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Putting America in Its Place

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It is now a commonplace that the media are global, or that they create, in Marshall McLuhan's terms, a global village, and that such globality comes to us as a mediated phenomenon. If we needed any reminding of this fact, recent uprisings from Tahrir Square to Occupy, as well as many smaller movements against corruption and for citizens' rights, have provided it. In what lies this globality of media, and are we celebrating its worldliness too easily? Rather than assume that media technology is inherently global in its form, we should ask how it came to be regarded as such. I argue that the historical origins of the media are specifically North American. While their physical reach may be global, our understanding of the media's relation to globalization will retain the influence of its provincial origin unless we bring it into view as a problem (see Chakrabarty 2000).

Criticisms of United States–centric theories are familiar from debates on modernization theory. We will recall that the word *modernization* synthesized liberal postwar American values to present an abstract idea of what many intellectuals wished the United States would become. It also prescribed an agenda for new states in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. "By defining a singular path of progressive change," a historian recently observed, "the concept of modernization simplified the world-historical problems of decolonization and industrialization, helping to guide American economic aid and military intervention in postcolonial regions" (Gilman 2003: 3). Modernization expressed anxiety about the United State's place in the Cold War era as well as confidence that with economic growth

and technical expertise communist influence could be overcome, drawing the world's countries toward the US model instead.

If scholars assumed that media as well as research on media had worldwide application, modernization theory was both matrix and motor of those assumptions. Modernization theory launched the academic analysis of media as a global object of research, with the work of Daniel Lerner and others. Media were seen as indispensable agents of modernization. Lerner pointed out that Europeanization had meant the promotion of "class media," directed at educated populations. Modernization, by contrast, uses mass media, he wrote. Middle Easterners, for example, might reject the label "Made in U.S.A." while accepting the modern package (Lerner 1958: 46).

Indeed, at times it seemed as if media represented the culmination of modernity. To quote Wilbur Schramm, "The world had been trembling on the verge of mass media for centuries" (1977: 7). By the end of the Cold War, modernization theory had succumbed to its critics; today it has few overt defenders in the academy. Many of the ideas it helped launch remain in orbit, however, embedded in objects that appear immune to criticism. "Media" are one such class of objects. What I propose to highlight in this essay is the fact that "media" became a carrier of a distinctly North American understanding of individual freedom and rights, while the theories that had actually formulated such a view ceased to draw attention.

The Object of Media Studies

Like many other multidisciplinary formations in the academy, media studies defines itself around objects rather than as a conventional discipline per se.[1] Object-centered fields of study must presume a theoretical subject, an ideal actor/observer whose norms and values prioritize the evidence to be analyzed and the arguments that merit attention. In this case, subjects are constituted through their relation to media objects as readers, viewers, hackers, and so on. Accounts that investigate the latter, for example, in "reception studies," have devolved into more specific subfields. The focus of the most visible scholarly work has shifted from theories to things.[2]

1. Traditional disciplines in the arts and sciences, by contrast, have been reluctant or even fearful of objects qua objects. Scholars as various as Bill Brown and Bruno Latour have made this point. My thanks to Rey Chow for helping me draw this contrast.

2. Other critiques of object-centered knowledge from Edward Said onward, and from feminism and from racial and ethnic studies, have ended up in producing counterhistories. Media studies, however, has tended to conflate the object of media with the (traditional) subject of history; hence there appears to be no countervailing account at all. A widely circulated teaching text reproducing such a view, for example, is Crowley and Heyer 2010.

Two points bear notice with regard to the perils of object-centrism. First, an object-centered history presumes a plurality of objects. Some objects, however, have acquired significant status, such as the phonetic alphabet, paper, and the printing press. A history centered on a different object, for example, ideographic instead of phonetic script, or papyrus instead of paper, could only be additive. It excludes social antagonism unless subjects are brought back in. The apparent victory of one object over another "speaks for itself"; as a result, there is typically no counterhistory that can be used as critique. Perhaps technocentric and teleological histories are now less common or more apologetic than they used to be. But even sophisticated critics of teleology often merely invert Eurocentrism, recoding enlightenment as domination.[3]

The second and perhaps more significant issue is this: media are a distinct kind of object, since they acquire their object status by the act of mediation. Specifically, a relationship between subject and object appears as if embedded in the media object and appears as its inherent form. This social character of media requires unearthing from the sense of a purely technological form and has to be decoded much like the social hieroglyph of the commodity form. In other words, the media appear before us as already mediated entities; they embody both a technological development and a social history. We can assign a global status to the former, but the latter is specific and regional.

