

Transcultural Communication

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Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	Approaches to Transcultural Communication	10
	2.1 <i>Consequences of Globalization</i>	13
	2.2 <i>Postcolonial Critique</i>	18
	2.3 <i>Methodological Reflections</i>	22
	2.4 <i>Integrative Analyses</i>	28
3	The Regulation of Transcultural Communication	35
	3.1 <i>Global Commercialization and Communicative Infrastructure</i>	39
	3.2 <i>State Regulation</i>	51
	3.3 <i>From the Free Flow of Communication to the Regulation of Globalization</i>	59
	3.4 <i>The Global Governance of Media</i>	73
4	The Production of Media and their Transcultural Contexts	82
	4.1 <i>The Cultures of Production within Global Media Businesses</i>	88
	4.2 <i>The Transculturality of Journalistic Practice</i>	98
	4.3 <i>Alternative Forms of Media Production</i>	104
	4.4 <i>Media Cities as Transcultural Locations</i>	113
5	The Transculturality of Media Products	124
	5.1 <i>Hollywood, Bollywood, and Nollywood</i>	128
	5.2 <i>The Import of Programs and the Adaptation of Formats</i>	140
	5.3 <i>The Articulation of News</i>	154
	5.4 <i>Media Events</i>	168

vi *Contents*

6	The Appropriation of Media and Transculturation	179
6.1	<i>The Appropriation of Media as Cultural Localization</i>	181
6.2	<i>Media Disjunctions in a Mediatized Everyday World</i>	193
6.3	<i>Communities and Communitization</i>	205
6.4	<i>Media Identity and Citizenship</i>	216
7	Perspectives on Transcultural Communication	226
	Acknowledgements	231
	References	234
	Index	000

1

Introduction

In his wide-ranging history of communication, Marshall T. Poe has almost euphorically described the present as an epoch of mediatized transculturality. While the eras of the printing press and audiovisual media were characterized by tolerance and multiculturalism, Poe argues that we are now moving into an era that is “beyond culture” (Poe 2011: 240). He suggests that, in the future, identities will no longer be so firmly linked to historical (national) cultures, but instead to a mix of diverse historical and new, invented cultures. An example of this is what he calls the transnational identities of different subcultures. These already existed outside the Internet (and are lived beyond it) but the emergence of the latter made access to them much easier. Hence the current transformation of media furthers the emergence of a transcultural everyday life. Poe cites, as proof of this, the book *Transculturalism*, a collection edited by Claude Grunitzky, a creative entrepreneur and son of the Togolese ambassador. Here transculturalism is described as a way of life within which “some individuals find ways to transcend their initial culture, in order to explore, examine and infiltrate foreign cultures” (Grunitzky 2004: 25). The ongoing transformation of the media is therefore associated with an entirely new way of living and experiencing culture, and this new way of life is captured by the concept of transculturalism.

If we pay attention to the media we might detect other aspects of transculturality. Among these are the transcultural conflicts that organizations have to confront and manage, but also the transcultural conflicts between

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2 *Transcultural Communication*

the “West” and the “Rest” (Hall 1992a). We are not only aware of such transcultural conflicts through various forms of media, from the World Wide Web to more traditional forms of mass media such as television and newspapers; media can *themselves* become driving forces in transcultural conflicts. One leading example of this was the uproar created in 2006 by the publication of cartoons of the prophet Mohammed (Eide *et al.* 2008), followed by protests in the so-called Arab world and a subsequent public discussion of Islam and religious values in Europe. The cartoons were published by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* with the deliberate intention of creating controversy. This incident serves to illustrate the perspective of a certain media outlet on a “foreign culture.” People in the Arab world found out about these cartoons, likewise—from a critical dossier circulated among Islamic preachers, from the Internet, from reports by Al Jazeera—and various forms of protest followed. These were then the subject of reporting by European mass media, coupled with commentary that, in some cases, sought to distance itself from the issue. The transcultural communication made possible by the globalization of media thus led to conflicts between religions and cultures, and did not necessarily enhance mutual understanding.

