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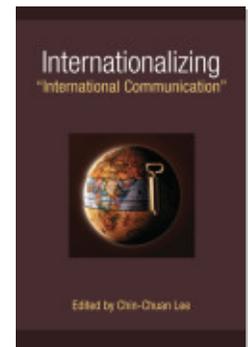
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## Public Spheres, Fields, Networks

### *Western Concepts for a De-Westernizing World?*

Rodney Benson

Media research is finally internationalizing in its geopolitical ambitions, but what does or should this mean for how scholars theorize, analyze, and evaluate data? At least three distinct claims are being made about the challenges of truly international media research. The first is that moving beyond Anglo-American and continental European contexts introduces a new level of empirical variation and complexity, requiring new theoretical models (Appadurai, 1990; Thussu, 2009). The second is that as research begins to flow in multiple directions—the West studying the non-West, the non-West studying the West, the non-West studying the non-West (with “West” and “non-West” of course always encompassing multiple standpoints)—questions of epistemology, of the limits and biases of forms of knowledge, come to the fore (Smith, 1999). And the third is that baseline Western attitudes of what constitutes the good and just and “democratic” society—indeed whether democracy is the only worthy goal—can no longer be presumed (Latour, 2005a; Silverstone, 2006).

One could argue that the challenge is so far-reaching and fundamental that entirely new non-Western theories and models are needed, or more radically, that the “North,” however we define it, is simply not epistemologically or morally equipped to study or critique what is happening in the “South,” and thus we need new researchers and new institutions of research too. Without accepting such critiques in their entirety, we can

certainly agree that new theories and new research communities are more than welcome. But the reality is that global research is being conducted for the most part by the usual suspects using the usual theories. My question, then, is how well are some of these Western-originated theories meeting the ontological, epistemological, and normative challenges that emerge in diverse non-Western settings?

I focus my attention on three master concepts—public spheres, fields, and networks—that increasingly are being used to map the world’s complex and inter-connected media environments. In this chapter, I analyze each of the terms based on how they are actually defined by their primary theoretical proponents (Jürgen Habermas and Bernhard Peters for public sphere, Pierre Bourdieu for field, and Manuel Castells and Bruno Latour for network) and deployed by international media scholars. Broadly speaking, I argue that as one moves from Habermas/Peters and Bourdieu, on the one hand, to Castells and especially Latour, on the other hand, the ontological accounts become more fluid, the epistemological accounts (to the extent they are elaborated) become more relativist, and the politics become more open-ended. I will conclude with a discussion of what is at stake in these different approaches and to what extent the various theories are mutually complementary, antagonistic, or simply represent distinct alternatives.

### Public Sphere

The term “public sphere” is most closely associated with the work of Jürgen Habermas, and in general refers to the social space or spaces through which citizens debate and attempt to influence their government. There has long been criticism of the initial public sphere concept (Habermas, 1989) for being institutionally underspecified (Benson, 2004; Calhoun, 1992; Peters, 2008). Drawing extensively on the work of his late student and colleague Bernhard Peters (translated into English and collected in Wessler, 2008), Habermas now acknowledges the multi-layered complexity of the contemporary public sphere, in an effort to develop a model with “empirical relevance” (Habermas, 1996, p. 373; 2006).

In the essay that laid the foundation for this approach, Peters (2008) argues that democratic societies are organized according to principles of “center” and “periphery.” The “institutional core of the system of government” has four departments: “the parliamentary complex, the judiciary, government [‘the political leadership’] and administration [‘non-political’ or civil service]” (Peters, 2008, p. 23). The outer periphery consists of the

informal associations of the lifeworld’s various “private” social spheres (p. 20). Mass media, along with other public sphere organizations, play a crucial role as an intermediary “sluice” to bring progressive and emancipatory ideas from this outer periphery into the center. The public sphere is at the inner periphery of the political system, consisting of “mass media, opinion research, numerous and diverse communicative networks and ‘publics’ crystallized around current topics or around publications, professional contacts and contexts for discussion specific to particular milieus.” While the center or core is where “debates or processes linked to the resolution of problems are condensed and formed into decisions,” the “legitimacy of (these) decisions depends on the formation of opinions and political will in the periphery” (Peters, 2008, p. 25).

How well does this new model work in practice to describe communication practices at least partially outside of Europe and North America and transcending a single nation-state? Sonia Serra (2000) uses a case study of activism, media coverage, and policy making around the issue of “the killing of street children” in Brazil to try to demonstrate this (new) Habermasian “international public sphere” in action. For many years, Brazilian religious, left-wing, and human rights activists from the “periphery” challenged national government policies that encouraged or at least permitted the police killings of poor youths, many of whom were engaged in petty or even violent crime (see, e.g., the film *City of God*). They made no progress until their activities were able to attract the attention of such international NGOs as Amnesty International and the Catholic Church, and through them well-respected media outlets such as *Le Monde*, the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, and CNN, which acted as “sluices” to move the issue from the Brazilian periphery simultaneously to the Brazilian governmental center and to Western/international centers of power such as the United Nations (and linked organizations UNICEF and Defense for Children International) and the Organization of American States. As a result of this international (U.S./European) attention, the Brazilian government created a national commission to deal with the problem and ultimately enacted a new law restricting police killings, over the objections of “powerful groups in the judiciary, the army, the police and business associations” (Serra, 2000, p. 162).

