, that informs media studies (we know far more about media’s functioning in North Atlantic nations than in the Global South and in Non-Western modernities), *we need so many more journals* that are committed to rectifying this inequality in knowledge production. For at the end, as at the beginning, this is not just a matter of theorizing media; *it is centrally about the geopolitics of knowledge production and how we can intervene in that to reorient the unequal directions of knowledge flows and re-engage or rediscover histories of media that were never allowed to be histories* (Shome, 2016). My hope is that this journal can act as a site or forum that allows for such interventions and reorientations in knowledge production about media worlds.

I want to throw in a qualification. It is not that there no journals on media and the Global South, or on Non-Western Modernities. For instance, in 2012, I guest edited a special issue on “Media and Asian Modernities” (Shome, 2012) for the journal *Global Media and Communication*, whose executive editor Daya Thussu generously supported this initiative. This is a journal that, along with a handful of others, such as *Critical Arts*, *African Journalism Studies*, or even *Bioscope* (although *Bioscope* focuses more on South Asia, and India in particular, and exhibits a preference for cinema cultures), publishes work on the media and the Global South, or on mediated modernities of Non-Western worlds. But this is just a handful. We need more journals that can focus on the Global South (and Non-Western modernities) *on their own terms and through a nuanced engagement with their own contexts*. This assertion is not new. Outside the field of media studies, scholars such as Jean and John Comaroff, Achille Mbembe, Raewyn Connell or even Kuan Hsing Chen have been asserting this for some time now in relation to Cultural Studies, Anthropology, and Social Sciences more broadly.

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In media studies too, scholars such as Brian Larkin in media anthropology, Ravi Sundaram, or more recently Herman Wasserman, Keyan Tomaselli, and Wendy Willems (in the field of Communication Studies) have been making these arguments. But their application continues to be very limited in media studies. Jean and John Comaroff (2012), invoking Homi Bhabha and Achilles Mbembe, write that:

*Theory from the South* is NOT about the theories of people who may be wholly or partially of the south, least of all ourselves. Nor is it... simply theory “about” the south. It is, as Mbembe has stressed, about *the effect of the south itself on theory*, the effects of its ex-centricity<sup>2</sup>” (emphasis mine).

In other words, it is about understanding how the complex contexts of the Global South (where those contexts cannot be defined a priori) impact and compel us to rethink what may even count as media or media relations that would be simply unimaginable in the Global North or from the epistemological frames furnished by the West. This means paying attention to “how we have known what we have known about the media so far.” It means being reflexive about how complex contexts of the Global South compel us not just to know “differently” but also to drastically shift (in fact disrupt) the points of epistemological reference through which we “know” about media.

### **My Wish List (Agenda?) for this Journal**

So, I would like this online journal, *Media Theory*, to play a significant role in addressing the inequalities in knowledge production about ‘other’ media worlds – whether in the Global South or in spheres of modernities that exceed North Atlantic modernities. I would like this journal to *consistently* devote expansive space to *making visible* the cultural politics and relations (including of history) of media in the Global South *on their terms* and where the Global South is not seen as an always already “known” context (for its contours shift and slide according to shifts in geopolitics and national politics). Such foci, I hope, would encourage us to rethink what media means, what it can mean, its histories, its scope of operations, and *even the objects* that may count as media in ways we have not thought of before (see, Shome, 2016).

For example, as migrants from the Global South – in particular Africa – come onto European shores in their boats, can those boats be considered as media? What kinds of geopolitical relations do they mediate? What communicative spheres and communities do they open up, as migrants are huddled in these boats for days (and sometimes denied entry into the ports), often running out of food and water or medical supplies; are they forced to create some sense of community? Consider another example. In India, wearing astrological/energy rings is common. The idea is that they channel particular modes of energy into your body which has physical and emotional healing effects. This is considered to have a “scientific” basis as most educated astrologers would aver. Can such astrological stones – pearl, coral – be considered as media objects? Such a kind of rethinking and questioning requires a *textured, situated, and grounded* engagement with contexts of the Global South and of modernities of the Non-West. It requires engaging, and even sometimes building, epistemological references and frames for understanding media, its scope (that is, what may count as media) that thus far may not exist.

