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Review of Daya Thussu (ed.) International Communication: A Reader (London: Routledge, 2010)

Archetti, C

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Daya Thussu (ed.) *International Communication: A Reader*. London: Routledge, 2010.

Daya Thussu's *International Communication: A Reader* aims to be a comprehensive review of the global communication landscape. Considering the extension, sheer complexity, and variety of features inherent to this landscape, this is not an un-ambitious task. Despite this, the book attempts to draw far more than a map. It attempts to construct the academic equivalent of a 3D model of an entire subfield of study.

The work brings together seminal texts from media and communication studies that have made the history of the field of international communication, as well as more recent contributions. Beyond addressing the development of the technological infrastructure of global communications, these readings, in combination, cover the political, economic, social, and cultural aspects of the global communication system. They are integrated by policy documents that have shaped the development of international communications, from the recommendations of the MacBride Report (1980), which had a prominent role in the New World Information and Communication (NWICO) debate, to the Google "Software Principles" (2004), which guide the popular search engine's ethical approach to software creation and distribution.

The reader is divided into six parts, each of which tackles, from a different angle, the fundamental question regarding the relationship between power and communication. The first part is about the technical infrastructure of international communication. It deals with the profound impact that communication technologies have had on society, including the ways in which satellites have changed our lives (Pelton), the potential for the liberalization of communications for the purposes of economic development (Noam), and the establishment of new global forms of governance through worldwide networks of digital communications (Castells; Raboy).

The second part of the reader deals with the relationship between media and modernization, a topic which has, over time, raised a lively debate within the field. Changes in communication technologies have been widely regarded as a tool to political and economic development, although the assessments of the outcomes (and beneficiaries) of such changes have varied. The contributions in this part of the book show the diverse stances within the debate. Lerner's (1958) notion that "the state of politics is a function of the communication process" (p. 87) and that public communication can positively be used "to mobilize energies" is contrasted by Melkote's review and comparison of modernization paradigms and their biases, as well as by Schiller's more pessimistic view that globalization has become, to borrow Ramonet's words, a "new totalitarianism" (p. 132). To more deeply understand the media link to modernization, Shome and Hedge suggest the application of postcolonial studies to the field of international communication so as to be able "to rethink communication through new visions and revisions, through new histories and geographies" (p. 89).

The third part is about the control of the international flows of communication. The contributions to this section of the text revolve around the concept of media imperialism (Boyd-Barrett), the extent to which we are witnessing a homogenization of media systems on a global scale (Hallin and Mancini; McChesney), and the degree to which such tendencies are resisted by contra-flows (Thussu). The challenges posed by national and regional media to international media are also addressed (Tunstall).

The fourth part covers dominant and alternative media discourses. The notion of media imperialism (based on the assumption that audiences receive and interpret media text in a homogenous manner, leading to predictable effects) is here challenged by theories of the "active audience" (Schiller), the consideration of the ways in which genres are adapted across cultural lines (Straubhaar), and the recognition of the public's ability to develop alternative

readings. The analyses of the effects of these alternative readings (Downing) and identity (Khatib) make the point that the issue of media impact (still) deserves further investigation.

The fifth part is about the use of communications to promote ideologies and political messages. The notions of propaganda (Lasswell), public diplomacy (Nye), and the deployment of “information interventions” as part of foreign policy (Price) are not new, but their changing meanings and implications are discussed in the context of the post-Cold War world (Mattelart) and the increasing relevance of “soft power.”

The last part covers the impact of global communications on culture. Contributors deal with the tension between (and sometimes coexistence of) cultural homogenization and heterogenization (Appadurai). The authors discuss the decoding by audiences of global media texts (Katz and Liebes); the impact that diasporic information flows have on nation states (Karim); the ways in which power can take the form of cultural flows, drawing on the example of Japan (Iwabuchi); the notion of cultural “hybridity” (Kraidy); and the blurring between consumption and production as a “new model for understanding the changing nature of media in everyday life...beyond corporate co-optation and audience resistance” (Deuze, p. 464).

How close does Thussu’s virtual reconstruction of the field of international communication come to reality? Like an academic *Avatar*, it provides an impressive portrayal, but one that is not immune to distortions. For example, although the *Reader* makes an effort to show different political views, the very history of the field has developed through strong Marxist influences, which do affect the contents of the book. Although the book is about International Communication, the focus on the international dimension is perhaps a limitation. The increasing blurring of national and domestic dimensions, in fact, is extending the domain of the field to the extent that what is regarded as “domestic” political communication could have been perhaps more explicitly integrated (beyond the Hallin and Mancini chapter). As Ulrich Beck (cited in Castells’s chapter, p. 38) puts it: “The structure of opportunities for political action is no longer defined by the national/international dualism but is now located in the ‘global’ arena. Global politics have turned into global domestic politics, which rob national politics of their boundaries and foundations.” The very boundaries of International Communication, in fact, could have been problematized and discussed. The image of the field, partly due to the contributors, also reflects more its past—the debates about modernization and political economy, for example—than its present or its future. What are the implications of Web 2.0 and social media, for instance, on theories such as media imperialism, globalization, and media flows, which have shaped at least the past 40 years of International Communication research? Students who use the *Reader* will especially need to be made aware of these biases and possible limitations.

The *Reader* is a highly commendable piece of work. If the author’s *International Communication: Continuity and Change* (2000, 2006) was undoubtedly a good textbook, this text will be a more complete, although also more advanced, reference. Indeed, Thussu’s work may be the closest a source can get to a one stop-shop book. What lecturers will particularly appreciate is the unabridged reproduction of texts, which will encourage students to get to grips with proper academic literature rather than simplified and, inevitably, more generalized accounts of research. Beyond the academic texts, the policy documents are also valuable teaching resources. The juxtaposition of texts providing different arguments and showing the evolution of debates over time is interesting (even for those who already know the field) and very useful for stimulating students to take a critical approach to the literature. Having said that, from the perspective of an undergraduate, it is not at all clear where most the excerpts come from and when they were originally published. Students will therefore need guidance in their navigation and contextualization of the texts.

In the book, Pelton describes the development of satellites (though his words may be applied to all communication technologies) as follows: “Some believe that because communication satellites are largely high-tech tools (almost literally supercomputers with specialized software that are deployed in the skies), the stories of these space systems might be dry, straightforward, and devoid of emotion. The truth is that the stories surrounding the development and implementation of satellite communications are filled with elements of intrigue and joy” (p. 33). Beyond all its positive features, one more contribution the book makes is certainly bringing the subject alive by showing its debates, its fights, its practical relevance, and its human side.

References

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Cristina Archetti Ph.D.
University of Salford
c.archetti@salford.ac.uk