IJoC | Turkey, the Middle East & the Media

Turkey, the Middle East and the Media
Special Section

Editorial Introduction

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This special section on Turkey, the Middle East, and the Media brings together scholars whose research focuses on and problematizes the various aspects of the phenomena commonly labeled as transnational media flows. Within the past two decades, there has been an abundant use of the term transnationalism in the study of globalization in general, and in media studies in particular. This concentrated focus has yielded a wide variety of rich and meaningful analyses in disciplines ranging from anthropology to political science, geography, and sociology. Yet, in many instances, arbitrary and superficial (and, in some cases, intellectually bankrupt) utilizations of the concept rendered it void of any critical value. In the study of the global dimensions of the media, the transborder characters and related consequences of media flows have often been regarded in a generalizing discourse of fusion and cultural hybridity, and the paradigm of globalization has often been employed in a blanket manner.

There seem to be two main reasons for the interest among communication scholars in the phenomenon of transnationalism. The more obvious of these is the interdisciplinary nature of the field of communication studies and the fact that all forms of human interaction—be they political, cultural, or economic—are, at the end of the day, concerns of this field. Secondly, and as importantly, scholars of communication are particularly interested in the processes of transnationalism because media transnationalism is transforming cultural geographies around the world in unprecedented ways. The articles that constitute this special section reflect critically on the role of the media vis-à-vis the current phase of the cultural, political, and economic transformations observed in the Middle East and Turkey. The strength of the special section lies in the two-pronged approach adopted to tackle the challenge of taking account of transnational flows in ways that are both critical and nuanced. On one level, the articles contest and scrutinize the concept of transnationalism and point to new directions for rethinking both its paradigmatic components and its analytic purchase on understanding current trends and transformations. Rather than taking "transnationalism" at face value, each paper approaches this particular phenomenon

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and its contingencies from a critical stance, interrogating the theoretical and political/ideological elements embedded within it.   On another level, each author seeks to address the material and empirical dimensions of transnationalism by way of offering geographically grounded case studies from the Middle East and Turkey. Taken together, the papers constitute a robust body of scholarship toward reconsidering transnational media flows in light of the key events that mark particular geographic locations.

The transnational flow of cultures, finances, people, and commodities is now seeping through and disrupting the borders of even the most "closed" and "detached" societies. Furthermore, the multiplication of sources and receivers of these flows, the rapid decentralization and disordering of transnational and transcultural nodes, and the increasing ease of accessibility to these nodes and flows by previously marginalized societies are all changing the cultural, political, and economic textures of geographies all around the world. In fact, on the one hand, we see how previously subjugated societies are today becoming important political, economic, and cultural actors, both in their own regions and in the global arena, due to the impact of these transnational flows. On the other hand, we are witnessing the ways in which these societies are experiencing transformations within themselves—again directly linked with the processes of transnationalization.

While transnationalization is, of course, being experienced in every part of the world, we argue that some societies are experiencing the implications of transnationalism more profoundly and in more particular ways—mostly due to their political, cultural, and historical heritages. This special section aims to attract attention to one of these geographies which have been highly affected by the implications of the processes of transnationalization, particularly within the last decade. It is our contention that these processes have contributed in many ways to both linked and eclectic transformations among the societies at the crossroads of Eastern Europe, the Arabian Peninsula, the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and North Africa. Furthermore, we argue that at the heart of these profound changes lie the new information and communication technologies (ICTs), and the ways in which these relatively new forms of communications are being deployed by both the political and economic authorities and the publics in the region. Media flows and transnational dynamics have increasingly been seen as key components of both shared and eclectic transformations in the Middle East. Turkey has a particular role within this context. The rise of Turkey as a political and economic leader in the Middle East has been reflected upon in both popular and academic discourse in the country itself, in the Middle East, and elsewhere.

One particular phenomenon that has been widely debated is the spectacular popularity of Turkish media products in Arab countries, disrupting in many ways the domination of the Western media in the Middle East. As such, one question that arises is whether media flows originating from Turkey are decentering the hegemonic position of "global media" and challenging existing power geometries by way of offering alternative media spheres. As Koichi Iwabuchi reminds us, globalization and transnationalization of media are generating the decentering of Western (U.S.) cultural hegemony.

> Non-Western players now actively collaborate in the production and circulation of global media commodities. . . . Furthermore, the predominance of Western (U.S.) culture has been seriously challenged by the intensification of intraregional cultural flows and connections in the non-West. (Iwabuchi, 2002, pp. 554–555)

This decentering or disordering potential of transnational media forms one of the main topics of discussion among the articles in this special section. Contributions in this special section focus on the productive aspects of these processes of decentering and disordering, highlighting the ways in which they open pathways for alternative, counter-hegemonic, transcultural fields that foster dialogue and interaction between societies and enrich what we have come to refer to as "global culture."