Relatedly (and as suggested in earlier sections), I would like this journal to explore and excavate logics of media modernity outside of logics of Western liberalism. In India, for instance, devotional ringtones are regularly downloaded and used in mobile phones. The vibrant mobile phone culture in India at one level enables religious minded people (which most of India is) to reconnect to their gods and faiths through new modes providing immediate forms of psychological and emotional comfort. For the poor and lower class populations, many of whom may have second hand mobile phones, and who feel increasingly cut off from the wealth and affluence they see around them in upper/middle classes, such intimate access to devotional hymns (for example, they may be woken up in the morning by the ringtone of the famous Gayatri Mantra – one of the most powerful Hindu chants that exist – and not have to visit a temple for that) may enable them to continue to “hold on” and find emotional comfort through that media object they hold in their hand – and the devotional affects it generates for them. This is a very different promise of modernity being delivered by technology (here the cell phone). Here the promise being delivered is that of greater and quicker religious connection to their “gods”, as well as the sense of religious intimacy that can be produced by pressing the button on their

cell phones to generate devotional songs. Who is to say here that this is not an experience of mediated modernity? Who is to say here that religion, magic, faith and so on cannot be brought into the regime of modernity, and media modernity, to be more specific? But once again, such reconsiderations require a drastic unsettling of our epistemological frames of modernity through which we even attempt to understand what media does and can do for “the people.”

I would also like this journal to publish work that focuses on South to South media relations. That is, rethink media transnationalism, taking the Global South as the central frame of reference. While there is an explosion of work on media transnationalism, most of this work has focused on media flows in a manner where the “West” is always a location. But we know so little about the kinds of media connections or disconnections being produced by South to South flows. Knowing this would once again enable us to produce more epistemological frames of reference that can widen the scope of media studies in a productive manner and give us glimpses into mediated lives, relations, usage, objects, and flows that thus far have escaped our intellectual radar screen.

Last but not least, I would like a journal of this kind, in its attention to the Global South, to *link media studies to issues of environmental justice*. Sites in the Global South – India, parts of China, Nigeria for instance – have become grounds for the dumping of electronic waste from the North. Despite all kinds of regulations in the North, this still goes on. I have myself visited one such site in India – Sangrampur, a small town 25 miles outside of Kolkata. The poor mine the minerals from computers and other smart products without any protection gear. These are then sold back, often illegally, into the global economy. The work is toxic to begin with, causing all kinds of health risks and even death. While we celebrate digital life in metropolitan spheres of the world, in so many parts of the Global South that same digital life produces what I term “digital death”. My hope is that this is something to which this journal can provide significant attention.

At the end, my wish is that this journal will be disruptive, that it will geopoliticize and decolonize media studies in order to produce new, unknown or unrecognized epistemological frames through which to engage media, so that we can glimpse into



those impoverished lives and worlds whose desires and despairs rarely come up to our mediated screens. My hope is also that we can also discover logics of *mediated modernities* in the Global South and in Non-Western spheres that can unsettle what we have known to be “modern” in the North (or the West). This is not simply a matter of trying to say “we have never been modern.” It is perhaps one of asserting that “we” have never always been “modern” in ways that the North (or West) has taught or forced us to be. This in itself would be a huge accomplishment for the journal.

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<sup>1</sup> Clearly, I am not the first to note this. In various fields, this has been noted by some scholars in their corresponding fields. Scholars such as Raewyn Connell, Jean and John Comaroff, Tejaswini Niranjana, Kuan Hsing Chen, Wendy Willems (in the Communication discipline) also have expressed this concern. In 2009, I offered a similar critique on Cultural Studies, especially as it is attempting to "internationalize" itself.

<sup>2</sup> The term "ex-centricity" is from Homi Bhabha.

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