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## EDITORIAL

# Reframing Media and Cultural Studies in the Age of Global Crisis

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**Keywords:** Media Studies; cultural studies; global crisis; digital media; globalisation; migration; crisis of democracy

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In an age of ongoing economic and political crisis, military conflict displacing millions of people and systems of governance and democracy in question, a reassessment of the questions posed by the disciplines of media and cultural studies is called for. Traditional paradigms for conceptualising the media are further challenged by shifts in the media environment resulting from the growth of digital and mobile media. This is a defining moment for the field and a time for reflection and re-evaluation.

The production of academic knowledge and the development of fields of enquiry into the media, culture and society have always been linked to both intellectual formations within the academy and historical events taking place outside it (Scannell 2007). Critical theory and much later cultural studies and media studies were not only a reaction to the pathologies of modern times, but played an active role in naming and identifying them, thus serving as the harbingers of changing times. Conceptual and methodological frameworks used within these disciplines have also changed through time as international scholars attempted to grasp broader shifts in historical, cultural and social processes, showing that the analysis of media in different parts of the world may require different frameworks. This issue of *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* arose from an invitation to key international scholars in media and cultural studies to reflect on the present state and the future of their field in the light of recent waves of global crises and new media developments, in ways that transcend facile binaries – between cultural studies and political economy, or new and old media, or global north and south – and to critically engage with the concepts and methods that can help us address the important issues of our time. This issue of WPCC addresses three key thematic questions: A) what are the questions that media and cultural studies should be asking, to respond to a world in crisis? B) How have changes in media technologies altered the questions that media and cultural studies scholars are asking or the methodologies that they have been using? c) How are developments in media/cultural studies research and theorising around the world enriching and challenging the field?

**Dave Morley** opens his talk by questioning the premises of the major questions in media theory. Arguing for better questions, Morley notes the persistence of eurocentricism, media-centrism and technological determinism in framing the terms of debate and study in media



**Figure 1:** © Loyal Ftouni.

and cultural studies. Morley endorses an anthropological approach to help us defamiliarise the presumptions of western media theory and more clearly address the question of ‘Where is the global ‘Greenwich Mean Time’ of Media Theory?’ Morley makes the case for the primacy of historical and spatial contexts over the immediate moment of technological invention – on which so much attention is customarily focussed. **Paddy Scannell** asks whether amnesia has been a consistent aspect of media studies and acknowledges how crisis has always accompanied the *newness* of the media: ‘that new media are things we do not know what to do with’. **Anastasia Kavada** proposes that social movements ought to be considered as ‘prophets of the present’ because of their ability to both anticipate and proclaim events. Kavada urges us to place communication at the centre of our enquiries into media and cultural studies so we are able to observe from the ground up how collectives and their communicative systems are created. Kavada also accentuates the role of the ‘imagination’ in engaging with and analysing social change. In her intervention, **Annabelle Sreberny** avers that the decades of the 1930s, 1950s, and the 1980s all produced new theoretical approaches and political formations. The current moment, argues Sreberny, is best described as ‘a crisis of complexity and a crisis of politics’. Sreberny points to the splintering/fracturing and over-spatialisation of media and cultural studies and presses us to reassemble the relevant elements of our field and include by way of interdisciplinarity, others from different disciplines. Sreberny also advises us to produce a new politics based on ‘inclusivity, solidarity and resistance to global realities embedded within colonial and sectarian histories’. **Colin Sparks** asserts that understanding new media and the collapse of mass communications requires an engagement with ‘larger historical shifts where existing social relations’, observes Sparks, are inclining to shape digital media into reproducing the dominant social order’, maintaining, henceforth, the status quo of one dominant institutional- intellectual superpower. **Jeremy Gilbert** opens his intervention