Media studies as a field has developed mostly in the United States and, not surprisingly, tends to concentrate on the United States and Europe. Unwittingly, this reproduces a logic of realpolitik, since it is in these countries that media technologies are understood to have developed. Rather than investigate how globalization takes shape, media studies tends to assume a trickle-down theory of global effects, with non-Western areas presumed to have little impact on the West and providing little theoretical purchase on questions concerning technology. The hubris of such a position is perhaps more apparent today with the waning of the US empire and the emergence of non-Western centers of power.[4]

3. For example, the art historian Jonathan Crary (1992) draws on the work of Michel Foucault to offer an important critique of modernist ocular-centric knowledge and to demonstrate the growth of governmental technologies of domination. However, he omits to inquire into the crucial differences in the power-knowledge ratio across metropole and colony, which are salient to his argument.

4. I should note that media studies represents a recent and still emerging agglomeration of disciplines; there is a fluid and provisional character to its debates. "Media studies" is thus a descriptor of scholarly trends as much as a field, one that has to struggle for legitimacy vis-à-vis disciplines formed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For these reasons, my discussion in this essay engages not with a specific ideology or set of authors so much as with tendencies that few scholars are likely to defend but that persist as a set of largely unintended assumptions.

Therefore, while scholarly debates abound on a range of issues directly relevant to media studies, including issues of political power and sovereignty, cultures of sense perception, language and linguistic difference, and religion and religiosity, the major thrust of media studies is toward long-standing political goals of enlightenment and emancipation as they are conventionally understood and on the means by which these goals may be achieved, notably through the media. No one can dispute that these goals are important. But the interest in these goals also demands that the political express itself in ways familiar to those in the United States itself. Such an expectation results in impatience toward factors that subtend or qualify the political in most other contexts. American exceptionalism and its post–World War II history now provide the implicit frames through which we understand media effects.

Meanwhile, media "in the rest of the world" suggest discrepant histories of use, interesting for their variety but illuminating nothing essential in all the range of their forms.[5] If the media tend to exhibit or mobilize other characteristics, whether the interanimation of different linguistic strata and consequently different layers of social history or of varying cultures of ritual and worship, for example, the research uncovering such phenomena tends to gravitate to other fields, for example, to area studies, ethnomusicology, religious studies, or visual culture. For the most part, media studies will take little account of such findings. The object-centered character of the field can thus make it difficult to hold it accountable for ignoring relevant research. Theoretical critiques may be dissuaded by historical facts, while historical counterevidence can be deflected by theoretical assumptions. Case studies that could alter existing assumptions migrate to other fields or disciplines, leaving the propulsive forces of the existing field undisturbed. "New media" represent the cutting edge of media studies research, in this sense, since "old media" are liable to be plagued by Old World problems. Such strategies rely on triage to preserve the thrust of the field and keep it insulated from critiques of the political assumptions involved as well as from findings from other parts of the world.

(New) Media in the (New) World

The idea of America as the medium of the media, I suggest, underpins the key concerns of media studies. In the beginning, all the world was America, John

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5. *Media* is the successor term to *communication*, the latter word connoting a more expansive conception of nation building and development, currently in disfavor. The currency of the term *media* points to a shift away from an infrastructural conception of communication and toward a more commoditized sense of the function.

Locke wrote, in his *Second Treatise of Government*. The ideas of natural law presumed by Locke's argument about inherent rights of property in personhood render the modern state a caretaker, at best, of processes whose growth is natural and laissez-faire and whose legal authority was no longer understood as the preserve of the state but ultimately rested with its citizens (Locke 1970 [1689]: 319).[6] Implicitly, in this understanding, tools such as communication media are a potential to be actualized, rather than merely an apparatus of information transfer or state rule. In these accounts, the media ideally connote an empowered people, governed by reason.

More than 250 years later, Raymond Williams, in 1961, argued that communications media as a whole were part of the "long revolution" that would make equals of the rich and the poor. Precisely for this reason, he pointed out, governments feared the power of media. Today many would demur at Williams's argument and might suggest that mass media are not always positive in their effects. By contrast, it is likely that many would view "new media" or "social media" as ensuring the media's progressive potential.

For example, broadcast media have come to symbolize nonconfrontational communication or even pacification, and that too without overt state supervision. In the meantime a newer set of technologies have become sites of more pressing concern, that is, the so-called social media. But what are media if not social? The answer is, broadcast media's one-way communication is presumably less social (and new) than interactive media such as cell phones, Facebook, and Twitter. However we respond to this mode of analysis, it appears that the gravitational pull of "new media" dissuades many scholars from posing questions about it, because the latter are thought to present more urgent problems for analysis. Why that should be so is seldom made explicit.

