

Book Title: Democratizing Global Media: One World, Many Struggles

Editors: Robert A. Hackett & Yuezhi Zhao

Publisher: Rowman & Littlefield 2005

Reviewer: Kevin Howley

Writing in the foreword of this incisive volume, Majid Tehrani, director of the Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research, identifies three interrelated themes taken up by the book's contributors: "globalization, democratization and media pluralization" (p. vii). While these topics have received considerable attention in recent years, few collections offer such cogent analysis of the uneven, often precarious state of democracy in an era of global communication and conflict. In taking up this ambitious project, editors Robert Hackett and Yuezhi Zhao, both of the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University, have assembled an international team of scholars and journalists whose unique perspectives contribute to a timely and revealing examination of the global struggle for communicative democracy.

Zhao and Hackett describe their project as ". . . an exploration of the nuanced and sometimes contradictory relations between political and social democratization and media globalization" (p. 3). In their introductory essay, the editors signal their intention to promote dialogue and debate between communication scholars, cultural analysts, political scientists and others interested in the relationship between media and democracy. To that end, Zhao and Hackett's introduction places the current volume in the context of ongoing debates over global communication and presents a convincing rationale for its interdisciplinary orientation. Throughout, the editors describe the varied and competing interpretations of key terms and concepts, such as "globalization" and "democracy." Although such imprecision sometimes confounds academic analysis, this discussion reflects the myriad ways in which these terms are understood, deployed and contested across the globe.

The collection is organized into three sections. The first takes up what the editors refer to as national and regional "audits" of media democratization. Here, readers learn just how complex and contradictory globalization processes are within and between various regions of the world. For instance, using the concept of civil society as an analytical framework, Colin Sparks explores the transition from totalitarianism to liberal democracy in Eastern and Central Europe during the late 1980s and 1990s. Sparks' analysis of the dramatic transformation of social institutions – most notably print media and broadcasting – across the former Eastern bloc foregrounds: "the shift in the meaning and social context of the concept of civil society" (p. 40).

Yuezhi Zhao's contribution charts the paradoxical character of media pluralization in China from the 1989 student-led protests in Tiananmen Square to the present. Tracing China's transition from a state-run to a market driven economy, Zhao finds that overt state censorship is no longer the sole, nor necessarily the most effective means, of containing dissent. Instead, the state has come to appreciate the subtleties of economic censorship of the sort that limits political debate in so-called democratic societies. As Zhao observes, ". . . the fate of critical ideas in the partially liberalized and fragmented Chinese media system is increasingly similar to that of critical ideas in Western media systems" (p. 65).

Pradip Thomas observes a similar, yet distinctive dynamic at work in India, the world's largest democracy. Like Zhao, Thomas emphasizes the relationship between domestic actors and conditions, and the broader impact of economic globalization on India's changing media system. Thus, while globalization has certainly diversified Indian media culture, one of the more troubling consequences of media globalization on the subcontinent is the rise of Western news values – business stories, celebrity news, and "lifestyle reporting" – and the attendant lack of substantive news coverage of India's crushing poverty. As Thomas observes, "[W]hile there has been a quantitative increase in news readership and more pages per issue, including special consumer sections . . . little or no space is devoted to issues related to how the other half lives and dies in rural and urban India" (p. 87).

On a slightly more optimistic note, Javier Protzel highlights the role indigenous popular culture has played in shaping Latin American media and politics. Protzel's concise review of Latin American social and political history, from colonialism to the present, illuminates the distinct character and development of Latin American media systems. Throughout, Protzel highlights Latin America's influence on and relationship to global trends in media and cultural production. Thus, Protzel acknowledges the effect US-style media has had on Latin American broadcast structures, forms and practices while revealing the assumptions and testing the limits of media dependency theory.

The book's first section concludes with Arthur-Martins Aginam's essay on media globalization in Africa. Profiling the broadcast cultures of Nigeria and South Africa, Aginam explores competing visions of media's relationship to democratic processes. Like other contributors in this section, Aginam is interested in charting the transition from state-run to private and public service broadcasting. And like his colleagues, Aginam finds democratic deficits in both the commercial and public service outlets that have displaced state-run broadcasters. Significantly, Aginam draws our attention to African traditions of communitarianism to make the case for participatory, community media as a viable alternative to commercial or public service models.

