

Communication and Media

All Gloom and Global Doom? Provocations on the Future of Global Media Theory

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"All Roads Lead to Putin," reads the *Global News* headline (Mascaro and Jalonick 2019), in reference to what is seen as Russian weaponization of social media in national elections worldwide. There is much media frenzy about China's leadership in the new global order forged by the "fourth industrial revolution"—driven by the Internet of Things (IoTs), Artificial Intelligence (AI), blockchain, cloud computing, and data analytics (Kuo 2019). The *Atlantic* writes of a dark shift in our contemporary social life as we are lured into the "gladiatorial circus" of online sociometrics, trapped in a perpetual performance for a possible global audience (Haidt and Rose-Stockwell 2019). A new kind of psychological shallowness is posited as the global personal (dis)order.

From politics and economics to our very own identities and personalities, there appear to be novel and global gravitational forces at play, steered by the hallmarks of our digital age: ubiquitous computing, mobile technologies, and social media platforms. We are said to be experiencing a "global turn" in media and communication that demands new ways of conceptualizing relations and boundaries between the local, the national, and the transnational (Kupchan 2012). Is the nation-state an outdated and inadequate construct today, or are we doubling down on this entity with the rise of popular nationalism? Is the West finally giving way to "the Rest," and if so, how may that affect the sacred pillars of the twenty-first century, those of liberal democracy, capitalism, and individualism? Are we sacrificing intimacy for mass adulation in a viciously competitive global marketplace for online attention? With the rise of automation, will we as humans lose control of all that we hold dear—freedom, justice, empathy, and even love?

The notion of globalization has long been associated with profound disruption and has often been shaped by our poetic imagination rather than by hard empirical evidence. Techno-utopians and dystopians

alike have fed on deterministic leanings, reordering our communicative practice by the primacy of tech novelty over that of human ingenuity. A decade ago, in the nascent years of big-data scholarship, Anderson (2008) was quick to paint a vision of the end of theory that challenged the classic proposition that "data without a model is just noise." He cajoled scholars and practitioners alike that it was time for a change: "[T]here's no reason to cling to our old ways. It's time to ask: What can science learn from Google?" Today, few social scientists would dare suggest that Googlization of science is the way to get to the truth (Vaidhyathan 2012).

There is a learned skepticism of big ideas, of big questions, and rightfully so. Grand theories such as enlightenment, modernization, and neoliberalism have been instrumentalized to enforce a universalism onto diverse contexts and people. Admittedly, this cultural flattening has been useful to scale products, services, and policies, celebrating that which brings the world together despite differences. Oftentimes, however, this flattening has come at the steep price of amplifying global inequalities, erasing cultures, and decimating alternative paradigms of a good life. Therefore, we academics tread carefully today. We hesitate to ask the big questions that can make sense of the global interconnectedness and intersectionality of data, institutions, and people. Simultaneously, it remains a challenge to "decenter" and "decolonize" the global in order to stay clear of a singular and universal logic that explains the social order of global media.

We have witnessed a significant shift in emphasis surrounding globalization, communication, and media, from a celebratory to a more critical stance. Only a decade ago, studies were tethered to the notion of the networked society of collective intelligence and the "wisdom of crowds" (Surowiecki 2004) in participatory knowledge making, community building, and global activism. Today, scholars sound the alarm on new forms of discrimination, alienation,

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and victimization through uninterrupted datafication, predictive analytics, and automation in decision-making (Leurs and Shepherd 2017).

However, it is worthwhile to remind ourselves that this so-called data economy is an economy built on our everyday communicative practices. The obsessive focus on data distances us from the fact that when we speak about data protection and data ownership, for instance, we are referring to the sanctity of our interpersonal, public, cross-cultural, and popular communication. There is much to unearth about the new languages and expressive practices evoked by social platforms that promise novel rules of engagement between various stakeholders. These emerging multimodal discourses are pushing for changes in conventional relationships between customers and brands, citizens and politicians, civic groups and constituents, and celebrities and fans. Moreover, these dialectic forms may translate to alternative contemporary institutional and regulatory frameworks that may cross borders.

The fact is that the theory of globalization, like all big ideas, has reinvented itself with the times. The sheen of neutrality evoked by the term *globalization* masks its intellectual lineage in the theories of modernization and imperialism (Kellner 1998). As academia is less of a linear and more of a circular phenomenon, we witness the emergence of concepts such as "data colonialism" (Couldry and Mejias 2019), which captures the power asymmetries of global datafication, and "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff 2019), which gives us a frightful futuristic picture of commodification of our everyday communicative acts.

So today, when we do theorize the global, there is an undercurrent of pessimism infused in these critiques. After all, we are up against formidable global forces. We see the rise of the tech oligarchy from Silicon Valley and China controlling and shaping the global digital sphere. We witness the growing chasm between the "data rich" and the "data poor": a few tech companies and institutions control our data while many of the world's citizens need to conform to a set of elusive online rules and architectures (Boyd and Crawford 2012). The growing polarization in politics and culture mediated by algorithms alarms us as they foster new techno-social alliances that amplify hate and circulate misinformation at an unprecedented global scale. We push back against the accelerating race to the bottom in wages and working conditions as the gig economy goes global (Graham and Anwar 2019).