An influential argument made by McLuhan suggests a reason. Old media become the content of new media; the form of the dominant new communication technology defines the media environment in a given period. A medium like television can no longer repay analytical scrutiny to the degree it used to, if we accept this reasoning: the world has moved on. "Digital" and "mobile" media have clearly taken radio, film, and television's place as more visible and trafficked sites of academic labor.

Such swings in scholarship may be influenced by academic fashion, and there are few things one rejects as unhesitatingly as yesterday's fads. But there is more than fashion at work here. McLuhan argued that with oral-tactile forms of com-

6. For a reading of Locke along the lines indicated here, see Koselleck 1988: 53–61.

munication created by broadcasting, the hitherto print-dominated West would be equipped to better engage with the world's nonprint literate majority.

McLuhan provided an ingenious argument about the power of media. A scholar of Elizabethan literature, he overcame his distaste for mass culture with a heroic theory of the media, one that gave it the ability to constantly surpass its own limitations. The move should have provoked questions, but he was treated as a prophet. McLuhan connected concerns about social order and the fear of the crowd, and latent apprehensions about the power of communist ideology, with the possibility of utopian transcendence. If the medium was the message, and the message was something about neotribal togetherness, it implied that communist propaganda would be neutralized. Modern media might in fact serve as silent allies of the West in the Cold War. Communications would create a global village, McLuhan prophesied, betraying his New World naïveté about the village as a place of consensus and harmony. He thus folded media globalization into an account of the West as an eternal harbinger of modernity, forever transcending its shortcomings.

One reason that these assumptions were not explored is that McLuhan appeared to be above the fray at a time when arguments about US intervention and superpower conflict were partisan.[7] To criticize the idea of a global village was perhaps not the most urgent task of criticism at a time of counterinsurgency warfare, in Vietnam and elsewhere, and when hamlets were a site of peasant resistance. At the same time, McLuhan provided linguistic purchase on a rapidly changing world, offering cultural analyses that were easily repeated but less often understood. His writing registered the sense that something new was happening, even if people did not know quite what it was, except that "the medium was the message." And the media were, after all, American.

America as Medium of the Media

The unique circumstances of US history led to extraordinary policies for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with state subsidies for the postal system, libraries, schools, and newspapers and, more unusually yet, an absence of censorship. These were undertaken in the attempt to strengthen national bonds within a nascent, far-flung republic. The US state expected that interaction between citizens could only strengthen its social base, which was not a typical assumption for the time. It reflected the reality of the government's reliance on settlers to extend the frontiers, battle the natives, cultivate the land, and build the nation in

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7. Note that McLuhan was from Canada, a country that occupied a less embattled position than the United States did in Cold War–era polemics. I thank Naomi Angel for this observation.

the process. Lacking a standing army and without much by way of revenue, the boundary between state and nation was tenuous at best. Subsidized education and communication, however, ensured an empowered citizenry that expressed a level of identity with the nation that was probably without parallel at the time (see Starr 2004; John 1995; Rajagopal 2006).

Thus in the United States, the modern problem of social order acquired a distinct solution. Alexis de Tocqueville observes in *Democracy in America* that the people understood themselves to be the real seat of sovereign power. As a result, the distinction between state and civil society was fungible and contingent; the political culture of the state was akin to popular culture. That was not his perception alone. Well before, in 1755, Benjamin Franklin could write: "In fine, a nation well regulated is like a polypus; take away a limb, its place is soon supply'd; cut it in two, and each deficient part shall speedily grow out of the part remaining. Thus . . . you may of one make ten nations, equally populous and powerful; or rather, increase a nation ten fold in numbers and strength" (1755: 23.53).

Franklin envisions a decentralized and homogeneous nation, whose form of vitality replenishes its overall similitude, activating the immune defense mechanism of self-multiplication when needed. His organic metaphor echoes the thought of his age. Today we would be more likely to employ technological imagery, invoking, for example, circuitry and networks of communication. Franklin's word picture suggests that a deeply mediatized sense of the American project was present even before the birth of the republic. Such a retrospective reading clarifies tendencies that were only incipient at the time but are full-blown today.