On one level, this is a story about peripheral associations “outside the structure of power” in a developing country allying themselves with (Western) international civil society groups and mainstream media organizations in order to “influence national policy-making” (Serra, 2000, p. 169). It

complicates Habermas's center-periphery model: in effect, the periphery challenges one national center of power (Brazil) by mobilizing support from international bodies (UN-related) whose power in turn ultimately rests on linkages to the globally dominant national centers of power (such as the United States, United Kingdom, France). But it is precisely in this linkage to U.S. and European power that we see the democratic and critical limits of this international public sphere, at least in this particular case. It's not so surprising that Western media were willing to cover a dramatic, heartrending story that also reaffirmed "cultural images of Third World countries as places of barbarism" (Serra, 2000, p. 166). The killing must stop, the NGOs and Western media pronounced. But what of the social conditions that helped produce the petty crime and the police brutality, what of the role of Western governments and corporations and international monetary bodies in encouraging and facilitating economic policies that contributed to Brazil's extremes of wealth and poverty? The "progressive" NGOs and media had almost nothing to say about these problems: in effect, the real "center" in this account—the Western and international centers of power—were challenged not in the slightest and even allowed to revel in their sense of moral superiority and beneficence.

Serra acknowledges these complexities and ironies. In the end, her account demonstrates the utility and flexibility of Habermas's new public sphere theory for transnational and non-Western research, even as it exposes the sharp limitations of Habermasian deliberative democratic politics to move Western powers toward substantial self-critique and progressive economic reform.

As for its epistemological and normative aspects, Habermas's model was initially based on his historical research on the emergence of the western European bourgeois public sphere as a counterpoint to state power, and Habermas has been a vocal defender of the Western Enlightenment project. However, his concept of "communicative action"—in which knowledge is supposed to be produced through a process of mutual understanding—by definition seems quite epistemologically open. Research guided by communicative action, whose forms would by necessity change in any given cultural setting, would seem to be the absolutely necessary precondition for any attempt to engage with the "Other," even if it remains vague (by necessity) how this engagement, let alone comprehension, is to be achieved.

More problematic perhaps is Habermas's normative stance in favor of a particular kind of democracy—deliberative democracy—which may not be appropriate for all societies. In his recent work (1996; see also his essay

in Calhoun, 1992), Habermas acknowledges the need to make room for a wider variety of communication styles to ensure that a narrowly defined “rational” public deliberation does not end up reinforcing privileges rooted in education, wealth, and patriarchy. Nevertheless, the continued focus on open-ended deliberation may be neither politically realistic nor resonate with long-standing cultural practices in some non-Western societies.

Whether the public sphere ideal is used narrowly (to emphasize the need for reasoned, critical debate) or broadly (to emphasize inclusion, and make room for diverse communicative styles) does not necessarily correlate with the national origin or location of the scholar. United Arab Emirates media scholar Muhammad Ayish (2006) is sharply critical of Al Jazeera’s *The Opposite Direction* for its extreme sensationalism—what he terms “brinkmanship”—and he offers a careful quantitative parsing of the show’s techniques aimed at bringing guests to the verge of fisticuffs. While acknowledging the show’s importance as a forum for “robust debate,” Ayish concludes in high Habermasian fashion that “talk shows need to promote real dialogue rather than sensational shouting matches among participants” (p. 125). On the other hand, American media scholar Marc Lynch, while acknowledging similar problems of sensationalism, tends to emphasize the positive aspects of Arab media. According to Lynch (2006, pp. 247–48), “the new Arab public sphere is a genuine public sphere, characterized by self-conscious, open, and contentious political argument . . . reform has been a consistent obsession of this new public, a constant topic of intense public argument in the op-ed pages and on the talk shows.”

### Field

The concept of field is most often associated with the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, though in fact it is also widely used by “new institutionalist” theorists and researchers (e.g., Powell & Dimaggio, 1991; Fligstein 2001; in media studies, see Cook, 1998) and the term itself owes its origins to the social psychologist Kurt Lewin (see Martin, 2003). The “fields” in field theory refer to the contemporary differentiation of society into multiple, competing, hierarchically organized, partially autonomous, and increasingly specialized spaces of professional and creative endeavor. Within and among these fields, relations of power fundamentally structure human action. Bourdieu brings Ferdinand de Saussure to Max Weber, Karl Marx and Émile Durkheim, insisting that the “real is relational” at both the so-

cial and discursive levels: the fundamental opposition is between economic and various forms of cultural power, which at the same time are interconvertible and can thus be allied.