However, these theories do not account for the tremendous optimism expressed by the vast millions of people coming online for the first time in the Global South. With radically cheap and affordable mobile phones and data plans, the next billion users are emerging from countries like India and China and are

passionately consuming digital products and inhabiting these new online spaces (Arora 2019). In addition, the protest culture has radically reconfigured itself, fueled by a politics of hope. What social movements like the Hong Kong protest for democracy, March for Our Lives, and the Fridays for Future climate strike have demonstrated is that digitally mediated communication of local concerns has the power to build empathy among members of a global and diverse public. Scholars have come far, from the simplistic constructs of "clicktivism," "slacktivism," and "leaderless movements" to more nuanced framings of these persistent phenomena as alternative and deliberative strategies of engagement (Gerbaudo 2017).

This landslide of optimism and hope has the possibility of creating a seismic shift in the ways we reconceptualize the global. Thematic concerns about privacy, community, democracy, justice, play, and romance need to be approached empathetically, giving due legitimacy to both the fears and the hopes of people as media apparatuses span borders. Big data should embrace its rightful companion, the thick data of everyday realities, and humble itself. Juxtaposing the "what" with the "why" can humanize data.

So, rather than condemning ambitious intellectual provocations, we should be asking why "classic" grand theories seduce large segments of academia and media. Perhaps all academics are dreamers, activists, and storytellers at heart. We need to recognize the role these provocations play in stimulating debate, fierce contestation, and grounded scholarship. Bad theory paves the way for good ideas. It forces us to rethink what we value and why we resist.

We find ourselves at an important juncture that requires moving beyond staid dualities, traditional framings, and descriptive media comparative work. While media continues to be implicated in the "disjunctures between economy, culture, and politics," as Arjun Appadurai (1990, 297) astutely observed a quarter century ago, digital cultures have created new opportunities and discontinuities, at a global scale, that invite a prolonged and thoughtful investigation. How do we transcend the binaries—of the online and the offline, the public and private media spheres, the data divide, the producer and the consumer, homogenization and heterogenization, media convergence and divergence, disembodiments and the situated materiality of media imaginaries—to maintain the contextual integrity of the media event? What alternative frameworks, systems, etymologies, and ontologies are on offer to reconfigure our understandings of how global media are organizing the power relations in society?

Speculations abound; the fate of traditional mass media like print, radio, and television continues to be of rising concern in academic and industry research.

The rise of user-generated content continues to challenge conventional framings of media producers and audiences. To what degree are these content producers bound to the nation-state? For example, bloggers, podcasters, online celebrities, digital activists, and citizen journalists can shape global public opinion and the media landscape at large. The fate of our essential social institutions, including education, healthcare, welfare, and the like, appear to be at their most vulnerable as there is much effort to commodify and gamify these realms. With Amazon and Google gaining access to the health data of UK and US citizens (Walker 2019), is the liberal democratic state becoming subservient to or even dissolving into the larger cauldron of these tech empires?

As a few digital platforms control the vast amount of data generated through everyday communicative practices worldwide, scholars across disciplines and fields are rightfully concerned about who gets to collect, curate, store, and moderate such media content. Are art connoisseurs, military intelligence, and healthcare specialists being undermined by algorithmic "expertise"? Are digital media creating cognitive changes in the ways we remember, write, speak, listen, and navigate, and if so, what kind of new cultures do these cognitive shifts produce? What is driving the expansions in media infrastructures and policies, and is there a unified and shared logic to their organization? What are the implications of new media technologies for politics and governance at national and international levels?

Clearly, these significant happenings demand equally ambitious innovations in theory and method in academia. Jointly, we can embrace the vibrant messiness and joys of methodological innovation and conceptual alternatives to traditional approaches to the media and the global. We invite scholars, policymakers, and practitioners alike to join forces to tackle some key questions we face together as a community, such as the following:

- Should we continue to use the nation-state as a central unit of analysis or push for a provincializing or translocating of the global in media studies?
- Are we giving too much primacy to data in untangling global digital cultures and overestimating the influence of data?

- How do we conceptualize the global transformations of the traditional media without being too medium- or user-centric?
- What moral standards should we standardize as we embark on digital ethnography?
- How do we encourage the examination of the most vulnerable populations while simultaneously coming up with stringent ethical guidelines to protect them from privacy violations and undue harms?

Clearly, there is a deep-seated hunger for new framings to make sense of the complex matrix and flow of humans and technology. Scholars across disciplines are invited to satisfy this intellectual appetite.

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Payal Arora is a Professor and Chair in Technology, Values, and Global Media Cultures at Erasmus University Rotterdam. Her expertise lies in digital media experience and user values among low-income communities worldwide and comes with more than a decade of fieldwork experience in such contexts. She is the author of a number of books including the award-winning *Leisure Commons* and most recently the *The Next Billion Users* with Harvard Press. Forbes named her the "next billion champion" and the right kind of person to reform tech. Several international media outlets have covered her work including The BBC, The Economist, Quartz, Tech Crunch, The Boston Globe, F.A.Z., The Nation and CBC. She has consulted on tech innovation for diverse organizations such as UNESCO, KPMG, GE, and HP and has given more than 170 presentations in 109 cities in 54 countries including a TEDx talk on the future of the internet. She is the founder of Catalyst Lab, a digital activism organization and sits on several boards such as Columbia Univ. Earth Institute and World Women Global Council in New York. She has held Fellow positions at GE, ZEMKI, ITSRio, and NYU and. She has a Masters in International Policy from Harvard University and a doctorate in Language, Literacy and Technology from Columbia University. She was born and raised in India, is an Irish and American citizen, and currently lives in Amsterdam.

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