Tocqueville's essay too can be read through this prism, I suggest. One of the puzzling aspects of *Democracy in America*, in this context, is the change in tone over the course of the work, from generous approval to apprehension and foreboding. The optimism of the first volume, where he praises the equality mandated by law and reiterated in everyday life, and the pessimism of his concluding pages, where despotism looms, can be linked if we factor in the means of communication, which were subsidized by the central government and, by the 1830s, influenced by the mass political party.[8] As Paul Starr has written, the modern sense in which we invoke "the media" was, arguably, created in the United States, as an essential institution of the republic. Governmentalization of state power was not

8. The postal system, symptomatically, was the branch of central government that touched the lives of most people until at least 1845, when stagecoach subsidies began to be reduced (John 1995: 98–99). On the importance of the mass party under Andrew Jackson (1829–1937) and its political influence on the postal system, see ibid.: 206–56. The scope of the point extends beyond the post, however.

only political-economic but simultaneously communicational and devolved onto white settlers and their progeny by means of the state bearing the cost of education, information, and early forms of virtual interaction via the post.

In the United States, media emerge as a ventriloquism of state power in and through civil society. A parliamentarism of marketplace communications arises to complement it, with conventions about neutral and bipartisan newspaper reportage taking shape alongside partisan pamphleteering. A republic that sought to ally society with a fledgling state, including giving citizens the right to bear arms, promoted the growth of media by all means possible. The market was not opposed to the state but in concert with it.

An unexpected site where we can find confirmation of this view is in the proliferation of a communicative form regarded as distinctly American. In the United States, advertising matured more quickly than anywhere else. Advertising, although an interested system of communication, is granted its own citational authority and claims to speak to the common interest as if it were the state. The message itself acquires the status of sanctioned communication and becomes freefloating, rendering questions such as who is speaking, where, and when relatively unimportant.

The unique characteristics of the US state's influence on its media, including its racial, religious, and nationalist entailments, have been normalized through a familiar method of distinguishing between those data that conform to a given theory and those that are aberrant. In discussions of civil society, when theory collides with reality, Karl Marx once observed, theory wins. Reality is declared deficient instead (Marx 1844).

The theoretical subject of the media in media studies is American.[9] This subject exercises communicative privileges as a natural right in the marketplace and encounters the state as a discrete actor rather than as a historically contingent support authorizing communication. Advances in media technology appear as means to enhance human capacity, and media form is understood as containing the secret of this possible enhancement.

Even if we set aside the philosophical problem of independent, self-adequate objects (how can we know they exist, absent a subject able to know?), "media" arise only from conventions that designate certain objects as such. Furthermore, if "the medium is the message," this depends on a subject who registers the message and activates its codes. The media are not, therefore, independent objects but are

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9. I use the adjectival rather than the nominal form of the word here for the sake of euphony, but my point is the same.

constituted together with the subject through whom media achieve their mediating effects. And as we have seen, the normative subject of media studies operates in a New World context where the individual is sovereign and the media are a support to that sovereignty.

It is in the interwar and post–World War II period that a different theoretical model arose most forcefully to challenge such an idealized view of the inter-mediation of state and society in the United States. The Frankfurt school's critique of mass society, informed by the experience of European fascism, marks this historical moment, one that is in fact on a line of continuity with the early American solution to the problem of order. *The American citizen was both medium and message of governmental power.* In the early republic this power was experienced as cultural ethos, not as state directive (Tocqueville 2000 [1835, 1840]). In mass society, citizens acquired an intensive conformism resulting from a mode of power where the distinction between state and market was hardly relevant. But in the context of Cold War rhetoric, the default framework was one in which media growth and the expansion of freedom were aligned most clearly with the idea of America, even if not with the historical experience of the United States. Technologically advanced media, according to this logic, held the possibility of furthering the project of enlightenment, even if they were enmeshed in systems of social regulation and political control.

I have mentioned Marx's epigram, that theory is the rule and reality the exception. In this case we could say that myth rather than theory is the rule, myth that informs life but does not claim conformity with reality. This is the myth of America as the site of natural law and Rousseauian harmony and as the destiny of the world, a myth that is neither narrow nor parochial and can elicit wide support. Geography, however, is not incidental to this myth but constitutive of it. The New World, existing far from the decaying structures of European feudalism, offered a "blank slate" for the utopian projects of Enlightenment philosophes and continues to function as the transparent and nonmaterial support for mediating Enlightenment in the imagination. Colonial genocide and slavery exist at the margins of this myth and do not fundamentally alter it, because for all its flaws, this idea of America provides a guiding light for collective action.

Studying Media: Locating an Emergent Field

Those engaged in media studies who wish to acknowledge the global character of their subject labor under a double burden of provinciality, certainly in the view of many of those who study new media. First, they imply a focus on places distant

from where technologies incubate and advance, and in many cases, though not all, they examine old rather than new media.

There is a familiar irony here. The political and theoretical vanguard in a field feel obliged to turn their backs on the majority because their attention is fastened on defining tendencies and maturing contradictions, which are premised on the centrality of their own situation as they understand it.