Empirically, field theory offers a flexible model that nonetheless aspires to universal validity. As a comparativist, Bourdieu rejects in principle any claim that there are “transhistorical laws of the relations between fields,” insisting that “we must investigate each historical case separately” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 109). Yet, in a speech delivered at the University of Todai, Japan, in 1989, Bourdieu (1998c) insists that the deep structural, relational analysis of culture and power that he developed from his research in Algeria and France is not limited to those settings, but has wider, even universal applicability:

I think that if I were Japanese I would dislike most of the things that non-Japanese people write about Japan. . . . Does this mean that I shall confine myself to the particularity of a single society and shall not talk in any way about Japan? I do not think so. I think, on the contrary, that by presenting the model of social space and symbolic space that I constructed for the particular case of France, I shall still be speaking to you about Japan (just as, in other contexts, I would be speaking about Germany or the United States). (p. 1)

Bourdieu (1998c) continues, and it is worth quoting at length, particularly since this viewpoint will be so roundly condemned by another theorist we are about to consider:

I am convinced that, although it has all the appearance of ethnocentrism, an approach consisting of applying a model constructed according to this [relational] logic to another social world is without doubt more respectful of historic realities (and of people) and above all more fruitful in scientific terms than the interest in superficial features of the lover of exoticism who gives priority to picturesque differences . . . The researcher . . . seeks to apprehend the structures and mechanisms that are overlooked—although for different reasons—by the native and the foreigner alike, such as the principles of construction of social space or the mechanisms of reproduction of that space, and that the researcher seeks to represent in a model aspiring to *universal validity*. (pp. 2–3, italics in original)

What is potentially universal then is a basic structural, relational model of social relations.<sup>1</sup> The concrete forms that it takes in any given social context are expected to vary. As a working hypothesis, across the industrialized world at this particular moment, one would certainly predict the economic field to be dominant. But contra Marx, this is not the result of any historical necessity; it is just, in Weberian fashion, the contingent result of a path-dependent historical process. How dominant the economic field will be, how autonomous the opposing fields of cultural production will be, and how the realms of the economic and cultural are understood would certainly be expected to vary cross-nationally. In the industrialized West, especially in western Europe, the artistic and scientific “cultural” fields will constitute the primary opposition to the economic field; however, in many countries the religious field may be the major opposing field or even the dominant field. In some countries, the military or command-economy political fields may be dominant. Thus, in Bourdieu’s field theory, a basic structural framework posited to have universal validity is balanced, at least partially, by an open-ended investigation of the particular empirical forms that these structures will take in any given social realm.

Indeed, field theory is already being put to use in fruitful ways for a variety of studies beyond the Anglo-American or French orbits (e.g., Kjær & Slaatta, 2007; Hovden, 2008; Hallin & Mancini, 2004), as well as comparative studies that demonstrate the persistence of national field logics against the supposed homogenizing force of Americanization (e.g., Benson & Hallin, 2007; Benson, Blach-Ørsten, Powers, Willig, & Vera Zambrano, 2012; Benson, 2013). In recent years, field theory also has been adopted usefully for scholarship of the global South.<sup>2</sup>

Orayb Najjar (2007) draws on field theory for a study of the rise of transnational news media outlets like Al Jazeera (Arabic and International) in Qatar and TeleSur in Venezuela. Najjar goes beyond a straight political economy account to emphasize, in Bourdieuan fashion, distinctions between funding (economic capital) and legitimacy (symbolic capital), and the relational basis of all symbolic claims to legitimacy. Najjar takes seriously field theory’s insistence that field relations extend beyond national boundaries, as when Bourdieu (1998b, p. 41) remarks that for a journalistic field analysis to be complete “the position of the national media field within the global media field would have to be taken into account.”

In Najjar’s study of Al Jazeera and TeleSur, field structure and dynamics are shown to be a product of history, which in the case of global media must take into account the global South’s long-simmering dissatisfaction

with the ethnocentrism of the dominant Western news agencies counterbalanced by admiration of U.S. journalistic professional ideals, which emphasize “independence” from the state. This pre-existing state of the field helps explain why Al Jazeera and TeleSur, in their effort to expand their audience, revenues, and professional legitimacy, have been constrained to simultaneously emphasize their links to UNESCO’s challenge to U.S. media hegemony during the 1970s *and* their autonomy from their sponsoring states (Qatar in the case of the former; primarily Venezuela, but also Argentina, Uruguay, Cuba, and Brazil in the case of the latter) (Najjar, 2007, pp. 7–8).

Najjar thus nicely captures how the drive for symbolic capital shapes action in the global journalistic field:

TeleSur, even while introducing a revolutionary project, could not move away from the tenets of global journalism and from the negative perception of media owned by government. Because the idea for TeleSur was initially proposed by Cuba’s President Castro and because the station’s critics were already calling it “Telechavez” even before it went on air, the station had to work to “unbrand” itself by moving away from a political field funded by the president of Venezuela, to [a relatively more autonomous position] similar to Al-Jazeera, i.e., funded by the ruler but whose board of directors is independent. (p. 10)

In a world in which U.S. political, economic, and cultural hegemony are arguably diminishing, Al Jazeera’s efforts to professionalize and diversify journalistic staff (as Al Jazeera International is well known for doing), to provide a wide diversity of perspectives, and to cover in a sustained and non-sensationalistic manner areas of the world ignored by the Western media are likely to reap real dividends in the accumulation of symbolic capital; indeed, they already have, if a glowing appraisal of Al Jazeera English in the *Columbia Journalism Review* is any indicator (Editors, 2011). Ironically, the U.S. government has failed to recognize how influence is contingent on symbolic capital in its openly government-funded and controlled “public diplomacy” efforts to counter Al Jazeera; as Najjar (2007, p. 17) notes, these efforts are “viewed as illegitimate because they fall in the political, rather than in the journalistic field.”