Kari Hafez opens the second section of the book, which explores the relationship between media and democracy in sites of global conflict. Hafez calls our attention to the crucial, if sometimes overlooked role, regional media systems play in globalization processes. According to Hafez, regional media, such as the Arab television network Al-Jazeera, play a decisive role in creating a more diverse, pluralistic global media culture. Hafez contends, "[R]egional TV, radio, and the press have a greater impact than global TV on political transformation because the content is politically and culturally more adapted to transformatory needs" (p. 160). Viewed in this light, regional media constitute an important site of media democratization: one that demands greater critical scrutiny and theoretical development.

In the following essay, Dov Shinar considers the contradictory character of Israeli media in the context of global communication. Shinar's emphasis on the role of print and broadcast media in the construction of collective Israeli identity is useful inasmuch as it serves as a lens to consider popular reactions to globalization: a process Shinar refers to as deglobalization. According to Shinar, contemporary Israeli media registers competing tendencies at work in the construction of a Jewish state. "On one hand, more than two thousand years of Diaspora gave Israel's historical, religious, linguistic and cultural character a global orientation: on the other hand, with the Zionist movement beginning in the late nineteenth century, deglobalizing motives typified the gradual building of Israel" (p. 167).

Not surprisingly, collective identity formation within and through Israeli media foregrounds issues of war and peace in a volatile region. This discussion begs the question of how well (or poorly) global news organizations cover modern warfare. Jan Oberg offers a sober assessment of press performance before, during, and after the US-led invasion of Iraq. Oberg contends that mainstream press coverage of the Iraqi war has fostered "conflict illiteracy": the widespread ignorance of Western publics on the causes and consequences of the hostilities (p. 190). Refuting a number of high-profile press reports regarding weapons of mass destruction (WMD), civilian casualties, and the toppling of the Saddam statue in Fatus Square, Oberg underscores the implications of media subservience to war planners and the worrisome practice of "embedded" reporting. In conclusion, Oberg calls for a more balanced approach to media coverage of war and peace – a topic discussed at length in Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick's fine essay on the theory and practice of peace journalism.

This section concludes with the first of two essays written by media activist Seán Ó Siochrú. In chapter 10, Ó Siochrú's point of departure is "the widespread diffusion of a single market-based regulatory model and the emergence of a largely uniform global regulatory regime under the World Trade Organization (WTO)" (p. 205). Ó Siochrú then details four domains for civil society intervention into the field of global communication politics: 1) the diminished character and quality of discourse in the public sphere; 2) media's role in cultivating an unsustainable and deeply unequal consumer society; 3) the privatization and commodification of information and knowledge; 4) the threat to civil rights and civil liberties in an emerging surveillance society. Ó Siochrú concludes this essay, and foreshadows the argument he makes in his subsequent discussion (chapter 14), by acknowledging the transformative potential of local, national, and increasingly transnational advocacy campaigns designed to promote democratic communication.

The balance of the book's final section reviews a host of civil society initiatives – including the work of NGOs, community media, media education campaigns, media monitoring groups, as well as the aforementioned movement for peace journalism – that challenge the dominant global communication order. For instance, in chapter 11, Robert Hackett discusses communication politics with renowned US political economist Robert McChesney. The co-founder of the media reform group, Free Press, McChesney identifies some of the key problems in the global communication system. While both acknowledge the formidable structural and regulatory obstacles to achieving communicative democracy, Hackett and McChesney are quick to note the success civil society forces have had in

promoting greater public involvement in communication policy debates – the first, decisive step in constructing a more democratic media system.

In a similar vein, Annabelle Sreberny highlights the importance of alternative media forms and practices in overcoming the democratic deficit in national, regional, and global media systems. Sreberny is especially interested in the rise of popular movements aimed at democratizing public communication. Significantly, Sreberny argues that any discussion of communication rights and democratic media must place gender equality at the top of the agenda. To that end, Sreberny's essay reviews a host of women's communication initiatives – some local and national in orientation, others transnational in scope – that seek to empower women and promote gender equality in public life. Like other contributors in this section, Sreberny's analysis foregrounds the importance of activism and collective action – a dynamic that has usefully been described as “globalization from below” – for articulating and realizing democratic aspirations.

By concluding this book with a section devoted to civil society interventions in global communication systems and governance, Hackett and Zhao demonstrate their keen awareness of, and appreciation for, the role everyday practices and popular movements play in the ongoing struggle for media democratization. All told, then, the balance between journalistic and academic analyses of media globalization collected within this volume offers fresh perspectives on what is by now well-worn terrain.

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