This and similar examples make clear how complex and many layered the phenomenon of transcultural communication is. They draw attention to the need for differentiated knowledge of the possibilities and limits of processes of transcultural media communication if one is to give due regard to the ongoing globalization of media communication. Transcultural communication affects us all when we are confronted with media products on television, in the cinema and in the press that “travel” beyond the bounds of different cultures. It affects us when we come into contact with people of different cultures over the Internet. In what way, and by which businesses, are these transculturally accessible media products produced? What is the relationship between media policy and the activity of global media corporations? What is the nature of transcultural media products? How are they taken up and appropriated? How does this all relate to the way we communicate across cultures using social media? What kinds of theories and approaches can help us develop a critical perspective on that? These are the questions that I hope I can at least begin to answer in this book; but before I provide a brief overview of the book as a whole, I would like to make a few remarks about the concept of transcultural communication.

As will be seen in the following pages, the concept of transcultural communication is part of a continuing academic discussion of globalization and mediatization. It cannot therefore be adequately defined in two or three sentences. Here in this introduction we can offer at most a degree of

orientation. It should already be clear that the objects of analysis here are mediated forms of transcultural communication, and not face-to-face interactions between individuals. This is because *transcultural communication* typically takes place through media. Unlike intercultural and international communication, which takes place between individuals or groups of individuals belonging to distinct cultures or nation states, the concept of transcultural communication involves processes of communication that transcend individual cultures. Examples are our day-to-day involvement with the Internet, reading online newspapers from other parts of the world (insofar as one understands the language), or downloading images and music from different cultural contexts. There are also Hollywood, Bollywood or Nollywood films that appeal to people of the most diverse cultures. We use the specific concept of *transcultural communication* so that we can approach phenomena on different levels—something that is not demanded when talking of intercultural or international communication. We cannot approach this subject by comparing different national cultural patterns of communication, as is possible with intercultural or international communication. Differences of this kind are of course *also* dealt with when analyzing transcultural communication. But this also involves patterns that promote differences that *transcend* various traditional cultures. For example, formats such as *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* can be found in different national media cultures while being defined as the same broadcast across them. Therefore, developing a conception of transcultural communication involves the specification of particular national cultures, but also examines how these particularities are taken up in communication processes that transcend cultures, without at the same time assuming that in this process we are dealing with the development of a standardized and uniform global culture, the “McDonaldization” (Ritzer 1998) of the world.

This makes it clear that the concept of transcultural communication has close links with two other conceptions: mediatization and globalization. Both relate to long-term processes of change. Let us start with the first: *mediatization*. As I have shown in detail elsewhere (Hepp 2013a: 29–68), this idea seeks to identify the reciprocal relationship between changes in media and communication on the one hand, and changes in culture and society on the other. In the course of human history not only has there been considerable development in the number of technical media for communication, but existing cultures and societies have played a major role in determining how we communicate. Mediatization has quantitative aspects: an increasing number of media have become available for longer (a temporal dimension) at ever more locations (a spatial dimension) in

4 *Transcultural Communication*

ever more situations (a social dimension). It also has qualitative aspects: media “mold” (Hepp 2013a: 90) our communication, and so how we create or construct our cultures and societies through communicating with one another.

This brings us back to the remarks made by Poe, which I cited above, who emphasizes the way in which transculturality is closely related to the way in which Internet-based media mold our communication today. But things are more complex than he makes them seem; for one thing, the manner in which media exert their molding effects is much more diverse than he supposes. It is not only the “ought” of the Internet (Poe 2011: 240) that furthers worldwide transculturalization. The general idea of the molding forces of the media conceals two very important factors. The first of these is that media *institutionalize* the way in which we communicate with each other. Email, television, Internet radio, mobile phones and so on—these are not simple pieces of equipment, but each involves particular forms and patterns of communication. Secondly, media reify our communication, since particular elements, apparatus and infrastructure are involved. This reification, in turn, makes any change costly. To take a historical example: once the centralized network of radio broadcasting had become established, it was no longer possible to use it for decentralized communication, even though this might have originally been a technical possibility (Brecht 1932).

Today most people live in what can be called “mediatized worlds” (Hepp 2013a, b: 69; Hepp and Krotz 2014). Technical means of communication are central to the construction of their “small life-worlds” (Luckmann 1970), or “social worlds” (Strauss 1978), which are molded by these means of communication as outlined above. For example, today no school can do without media; and this not only involves textbooks, but, increasingly, computers and the Internet. The political world is mediatized by virtue of the fact that the form of democracy in which we live depends, among other things, upon the television and upon social media, in which we can post our own political ideas and criticize those of others. Seen in this light, the various worlds of today’s communities are inconceivable without the existence of media communication. What would Goths do without their music, and where would the fans of *The Big Bang Theory* or *Glee* be without TV series? It is much the same with the world of social movements; Occupy would not be possible without the existence of social media. Therefore, mediatized worlds are the level at which mediatization in a lived media culture becomes concrete—and increasingly so across the world.