In contrast to Habermas, epistemological questions are front and center in field theory, at least in Bourdieu’s version of it. Attitudes, tastes,

physical bearing—what Bourdieu terms “habitus”—are all indelibly shaped by one’s position in this complex system of stratification and the partially contingent circumstances through which one arrived at this position: “To speak of habitus is to assert that the individual, and even the personal, the subjective, is social, collective. Habitus is socialized subjectivity” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 126). Of course, this goes for the social researcher as much as for anyone else. How then does field theory escape an empirically paralyzing relativity, the kind that marks Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory? In a word: reflexivity.

For Bourdieu, what makes scientific research “scientific” is less the systematic testing of hypotheses and gathering of facts than it is the adequacy of one’s epistemological break with naturalized, common sense categories of knowledge. Heavily influenced by the French epistemologist Gaston Bachelard, Bourdieu succinctly describes his research process: “Facts are conquered [through rupture with common sense], constructed, confirmed” (Bourdieu et al., 1991, p. 24). Before one can adequately “objectivize” a given social world, one must also engage in self-objectivation, meaning not only taking into account class trajectory and position, ethnicity, and gender, but also the privileged position of the “scholarly gaze” that produces knowledge “from afar and from above”: “What must be objectivized is not (only) the individual who does the research in her biographical idiosyncrasy but the position she occupies in academic space and the biases implicated in the view she takes by virtue of being ‘off-sides’ or ‘out of the game’” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 70–72).

If Bourdieuan reflexivity conceptually solves the epistemological problem of producing objective knowledge transcending the biases of the observer, in both his or her individual specificity and institutional location, it is a little more mysterious about how this process works in practice. From my observations and readings of many Bourdieu-inspired studies, as well as my own research, reflexivity means never accepting without skepticism the categories offered up by official agencies or previous scholarly research, treating one’s own categories as provisional subject to ongoing critical reflection (e.g., what presumptions are built into terms, whose interests do they implicitly support, who or what is excluded by use of such terms), and spending just as much time listening to the individuals acting in a field and learning about their practice-based “subjective” categories of action as in gathering data about the “objective” social factors that supposedly constrain their action. Bourdieu’s injunction to interrogate naturalized categories is not so far from Blumler, McLeod, and Rosengren’s (1992, pp. 3–18)

defense of comparative research that “cosmopolitanizes, opening our eyes to communication patterns and problems unnoticeable in our own spatial and temporal milieux.”

What are field theory’s implicit normative stances, its politics? For Bourdieu, economic injustice furthered through the “symbolic violence” of the state and the mass media is a significant problem and one that he denounced as an “activist” in his later years (see, e.g., Bourdieu, 1998c). Seemingly separate from this project is Bourdieu’s spirited defense of artistic and especially scientific autonomy (Bourdieu, 1996), though Bourdieu has argued that a science understood as a critique of received categories of knowledge and as the uncovering of relations of power is inherently allied to projects of social justice. While Bourdieu has written eloquently and critically about patriarchy (2002) and his long-time collaborator Abdelmalek Sayad was a leading French scholar of immigration, “social justice” is conceptualized almost entirely in terms of economic justice and worker rights. He has been critical of U.S.-style identity and ethnic politics, not only their culturally imperialistic pretensions to be applicable to the rest of the world, but also, implicitly, the uses to which they have been put to suppress attention to what he would see as more pressing problems of economic justice (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1999).

These political stances, however, are not inherent to field theory, that is, a relational-structural model of social relations acknowledging the existence of multiple, if limited, forms of power (capital) that extend beyond just economic power. In “new institutionalist” field theory, the stance is often relatively conservative, or at least conventionally “liberal pluralist”: in these approaches, there is no presumption of the overwhelming power of the economic field, and there is little or no attention paid to deep culturally patterned class stratification (see, e.g., some chapters in Powell & DiMaggio, 1991).

### Network

Analysis of social networks has diverse intellectual sources and long precedes the current fascination with the worldwide digital network commonly called the Internet.<sup>3</sup> I focus on two strains of network theory that seem to me to have particular relevance for global media studies: the “network society” model of Manuel Castells (1996, 1997, 2000, 2007), and the actor-network theory most often associated with Bruno Latour (2005a; but see also Callon, 1986, and Law, 2007).

