

MEDIA AND POWER IN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS

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STUDIES IN MEDIA AND
COMMUNICATIONS VOLUME 16

MEDIA AND POWER IN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS: PERSPECTIVES ON AGENCY AND IDENTITY

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MEDIA AND POWER IN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS: PERSPECTIVES ON AGENCY AND IDENTITY

Apryl A. Williams, Ruth Tsuria, Laura Robinson and
Aneka Khilnani

Volume 16 of Emerald Studies in Media and Communications is entitled *Media and Power in International Contexts: Perspectives on Agency and Identity*. Scholars of communication, media studies, sociology, and cultural studies come together to examine axioms of power at play across different forms of cultural production. Contributing to these fields, the volume highlights the value of interdisciplinary work and international perspectives to enrich our understandings of agency and identity vis-à-vis key case studies of media consumption and production.

Probing facets of agency, the first section of the volume leads with work by Deana A. Rohlinger, Rebecca A. Redmond, Haley Gentile, Tara Stamm, and Alexandra Olsen entitled “Power and Representation: Activist Standing in Broadcast News, 1970–2012.” Impressively, their data cover a 32 year span and 269 broadcast news stories on five social movements: Women’s Rights, Gay Rights, Immigrant Rights, Occupy Wall Street, and Tea Party. They investigate discourse and representations of activism in news media as significant forms of power. Their findings demonstrate how hegemonic power mediates activism through representation of activists’ appearance, behavior, and social status. For example, as the authors note, “activists mobilizing for and against women’s rights are shown in business attire more often than Tea Parties.” Focusing on different activists’ standing, Rohlinger and colleagues reveal how the news media play a significant role in communicating who has the power and the legitimacy to call for change:

News coverage conveys to general audience who does and does not represent legitimate political perspectives and causes in America. These narratives are consequential as they reinforce notions regarding which movements deserve attention and action, and which ones do not.

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Next, Jason A. Smith's work, entitled, "Learning from a 'Teachable Moment': The Henry Louis Gates Arrest as Media Spectacle and Theorizing Colorblind Racism," examines hegemonic media cultural logics that limit agency for people of color. Smith finds that media utilize institutional power to perpetuate dominant colorblind narratives. He investigates audiences' consumption and negotiation of a highly racialized media event, the 2009 arrest of Henry Louis Gates, a black professor at Harvard who was arrested by a white police officer in his own home. Drawing on research from Pew Excellence in Journalism, Smith offers the context that following Gates' arrest, the story "accounted for 12% of total news coverage in the United States across all media outlets." In a qualitative content analysis, Smith demonstrates the normalization and adoption of colorblind rhetoric. He finds that media systems limit the agency of individual actors and the audiences that consume their products. In his words,

Rather than merely treating the media as a conveyor of colorblind racism, it is comprised of multiple organizations, agendas, actors, outlets, and mediums which create contentious claims toward whether America is a post-racial society.

As Smith's analysis shows, in a "post-race" society, media systems capitalize on racialized events to simultaneously deny the existence of race while championing the language of civility and equality. According to Smith, "Rather than a monolithic purveyor of racial ideologies, news media are complex in the chaos and contradictions can become present through the reporting of media spectacles."

In the next contribution, Melissa M. Yang investigates how media consumption mediates parent-child relationships in "Economically Challenged but Academically Focused: The Low-income Chinese Immigrant Families' Acculturation, Parental Involvement, and Parental Mediation." Yang finds that economically disadvantaged Chinese-American parents more closely monitored their children's media consumption and resisted patterns of acculturation, even after several years of emigration to the United States. Bridging domestic and international research on acculturation, Yang finds that parents mediate their children's television consumption in order to protect them from negative stereotypes and overconsumption. Adding a layer to the literature, Yang asserts that Chinese immigrant parents engage in co-viewing to ensure that children use television for educational engagement, not solely for entertainment value. Yang's work compliments Smith's in that both scholars position consumers on a spectrum of agency in terms of media consumption. Chinese-American immigrant parents both reinforce and hinder their children's agency. In protecting them from the negative impacts of media consumption, parents limit the damage that can be done by harmful narratives of Chinese immigrant families. At the same time, Chinese parents limit inter-familial agency by limiting the amount of control the children can enact in deciding the type and amount of television consumed. Yang explores the positive and negative aspects of parental mediation but ultimately finds that, "Parents who invest more time and energy in their children's intellectual and educational performances are also the ones more likely to enact active mediation and coviewing."

Concluding this section on agency, Naziat Choudhury, analyzes the adoption of Facebook in developing countries in “The Globalization of Facebook: Facebook’s Penetration in Developed and Developing Countries.” Employing George Ritzer’s McDonaldization framework of efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control, Choudhury asserts that Facebook exerts power over its users. Interestingly, this perspective addresses the affordances and limitations of the platform available to users in developing countries where English is not the dominant language:

The pattern of Facebook’s introduction followed the same path in each country of the developed world. The first few countries where Facebook was launched had only campus based access initially.