This brings us indirectly to *globalization*, which, since the 1990s, has become a major topic for discussion (Beck 2000; Giddens 1990; Tomlinson

1999). The globalization of media communication is a central element of globalization itself. This can be seen at work in global financial markets, whose existence is predicated upon worldwide communication networks. These networks are important not only for the execution of financial transactions, but for the circulation of the information vital to transnational speculation.

In this book I will adopt a rather limited conception of the globalization of media communication, denoting the global development of mediatized connectivity, hence the increase of technically mediated communicative relationships. Conceiving the globalization of media communication in this way has a great deal to do with mediatization: when the worlds in which people live become mediatized worlds, the prospects and potential for communicative relations across the world increase considerably. This initially involves those living in the so-called developed parts of the world, and not all those who do live there. But even in other parts of the world the life of individuals is increasingly lived in mediatized worlds. Even if it is the privileged who are in the lead, this also affects people whose lives are precarious, as will be shown below. They also develop transcultural communicative connectivities.

The reason for adopting this limited conception of medial globalization is apparent in the example of the Danish cartoons mentioned earlier: since mediatized relations of communication can have quite diverse consequences—from the demarcation and stabilization of existing cultural communities, to conflicts between them, and also processes of rapprochement—some kind of analytic instrumentarium is required that does not immediately carry implications about the nature and direction of these consequences. In particular, we need to be careful to avoid the assumption that the globalization of media is necessarily related to processes of homogenization, or Americanization. Concepts like these cannot capture the contradictory diversity of media globalization because they assume that an initial impulse has constant and uniform effects.

There are two further ideas linked to this understanding of the globalization of media communication which are often used below: that of network, and that of flow (Castells 2000). Any reference to connectivity should be understood structurally, in terms of the network that sustains such connectivity. Substantively, we are here talking about “connections” between “nodes,” which can be described as a structure. Examples of this are particular communication networks such as satellite television or the Internet. The notion of flow, on the other hand, shifts the emphasis to processes within such networks. Examples would be the flows of communication that actually take place through satellite television and the

6 *Transcultural Communication*

Internet. Communication flows vary in kind and thickening—they are not evenly distributed throughout a network.

Talking of networks, flows and the molding forces of the media involves the use of metaphors, images with which we can visualize complex socio-cultural phenomena. Perhaps the very plasticity of these conceptions has contributed to their use in discussion of globalization and mediatization. But it is through such ideas that abstract “meta-processes” (Krotz 2009) can be grasped initially, and so made conceivable. The term “meta-process” means, here that mediatization and globalization are gradual but lasting processes of change. It also involves the idea that globalization and mediatization cannot be broken down into a small number of analytical variables through which transformation processes can be tracked. The use of the term “meta-process” is rather intended to open up a particular “panorama” (Hepp 2013a: 49–51) of long-term change—a panorama that then makes it possible to pose the right questions when analyzing concrete phenomena, and to place them within a more general framework.

My purpose, here, is to provide an approach to the domain of transcultural communication that has been steadily developing in recent years. The arguments that I advance here are closely related to those in my book *Cultures of Mediatization*, where I sought to provide “insight” into individual cultures. I examined there what it means to be a mediatized culture. In this new book the focus shifts to contact between different mediatized cultures. It centers upon the relationship “between” media cultures—a relationship that is characterized by transcultural communication.

This kind of approach always involves two problems. First of all, one book cannot be exhaustive, covering the entire world. There is just too much of it. Secondly, it is always written from a particular standpoint, given that any description involves a point of view, and so cannot ever be entirely “neutral.” I seek to minimize these two problems by arguing from example. All phenomena and questions dealt with below will be related to specific examples that I consider characteristic, for the present at least. These will, for the most part, be drawn from empirical studies whose methods are, however, diverse—ranging from questionnaire-based surveys to case studies. I will also make use of surveys and reviews made by other academics. However, in some cases my arguments are also based on work done by journalists. This last source will typically be used when dealing with current developments for which no other sources are available.