Although Castells is now widely associated with network analysis, in his 19 February 2010 introductory speech at a USC-Annenberg conference (see endnote 3), he conceded that his initial preferred title of his book *The Network Society* was actually “flows” and it was only the publisher who suggested “network society” as a more exciting title and an apt description of Castells’s account of the rise of the Internet. In contrast, Latour and others developed the concept of actor-networks long before the Internet as a means of avoiding the individual-society opposition and as a methodological blueprint for research in the sociology of science; only in recent years has Latour turned his attention to digital networks and have media researchers turned to Latour (see, e.g., Turner, 2005; Hemmingway, 2008). I begin with Castells both because of his earlier link to media studies and because his framework lies somewhere between the macro-political economy models of Habermas and Bourdieu and the more micro-oriented, anti-structuralist, and epistemologically relativist approach of Latour.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Castells’s Network Society*

Castells’s admitted hesitation about the title of the first volume of his three-part, truly encyclopedic *The Information Age* is telling: his project is about a lot of things, and “network” per se is not necessarily at the center. In an analysis (similar to those of David Harvey and others) emphasizing an epochal economic change since the 1970s from a Fordist to a post-Fordist, “flexible accumulation” capitalist order, Castells (2000, p. 695) argues that alongside this “new economy” there has also emerged a “new society”—“a society where the key social structures and activities are organized around electronically processed information networks.” For Castells, networks are “set[s] of interconnected nodes . . . flexible, adaptive structures that, powered by information technology, can perform any task that has been programmed in the network.” Networks have long existed alongside “large, centralized apparatuses”; the rise of the Internet simply provides a powerful technological boost for networks over other forms of social organization (p. 695). What thus sets Castells apart from geographers and critical political economists like David Harvey is his emphasis on technology, which at times approaches McLuhan-style technological determinism (though he rejects the label).

For Castells, media are increasingly central to the operation of power across the globe. This is so because of the convergence of previous forms

of media (radio, television, print) into the single medium of the Internet. As Castells (2007) writes in one of his most compact and cogent essays:

[T]he ongoing transformation of communication technology in the digital age extends the reach of communication media into all domains of social life in a network that is at the same time global and local, generic and customized in an ever-changing pattern. As a result, power relations, that is the relations that constitute the foundation of all societies, as well as the processes challenging institutionalized power relations are increasingly shaped and decided in the communication field. (p. 239)

Inside this communication field or “media space,” Castells (1997, p. 312) suggests politics is “structured” by the “logic” of electronic media, a logic defined as involving “computerized political marketing, instant polling as an instrument of political navigation, [and] character assassination as political strategy.”

Castells does an admirable job in documenting changes in political communication that are increasingly evident around the world, and despite his oft-stated view that states are losing power in relation to global capital, he cites and has helped publish a number of Western and non-Western national case studies that highlight cross-national variation in the functioning of the global “network society” (see Castells, 2004). Castells acknowledges exceptions to a fault. The problem is that he doesn’t theorize them. Castells’s broad concept of “media space” cannot help explain why some political debates are more or less simplified, personalized, dramatized, or contextualized than others (for instance, he notes in passing that trust in government has not declined in Scandinavia, but he doesn’t ask why; see Castells, 2007, p. 244).

Partially counter-balancing this (mass) media logic, a “new kind of media space” of “mass self-communication” (“horizontal networks of interactive communication”) has also emerged on the Web (Castells, 2007). Blogs, social media websites, and a range of other kinds of user-created media sites, increasingly connected to mobile telephony, are changing the way the Internet is used and who uses it. While much of this horizontal network communication is apolitical, it is also linked to an increase in the number, range of types, and global reach of social movement activism. On the one hand, the Internet makes it easier for activists to directly challenge corpo-

rate power via “culture jamming . . . a strategy that turns corporate power against itself by co-opting, hacking, mocking, and re-contextualizing meanings” by creating and circulating negative, often humorous messages or images about corporate brands (Bennett, 2003). On the other hand, militant groups, such as the Zapatistas in Mexico, have used the Internet to create international support networks on behalf of battles against both national governments and (less effectively) global economic and political institutions (Castells, 1997; Russell, 2001).

Even as “mass self-communication” potentially aids resistance movements in developing countries, Castells (2007, p. 249) insightfully notes that “the development of the technology of self-communication is also the product of our culture, a culture that emphasizes individual autonomy and the self-construction of the project of the social actor,” thus suggesting that it could also serve as a form of U.S./European modernizing stealth power. Castells also emphasizes the ways in which capitalist media corporations have attempted to co-opt and gain access for advertising and marketing research on various social networking websites, as evidenced by Google’s ownership of YouTube, Yahoo Inc!’s purchase of Tumblr, and so on.

Castells’s use of theory of whatever sort is flexible, eclectic, and pragmatic. If he has an explicit epistemology, he does not highlight it. His observations are tested in the crucible of continuous, often team-based empirical research that draws on diverse primary and secondary sources.

Politically, like both Habermas and Bourdieu, his work emphasizes the progressive potential of social movement action. Unlike Bourdieu, he acknowledges and seems to approve of “new” cultural and identity-based social movements as well as class-based activism. Castells (2007) differs from both Habermas and Bourdieu in his arguably more optimistic assessment of long-term political outcomes:

It is plausible to think that the capacity of social actors to set up autonomously their political agenda is greater in the networks of mass self-communication than in the corporate world of the mass media. While the old struggle for social domination and counter-domination continues in the new media space, the structural bias of this space toward the powers that be is being diminished every day by the new social practices of communication. (pp. 257–58) (see also Castells 2012)

*Latour's Actor-Network Theory*

In contrast to Castells, who places contemporary economic and technological transformations front and center in his work, Latour and other Actor-Network Theory (ANT) theorists claim that actor-networks are and have always been the fundamental building block of human societies: data collection enabled by the Internet simply make this aspect of human existence more “traceable” and visible (Latour, 2010).