by cross-examining the nature of capitalism's post-2008 crisis. He shows how, in the case of Britain, the 'management of inequalities' operated successfully in preventing the framing of alternative 'sets of democratic demands'. Despite its setbacks, Gilbert maintains, digital activism may yet prove to be important. **Paolo Gerbaudo** asks what the appropriate research agenda for media studies after the financial crisis of 2008 might be. This he positions within the frame of the 'popular'. Gerbaudo discloses how postmodernism's 'retrenchment from the political to the personal is in retreat in the face of a unifying sense of the popular manifested in space, place and agency'. Gerbaudo proclaims that popular digital cultures are a key resource not only for emancipatory social movements but also for reflecting on our field. **David Gauntlett** argues for a 'system view of the entire context for media which has more compassion for ordinary people; a broader and more continuous view of media and attention to the more creative possibilities of media over mere criticism'. Such a take argues Gauntlett need not be ahistorical, but aims at a transformational media studies. **Christian Fuchs** delineates a critical digital and social media studies that 'draws upon real-life alternatives to neoliberal principles'. Fuchs presages how cultural studies' move from reductionist thinking led to the marginalisation of questions about the economy and capitalism that are still so relevant today. Fuchs advocates a media analysis that is informed by the political situation – in the case of the UK, Cameronism, Mayism and the 'co-opting of populist English nationalism'. Drawing on an extended survey, **Kaarle Nordenstreng** demonstrates that although its exponential growth since the 1990s (comparable even to computer science and biotechnology), the field of media and communication studies is largely presentist, with gaps in national histories of communication. The field, asserts Nordenstreng, is also still dominated by US/UK English language research. **Joanna Zylinska** enunciates a double-critique explaining how the 'anthropocene' may open up media and cultural studies to new ways of engaging with nature and culture through an engagement with questions around distribution, environment and ethics, and because of its attention to 'matter and discourse', media and cultural studies can in return 'rein in some of the rhetorical excesses of the Anthropocene debate'. **Tarik Sabry** advises that our focus on 'the mediated world' has unwittingly led to a kind of amnesia: forgetting suffering and the face of the sufferer have immersed us deep into a kind of 'sequestration' where academic language take precedence over experiencing a world in crisis. We have according to Sabry turned philosophy on its head, making it a tool of sequestration rather than a tool of critique and engagement with the world. Focusing on the case of media studies in South Africa, **Viola Milton** explains how South Africa's remoteness in the African continent is giving way 'to re-appropriating the idea of Africanization from misuse and looking at Africology in relation to global processes' and to theorising media and cultural studies from clearly articulated African positions. **Fernando Resende** makes the strong case for internationalisation processes within media and cultural studies to be contextualised within and through a reflection on relations between colonialities of power and colonialities of knowledge. The re-signification and extension of key concepts such as communication, culture and politics is for Resende key to a critical, international media and cultural studies. **Daya Thussu** argues that the need to internationalise media studies beyond western perspectives is now even more apparent and necessary than before because of an ever more globalised academia, scholarship and student cohort. Thussu insists that the scale and scope of change brought by recent historical events and shifts in geopolitics are too large, requiring new and context specific formulations. **Jaeho Kang** raises the concern that an emphasis on de-westernising theory might end by re-establishing 'the singularity of the West'. Attention to a polymorphous globality and the embrace of the tools of digital humanities Kang contends, may assist in addressing the major challenges posed

by uneven globalisation. Finally, focusing on the case of Chinese and Asian communication studies, **Wenshan Jia**, emphasises the need for Asian scholars to create Asian approaches to media and communication studies that are informed by anthropological research and a creative connectivity with local theoretical concepts.

### Competing interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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The author of *Cultural Encounters in the Arab World: On Media, the Modern and the Everyday* (2010), Dr Sabry is the editor of *Arab Cultural Studies: Mapping the Field* (2012) and coeditor of *Arab Subcultures: Reflections on Theory and Practice* (2016). His research interests include Arab audiences, Arab children and the media, Arab popular cultures, Arab contemporary philosophical thought and cultural policy.

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**How to cite this article:** Sabry, T. (2017). Reframing Media and Cultural Studies in the Age of Global Crisis. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 12(1), 1–4, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/wpc.255>

**Submitted:** 21 December 2016    **Accepted:** 21 December 2016    **Published:** 30 January 2017

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