My standpoint is shaped by the two languages that I know best: German and English. It is also true that one’s own cultural location plays a special role when talking about transcultural communication. In my case I write as a European who can see the potential of communal and

social transnationalism, for which the EU serves as an example. Perhaps the best that one can do is simply make one's own cultural position explicit, and, where necessary, examine it critically. Stepping outside it entirely is really not possible.

This combination of argument by example and my own linguistic and cultural positioning accounts for any failure to pursue many relevant examples that would be of great benefit to further discussion of questions of transcultural communication. This is especially the case in regard to Africa, Asia, and Latin America. I have, however, made great efforts to refer to the work of others at relevant points. This book is in no respect a "world history of the globalization of media communication." This would be a different project, on which some work has already been done (see Mattelart 1994 or Tunstall 2007). I wish here to present in as concise a manner as possible the *prospects offered by the conception of transcultural communication*. I also think that this would itself form a useful basis for writing any world history of media and communication. But, beyond such inclusive projects, the approach I offer here is, I think, important for a practical and critical understanding of the progressive globalization and mediatization of the world.

The book is divided into seven chapters, including this introduction and my concluding remarks. Chapter 2 presents a range of perspectives. Transculturality is not just another comparative framework to be added to interculturalism and internationalism. The concept of transcultural communication involves a particular understanding of the consequences of globalization, postcolonial criticism and methodological reflection. Together, these three elements make up what is original in the approach to transcultural communication adopted here.

Chapter 3 deals with regulation and the infrastructure of transcultural communication. To what extent have political agendas accelerated the globalization of media communication? How could the globalized infrastructure of media communication be created? Here we need a comparative overview of the various media systems in the world. However, the relationship between questions of transcultural communication and those of regulation cannot be reduced to the way in which particular media policies have furthered the globalization of the media. For this itself represents a challenge to media policy; this was already evident during the 1970s during discussions of media and communications policy in UNESCO, when the demand for a new world communication and information order was raised. Today there is a clear reference back to the idea of global governance of the media, related to attempts at managing "global media" through "globalized self-regulation."

8 *Transcultural Communication*

Chapter 4, “The Production of Media and their Transcultural Contexts,” addresses the production of transcultural communication. This chapter examines corporations that provide media content that is transculturally accessible, and the kinds of cultures of production that characterize these concerns. It also deals with the emergence of transcultural forms of journalism. Alternative forms of transcultural media production are also touched on here, anticipating material presented in the next chapter. Chapter 4 concludes with a consideration of the phenomenon of global media cities as prominent localities of transculturally oriented media production.

Chapter 5 moves from media production to media products, to transcultural media representations. I begin here with the sphere that has always been foremost in discussion of transcultural communication: that of film. This is examined using the examples of Hollywood, Bollywood and Nollywood. Attention is then shifted to imports and the adaptation of formats that create further transcultural communication relationships in the fictional sphere. This is followed by a discussion of the extent to which one could talk of transcultural news broadcasting, and hence of transcultural political public spheres. The chapter closes with a consideration of media events—perhaps the phenomenon and level of representation that has the most relevance to an analysis of transcultural communication.

Chapter 6, on “The Appropriation of Media and Transculturation,” is directed to transcultural communication from the perspective of the involvement of individuals with media in their everyday life. I start by developing a conception of media appropriation as a process of cultural localization. This makes it possible to treat discussion of a digital divide in a mediatized everyday life from a fresh perspective. This leads to forms of communitization that have been altered by transcultural communication, the way in which in different cultural contexts the identity of individuals is linked to media, and the resulting challenges to (political) citizenship.

Chapter 7 deals with “Perspectives of Transcultural Communication.” This identifies the core arguments of the preceding chapters and remarks upon the perspectives created by transcultural communication with reference both to the subject matter, and with regard to the approach adopted in this book.

I would like to say, in closing the introduction, that in writing this book, I have sought to avoid premature judgments. Even so, even the simple decision to engage with the problem of transcultural communication is not free of normative implications. I seek to review and analyze the possibilities of transcultural communication because I think this area is of great importance to human cooperation in a time of advancing globalization.

As Richard Sennett has remarked (2012: x): “we have greater conduits between people thanks to modern forms of communication, but less understanding of how to communicate well.” It is my hope that this book will make a small contribution to the improvement of communication, and so to communication between cultures.