While Latour's work originated in his studies of scientists, and originally had the most impact in the field of science and technology studies, in recent years he has linked his project to that of the nineteenth-century French sociologist Gabriel Tarde on behalf of a broader effort to challenge what he has called the “sociology of the social” (that is, any analysis that conceives of society as a *sui generis* unit of analysis, separate from and larger than the sum of its individual human parts). For Tarde, the representative of this “social” approach was Durkheim; for Latour, it is Pierre Bourdieu. In contrast to the sociology of the social, a Tardean/Latourian approach starts with the actor-network, that is an understanding of the human being (as well as non-human object) as constituted by its relations to other actors (both humans and non-human things) without any necessary link to a larger structure: “Every actor is a network, every network is made up of actors” (Latour, 2010; see also Latour, 2005b).

At first glance, ANT's relational approach would seem quite close to field theory. They are both forms of “constructivism,” beginning from the premise that there is no unmediated knowledge of the real but rather that “principles of vision and division of the social world” (Bourdieu) or “objects of concern” (Latour) are socially and discursively produced. Both eschew abstract theorizing and are designed to be put to use in empirical research. Bourdieu's (1989) “structuralist constructivism,” however, effectively privileges one construction over all others—that is, the reflexive sociologist's construction of the historically shaped structure within which others act. ANT's strict constructionism is neutral to an extreme, providing only a flat account of others' accounts without venturing any judgment on whose is closest to “reality.” As Michel Callon (1986, p. 4) puts it, “Instead of imposing a pre-established grid of analysis . . . the observer follows the actors in order to identify the manner in which these define and associate the different elements by which they build and explain their world, whether it be social or natural.”

No human, animal, or thing is privileged above another, thus ANT's famous, or infamous, equation of humans and non-humans. For this reason, some ANT theorists such as John Law (2007, p. 2) prefer the term “material semiotics” to describe their approach. While ANT theory would not deny that structures exist, it sees them as unstable, fragile, ephemeral, or, as philosopher Michel Serres has put it, “patches of order in a sea of disorder” (Law, 2007, p. 5). Law portrays ANT as “an empirical version of post-structuralism” with close affinities to Gilles Deleuze's nomadic philosophy. According to Law (2007, p. 6), both “actor-network” and “assemblage” (a Deleuzian term also used by Latour, Callon, and others) “refer to the provisional assembly of productive, heterogeneous and (this is quite crucial) quite limited forms of ordering located in no larger overall order.”

The empirical relevance of such ANT theory to global media studies may not be obvious. But I would like to venture some possible connections. First, how stable are structures of global media and cultural power? ANT seems to lie at the extreme end of a range of theories that stress fluidity, uncertainty, impermanence. Castells moves in this direction, but does not let go of the notion of power as something that endures beyond the particular situation. At the February 2010 USC network theory conference (see endnote 3), Latour responded to Castells's (2010) remarks by suggesting that he abandon the notion of power and Castells “agreed to disagree completely.” Similarly, Arjun Appadurai's (1990) conception of the global cultural economy as a “complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models (even those which might account for multiple centers and peripheries)” can be read as a rebuke, in advance, of Habermas's or Bourdieu's later writings on media power. Yet Appadurai's insistence that he does not want to completely “elide the social referent” (p. 6, n2) and his very use of the structural-sounding suffix “scapes” suggests he would not go as far as Latour and company in stressing contingency and chaos. Rather than decide the issue in advance, either in favor of fluidity/contingency or structure/constrained agency, it seems more reasonable to suggest that there is more agency and contingency in some social realms than others and this can only be confirmed through empirical research.

How do we simultaneously study the “global” and the “local” and their complex inter-relations? For Latour, there is no global and no local, just as there is no macro and no micro; there are only network sites (Wall Street trading rooms, scientific laboratories, legal offices, and so forth), with some being more “networky” than others, that is, approaching “a star-like shape

with a center surrounded by many radiating lines with all sorts of tiny conduits leading to and fro” (2005b, p. 177). As Latour (2005b) argues:

[A]s soon as the local sites that manufacture global structures are underlined, it is the entire topography of the social world that is being modified. Macro no longer describes a *wider* or a *larger* site in which the micro would be embedded like some Russian Matryoshka doll, but another equally local, equally micro place, which is *connected* to many others through some medium transporting specific types of traces. No place can be said to be bigger than any other place, but some can be said to benefit from far safer connections with many *more* places than others. (p. 176, italics in original)