The core of the arguments in these collected essays, then, take their point of departure from the idea that today's "global culture" can only be described as a product of the dialectic between the local and the global that abolishes any binary opposition. While, as the editors of this special section, we refrain from being caught in the pitfall of technological determinism, we are convinced that ways in which transnational media are being put to use by societies around the world do become central in fostering and nurturing this dialectic between the global and the local in a variety of sophisticated ways. Case-specific analyses of media flows in the Middle East then provide a valuable, meaningful, and highly unique contribution to the field of global media studies in general. Research presented in this special section offers insight—on the basis of a particular cultural geography—as to the "roots and routes" of transnational media flows, and into how their manifestations foster multicentered mediascapes in places marked by constant flux. While Turkey is emerging as a key political, cultural, and economic player in the region, it is also assuming the role of a significant node in the transnational crossroads that traverse the Middle East.

With the recent protest movements and democratic mass demonstrations against the suppressive politics of the government, with the region's fastest growing economy, and with its increasing significance in the Middle East and the North Africa (MENA), Turkey is lately one of the most important actors among developing countries in the Middle East, the Caucasus, and the Balkans. Geared by all these developments, Turkey is also becoming an important power base in its neighboring region. However, this leading role Turkey has recently been ascribing to itself is not without its complications. First and foremost, as a legacy of the Ottoman heritage and the claims of modern Turkey, Turkey is and has been occupying a liminal space for the past century. The country is poised—with complex alignments to all—between modernity and Islam; between being a secular republic and the strong pull toward an Islamic orthodoxy; between Europe and the Middle East; between post-Soviet countries, Russia, and Mediterranean Africa; between the Caucasus and the Balkans. Furthermore, the people of Turkey are culturally heterogeneous and cosmopolitan. This cultural cosmopolitanism, influenced by the geographical location and the cultural history of Turkey, becomes particularly problematic when it is studied under the rubric of the encompassing official ideology of Turkish cultural nationalism. As a modern country, Turkey is a center of media production and distribution, but at the same time, it is a major consumer of Western media and cultural product. Therefore, long before Daniel Lerner focused on the role of media in the restructuring of Islamic societies in his *The Passing of Traditional Society* (1958), Turkey was already of great interest for media scholars.

Therefore, the raison d'être of this particular special section lies in the argument that Turkey is a telling case in which to study transnational media flows and global media institutions within the greater region of the Middle East and the Balkans. Consequently, the articles compiled in this section are geared toward a better understanding of the transnationalism and media flows in these regions, and toward a

further scrutiny of the transformations among the societies at the crossroads of Eastern Europe, the Arabian Peninsula, the Balkans, and the Middle East. Overall, this special section aims to make an intervention into the broader discussions on transnationalism by bringing together scholars whose research focuses on Eastern Europe, the Arabian Peninsula, the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and North Africa through their focus on the use and flow of media products. Thus, each article interrogates changing mediascapes in these regions and maps novel reconfigurations of transnational media flows in diasporic, national, local, and global media spheres.

In rethinking the ways in which conceptual and paradigmatic instruments help us make sense of mediated encounters, Miyase Christensen, in her article, places at the center of her discussion the various morphologies and contested analytic values of transnationalism, mediatization, and accompanying processes, such as cosmopolitanization. Mahmut Mutman's article offers a critical reading of the concept of mediascape and transnationality, articulated through an elaboration on the ethical and political consequences of a new experience of transnationality that he explores via the concepts of hegemony and resistance. Yörük and Vatikiotis question the utility of the concept of "soft power" in comparison to the Gramscian concept of hegemony in understanding the developments in the recent transnational power games in the Middle East and the Balkans. In their focus on the transnational popularity of Turkish soap operas in the Middle East, they emphasize an emergence of both supranational and subnational regional spheres with cultural proximities. Yörük and Vatikiotis deterritorialize and transnationalize the notion of modernity when they relate the popularity of the Turkish soap operas in the region to an alternative form of modernization for the Arabic middle classes. Marwan Kraidy and Omar Al-Ghazzi, in their article, discuss the ways in which the rise of Turkey as a soft power in the Middle East has been complemented by the Turkish television dramas' "nation branding" on a transnational scale. They elaborate on this process of "nation branding" and how it functions within a transnational context, arguing that—as a form of neo-Ottomanism—the marketed nation and its "way of life" features individual freedoms and a carefree consumer lifestyle, without being wholly Western. The next article, by Yeşim Kaptan and Gökçen Karanfil, focuses on the policy and regulation issues concerning transnational broadcasting in the Middle East. Taking the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) as their object of study, the authors discuss the possibilities of an alternative transnational mediascape in the region. Altuğ Akın, in his article, sheds light on the Eurovision Song Contest as a transnational media spectacle. The author discusses the reasons of discrepancy between aggressive media discourses and producers' approaches to the Eurovision Song Contest, and highlights national media outlets' key roles in shaping the imaginations about communicative phenomenon beyond national borders. In the last article, Naomi Sakr shows us the relevant aspects of the evolution of two media conglomerates from Egypt and Saudi Arabia by scrutinizing the interplay of national and transnational power bases from a political economy perspective. In doing this, she focuses on the operational models and business interests of these conglomerates, locating them within the structure of transnational media and communications industries in the Arab world.

References

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