Tracing these patterns, Choudhury argues that Facebook has fully enacted a McDonaldized means of production and expansion, including key elements of the McDonaldization process such as predictability through Facebook’s globalized menu. As the author states: “The ingredients used are the same no matter where the restaurant is located in.” This disruption of availability limits the ability of consumers in developing countries to fully utilize Facebook’s features. Moreover, as Facebook was first developed for English-speaking populations. Choudhury argues that the company’s expansion to nations in which English is not a dominant language provides a mediated example of how the McDonaldization process enacts a form of cultural hegemony: “Hyper-consumer society, part of US culture, is established through cathedrals of consumption such as casinos, shopping malls and theme parks. Facebook also transports this hyper-consumer society to developing countries.”

The second section speaks to on identity as it relates to media and power in international contexts. Opening this section, Marissa Joanna Doshi’s chapter “Hybridizing National Identity: Reflections on the Media Consumption of Middle-class Catholic women in Urban India,” investigates the relationship between media, identity, religion, and power. Based on in-depth interviews, Doshi explores how media consumption informs and subverts gender, religious, and national identity:

Media have often been examined to better understand how national identity is constituted since media, such as newspapers, books, and novels, facilitate the building of “imagined community” by communicating and cementing ideas about shared culture and values. (Anderson, 1983)

Doshi calls attention to the importance of context to understand dominant power relations and argues that hybridity plays a role in destabilizing definitions of national identity. The author writes,

Because Hinduism is closely tied to conceptualizations of “Indianness” and because women continue to be marginalized in Indian society, Catholic women in India are viewed as second-class citizens or “not Indian enough” or “appropriately Indian” by virtue of their gender and religious affiliation.

According to Doshi, Catholic Indian women are often sexualized, and other-ized in Indian media. Her analysis points to a hybrid strategy, in which the participants

consumed both local and foreign media and negotiated their media consumption in the sense-making of their identity: “Specifically, participants cultivate hybridity as central to an Indian identity that is viable in an increasingly global society.” Through this gendered hybridity, Doshi maps out the importance of understanding a more complex cosmopolitan Indian identity, one that transcends mere binaries.

Adolfo Mora examines audiences’ interpretation of Sofia Vergara’s portrayal of Gloria Pritchett in his chapter entitled, “Reading a Complex Latina Stereotype: An Analysis of *Modern Family*’s Gloria Pritchett, intersectionality, and audiences.” Mora unpacks complex readings of Pritchett in which “several social categories coproduce her characterization.” Based on rich interview data, Mora examines the lexicon used to describe this sitcom character to probe how stereotypical ethnic, gendered, and class identities are employed by viewers. In his words: “The rather fragmented presentation of these stereotypes implies that she can be taken apart into several social categories that could intersect: a woman, working-class/middle-class, Latino/Hispanic, or a working-class Latina.” Mora’s study situates Vergara’s performance of Pritchett as “an intersectional representation, since her characterization rests on ethnicity, gender, and social class among other social categories that converge.” At the same time, Mora’s data reveal the malleability, rather than static nature, of audience interpretations. In this way the research illuminates how Mora’s interviewees assembled different combinations of identity categories in important ways. As Moro concludes, “in a television climate that continues to showcase Latin@s in rather simplistic and familiar ways” “Gloria Pritchett opens up a space to discuss the possibilities and opportunities of a three-dimensional Latina stereotype.”

Closing section is a contribution from Carol Azungi Dralega and Hilde G. Corneliussen entitled “Manifestations and Contestations of Hegemony in Video Gaming by Immigrant Youth in Norway.” They examine how identity markers are manifested and contested when Norwegian immigrant youth play video games:

The study both confirms but also challenges dominant discourse on video games by suggesting that although some positive strides have been made, the claims of a post-gender neutral online world, or celebrations of a “democratic” or transformative online culture, are premature.

Hegemonic narratives and practices work to create a negative experience, exposing young gamers to hostility and sexism. Based on in-depth interviews with diverse teenagers in Norway, Dralega and Corneliussen found that it was masculinity, even more so than racism, that players encountered both via the discourse surrounding gaming and the practices of gaming themselves. Female teens reported being denied inclusion as “gamers,” thus having their desired or actual identities taken from them. In addition to exclusionary identity work, female teens also reported gender-based harassment negating their experience of gaming as a post-gendered digital world. Instead they show how gaming reflects significant societal norms and power relations surrounding gender even in highly egalitarian societies such as Norway such that gaming serves “as an important instrument in reproduction of hegemony.”

In conclusion, across the volume, international contributions shed new light on the complex ways in which media reinforce and reflect power in different societal and national arenas. The result is a rich interdisciplinary and multi-method exploration of how power is conceptualized and realized through a variety of hegemonic and discursive practices. The authors' analyses of critical case studies make important progress toward closing theoretical gaps concerning the study of the complex relationships between media and gender, race, ethnicity, and national identity. In so doing, the volume contributes phenomenological and epistemic knowledge of media and power across disciplines and societal contexts.