A final potentially useful aspect of ANT is in the analysis of technology. As Tatnall and Gilding (1999, pp. 57–58, 63) argue, “ANT deals with the social-technical divide by denying that purely technical or purely social relations are possible” and thus seeks to avoid both technological and social determinisms. Fred Turner provides the example of Jim Romanesko’s media news column for Poynter Online. The human being Jim Romanesko is only part of what makes his media site influential; the digital technology is also an actor, in the sense that “any *thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor” (Latour, 2005b, p. 71). As Turner (2005, p. 323) writes, “From a traditional point of view, new media simply offer new channels for the distribution of information. From the point of view of ANT, however, they and their human partners collaborate in the creation of new socio-technical formations. Digital media do not just offer professionals like Romanesko a new voice; rather, they offer them the ability to build new linkages of institutions, individuals, and machines.” Similarly, Emma Hemmingway’s (2008) detailed ethnography of regional BBC television news highlights the way in which technologies (e.g., cameras and microphones, recording equipment) play an important role in shaping news production. She does so, however, not in a technological determinist vein, but rather in the ANT fashion of tracing what she sees as unstable, highly contingent collaborations between humans and machines.

Finally, ANT would seem to be the most epistemologically and politically open and non-judgmental of the theories examined here, making it especially appropriate for Western research in non-Western societies. The injunction to treat equivalently all actor accounts, including that of the researcher, provides assurance that both Western and non-Western perspec-

tives, in all their diversity, will be presented and respected. And this extends to politics as well. If the good society is defined as what “assembles” people, then what works to assemble in one setting cannot be assumed to work in another. Against the deliberative democratic dreams of Habermas, Latour ventures “getting together might not be such a universal desire after all!” (2005a, p. 34). Latour argues (without documentation) that there are diverse worldwide attitudes toward basic Western notions such as “representation” (in the Japanese tradition, “the very word ‘representation’ strikes their ears as quaint and superficial”; *ibid.*, p. 35) or “the idea of politics as speaking one’s mind in the middle of an assembly” (“the Chinese tradition seems to ignore it entirely”; *ibid.*). “Can we enlarge our definition of politics to the point where it accepts its own suspension?” Latour asks. “But who can really be that open-minded? And yet, do we have another course of action?” (*ibid.*, p. 36). Latour takes comfort in the fact that in spite of the lack of any success in conceptualizing a politics (democratic or otherwise) that could unite peoples across so many diverse cultures, the fact is that in myriad ways, through “those makeshift assemblages we call markets, technologies, science, ecological crises, wars and terrorist networks,” we are already “connected”—“it’s simply that our usual definitions of politics have not caught up yet with the masses of linkages already established” (*ibid.*, p. 37).

### Conclusion

Each of the terms (and their accompanying theoretical frameworks) discussed in this paper—public sphere, field, network (network society, actor-network)—has advantages and disadvantages for truly internationalized, de-Westernized, or trans-nationalized media research.

Public sphere is probably the most commonly used term for research extending beyond North America, western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, but it is often used only descriptively rather than analytically. Habermas’s “new” “core-periphery” public sphere model holds some promise as a framework for empirical research, especially if room is made for multiple cores and peripheries. Even so, it suffers from the shortcomings of Habermas’s previous work in that it places too much weight on the periphery (or lifeworld) as the generator of emancipatory movements while simultaneously offering little guidance on how system components such as the media can effectively challenge concentrated political and economic power. A strict interpretation of Habermas’s project in “delibera-

tive” terms (civil, reasoned, inclusive debate) imposes a normative standard that is inappropriate or irrelevant (at least in the short term) for much of the globe; on the other hand, the notion of communicative action oriented toward mutual understanding provides both a normative and epistemological bridge between East and West, North and South.

Field theory is only beginning to be used in non-Western settings. As an empirical and epistemological model, it holds some promise. The basic framework points to social processes that are (potentially) at work in all societies, that is, relational processes of identity formation, unequal distribution of resources (capital), and especially the importance of symbolic as well as economic power. So far, the de-Westernizing and trans-nationalizing field-theory-inspired research I have encountered mostly ignores the issue of reflexivity (for the researcher) and only begins to tap the full potential of the empirical/conceptual toolkit.

Castells’s “network society” has the virtue of offering a loose and flexible framework for empirical research related to the Internet in a variety of Western and non-Western settings. Network society theory highlights both technological and economic factors as well as the ongoing conflict between established power and new forms of counter-power. The virtue of the theory—its flexibility and comprehensiveness—can also be its weakness. However vaguely or flexibly defined, Castells retains an interest in power and democratic politics. The same cannot necessarily be said for actor-network theory. Does this make it the ideal theory for internationalizing media studies?

ANT theory is similar to field theory in that it begins with a series of basic guidelines to help orient research, though the guidelines themselves are quite different. In ANT, one should follow the actor, consider non-human objects and humans as equal partners in constituting networks, and look for nodes in the network that are mediators (which “transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry”) as opposed to intermediaries (transporting meaning “without transformation”) (Latour, 2005b, p. 39). Moreover, rather than attempting to construct an objective portrait of the world with the help of reflexivity, and in so doing critically uncover relations of power, ANT does not privilege one account—epistemological, ontological, or normative-political—over another. Such extreme relativism seems antithetical to any truly critical project; behind the veneer of radical post-structuralism, ANT arguably ends up being a rather conventional form of pluralist theory (see Steven Lukes’s [2005] “first face” of power). Even so, when Latour speaks

of re-assembling the social, he seems to be echoing Elihu Katz’s important concern with community (see, e.g., Dayan & Katz, 1992). In an era of increasing ethnic, religious, and political strife, the virtues of such a community-mapping and building project should not be underestimated.