We can say that there are, implicitly, two kinds of media studies operating here. Although they are not clearly distinguished from each other, they reflect a salient divide. One follows the development of science and technology that leads to the development of media artifacts from paper and print to the telegraph, radio, and beyond. The historical location of this body of work is the West, where the work of the media can be assessed in terms of measurable deviations from the norm. Broadly speaking, the modes of subjectivation shaped by media, which would include cultural, linguistic, and religious factors, can be bracketed because they are normalized, as also the mode of state intervention. In these contexts, the medium can be granted agency ("the medium is the message") to the extent that the subjective mediation of the media can be treated as relatively homogeneous and taken for granted.

Meanwhile, studies of the media from elsewhere invariably have to negotiate multiethnic, multilinguistic, and multireligious contexts. In these places the state is seldom a background presence, as arbiters and regulators maintaining a level playing field; it often seems designed to foil rather than foster the possibility of free communication. Accounts of the production, interpretation, or circulation of media texts, or of media organizations in their historical context, can consequently appear too detailed and inaccessible to all but the area specialist, even when such accounts are working through social scientific or critical theories. This is to some extent true across area studies, but the parochialism in media studies is more noticeable because as "modernizing" technologies, communications media should present a ready basis of comparison. However, media tend to scramble temporalities and present heterogeneous, nonlinear outcomes, complicating any claims about modernizing effects. The result is that a political frame (e.g., of anticolonialism or nationalism) is allowed to subtend the analysis, while bracketing the phenomena in question. It is striking how little distance has been traversed in comparative analysis, toward, for example, asking how different state regimes are disposed toward communication technologies or how different multilingual or multireligious contexts accommodate and constrain media institutions and texts.

The success of the best-received effort in this regard is perhaps Benedict

Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, and its success perfectly illustrates my claims here. Nationalism is presented as an empty modular form, to be filled through the combination of print capitalism and national sovereignty. Historical subjects, with their ethnic, religious, linguistic, and other contingencies, to say nothing of their concrete forms of thought, are incidental to the analysis presented in this argument.

The result of this mode of partitioning inquiry is that it leaves intact the hierarchies posited between the West and the presumptively less modern non-West, when for some time now, a range of forces have both been tying them together and producing difference between them at the same time. For example, communications technologies in the colony served as means of extraction, censorship, and surveillance, as well as means of elite and subaltern formation. Media were not neutral in the history of these developments but produced a series of outcomes, intended as well as unintended. Decolonization and national sovereignty were achieved, but national elites gained power too.

In this connection, it is relevant to note that the spread of technology was always claimed to incrementally (if not rapidly) Europeanize the provinces as sites of modernization. Forensic medicine, fingerprinting, and photography tracked and surveilled natives, while railways moved raw materials extracted from the hinterland to the port cities and transported finished goods from the metropole. Communications technologies such as print, radio, and telegraph were rigorously controlled and subject to censorship, and the government maintained a monopoly over the airwaves to ensure their proper use.

Under colonial government, technology brought the provinces closer to Europe. Technology also held natives apart as distinct entities, maintaining a rule of colonial difference. With political independence, the project of national developmentalism that followed the colonial state reproduced a raison d'état aloof from popular sentiment as a condition of its existence. Rulers were now elected, but politics appeared external to the logic of technology and development both, and as a process more likely to subvert the rationality of governance than to advance it.

Divergent histories correlate with the media in every period. Increasingly, however, we witness the fetishism of technology and assumptions that new technology drives social change and promises emancipation. Social media such as the Internet and the cell phone have launched a new wave of arguments about a digital sublime awaiting humanity. Older arguments, of criticism premised upon popular uprising and the accumulation of surplus value by the rich, reappear now in altered form, suggesting that the erstwhile contradiction of capitalism has now found a technological solution to which we must adapt ourselves. Media expansion can

lead to democratization if popular empowerment undercuts the exploitative power of elites. The tautological character of these accounts notwithstanding, they use terms from critical theory to affirm major trends of social change with little or no qualification (see, e.g., Shirkey 2011).

Media, which for some time now have been a symbol of the advanced character of Western modernity, have simultaneously reproduced Western insularity. For example, radio, television, and, to a lesser extent, the cinema cultivated audiences according to prevailing norms of improvement or entertainment. Societies elsewhere stayed in the periphery of the popular imagination unless they were disaster zones. The term *emerging markets*, applied to many of the world's oldest market societies, reflects this strange conceit.

But with the globalization of media, it is not the West so much as the rest of the world where scholars seek to discern the future to come. We might say the difference is that between being and becoming. The West seeks to preserve the broad character of its present structures, while the rest of the world's population is aware that their future lies in transcending their present, not in preserving it.

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