Despite such differences, there may be ways that the aforementioned theories are complementary as well as antagonistic. Public sphere theory, when it goes beyond a narrow defense of rational-critical deliberation, forces us to think and rethink the contours and limits of democracy. Even if a radical de-Westernizing in the spirit of Silverstone (2006) or various post-colonial theorists as noted by Thussu (2009) lies beyond the theory’s grasp, at least the question of how to achieve domination-free politics has been raised. Field theory goes beyond the core-periphery model to show how power is structured relationally and involves both cultural as well as economic resources. Although Latour has insisted that his sociology of associations is the antithesis of Bourdieu’s sociology of the social, some scholars have suggested that only the two models together can provide a complete portrait of the social world: as Bourdieu admits, the social space is not all fields, so perhaps actor-networks are the “spaces between” (Eyal, 2013). As for the network society, whether or not Castells is able to offer a fully coherent or consistent model, the synthesis of vast amounts of data is a significant contribution in its own right; through his voluminous books, articles, and edited volumes, and the output of his online journal *International Journal of Communication*, Castells has become the central node in an ever widening global network of empirical research with encyclopedic ambitions.

In sum, there is no reason why researchers can’t fruitfully draw upon any or all of these approaches, and there is every indication that they are doing so, either in direct dialogue with one another (e.g., Volkmer’s [2003] use of Castells to develop a model of the global public sphere); in respectful acknowledgment but limited engagement (e.g., Dahlgren’s [2001] nod to Castells in an essay otherwise focused on Habermasian concerns); or in succession, as when researchers draw on Castells for one project, Bourdieu for the next, and so forth, depending on the case study and what it is that needs to be explained (e.g., Russell’s [2001] network society analysis of the Zapatistas, followed by her [2007] field theory study of media coverage of the French urban riots).

Whether or not these theories have fully taken stock of their “Western” biases, they all have the virtue of moving beyond abstract philosophical quandaries to help facilitate systematic research. Habermas, Bourdieu,

Castells, and Latour certainly do not exhaust the possibilities for internationalizing media studies. They suggest only a range of possible approaches upon which or against which future theorizing—both Western and non-Western—might fruitfully build.

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## NOTES

1. Neil Fligstein, in a fascinating interview with the *McGill Sociological Review* 1 (2010), pp. 59–65, published online at <http://www.mcgill.ca/msr/volume1/interview/>, speaks to field theory's ambitions: “I think field theory is a huge breakthrough. It cuts across the social sciences . . . [sociologist and fellow field theorist] John Levi Martin and I have a standing joke that we're working on the theory of everything. So we call it the TOE when we're hanging out together. That is a joke! But I think with field theory, you come back to what do human beings do and how they make collective action happen. . . . how groups of people and groups of groups do these kinds of interactions and watch other people and reference other people and take positions, a very generic level of social process.”

2. While for reasons of space I focus in this paper on Najjar's work (2007), Noha Mellor (2007) also makes extensive use of Bourdieu (and Habermas). Unlike Najjar, Mellor is explicit that “Western theories developed to account for changes in Western societies cannot be used uncritically to analyze non-Western societies . . . rather, field theory is meant to serve as a building block” (p. 4). Mellor suggests some interesting modifications to field theory based on characteristics of Arab media and their audiences. For instance, Al Jazeera (and many other Arab media) uses an elevated written variant of Arabic yet its audience is more likely to be composed of low-income/low-education viewers than high-income/high-education viewers. This challenges Bourdieu's argument that there will tend to be “homologies” between media production and consumption (*ibid.*, 4; see also Benson & Neveu, 2005 for discussion of the possibility of such variations in the extent of homologies).

3. See Monge & Contractor (2003) for a comprehensive review of the social network literature. All of these strains of network theory are increasingly in dialogue with another, as evidenced by an International Network Theory Conference held 19–20 February 2010 by the USC-Annenberg School of Communication featuring presentations by Manuel Castells, Bruno Latour, Noshir Contractor, Peter Monge, Yochai Benkler, and others (see <http://ascnetworksnetwork.org/ann-conference> for summaries and videos of presentations).

4. Van Loon (2000, pp. 109–10) offers a similar analysis: “[W]ith the publication of Manuel Castells's *Rise of the Network Society* (1996), network-theory became firmly established as a mainstream force in contemporary political economy. However, Castells's almost uncompromising economism which is seductively intertwined with an ethos of technological determinism, made it difficult for those bending towards more cultural analytical orientations to engage productively with this concept. Instead, refuge was being sought in the more elusive and complex Deleuzoguattarian concept of assemblage. . . . Somewhere between the political-economic notion of ‘network’ and the differentialist notion of ‘assemblage,’ we can find ‘actor networks.’ Actor networks are more dynamic than network structures, but less elusive than assemblages.”