

Media and Global Divides

An Introduction

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The first keynote addresses focused on the very timely overarching theme for the Congress – *Media and Global Divides*. Professor Annabelle Sreberny (SOAS, University of London) and Professor Jan Nederveen Pieterse (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) delivered very thought-provoking speeches signalling the great importance of understanding the interpenetration of local and global forces of change. As Professor in Global Media and Communication, Annabelle Sreberny's research focus is on international communication and globalisation with a strong feminist orientation. Jan Pieterse is Professor of Sociology, specialising in research on the interactive character of global futures, drawing upon insights from economics, ecology, political science and culture studies. I was privileged to moderate this keynote session.

The extremely rich theoretical interests of these two plenary speakers, together with their diverse empirical work, ensured that their presentations on the way the media are implicated in the exacerbation of contemporary global divides insisted upon the need to speak to a wider public beyond the academy about how and why the media exclude or repress certain voices. Both speakers focused in different ways on how such exclusions are perpetuated and on the likelihood that the media could play a more effective and enabling role in encouraging and valuing diversity. The mainstream media seem unable to move beyond Western inflected portrayals of events both close to home and at a distance. Yet the very considerable expansion of alternative media, partly as a result of the spread of the Internet, has heightened the visibility of digital platforms hosting graphics and text which give spaces to the voices and images of those who challenge mainstream narratives and depictions of events. These developments offer openings for new discourses and dialogues, new contestations, and potentially, the emergence of new relations of power which may take greater account of those who formerly would have been silenced. Silenced by repressive states, cultural norms, or simply by their former inability to play a role in producing media content which is available to distant others.

IAMCR has long history of encouraging research that tackles the underlying cultural, social, political, and economic forces that give rise to the social dynamics of exclusion. IAMCR members frequently engage in debates about new possibilities for mobilising social change to reduce the gaps between rich and poor and to enable citizen participation in a more equitable social order. Both plenary speakers in this session emphasised the conceptual errors which are perpetuated by dualistic thinking about our own condition and that of 'others'. We have ample evidence that today's media are fostering

these dualistic partitions. Theoretically and empirically grounded research is essential to sustain criticism of mainstream media failures to expose the means through which power relations are replicated in ways that maintain unhelpful distinctions and emphasise differences which are disabling. Media representations that give greater attention to common projects, aspirations, and capacities to change the world for the better are sorely needed.

Annabelle Sreberny's presentation gave a very inspiring account of how the media can potentially play a positive role in contributing to human sociability, through their acknowledgement and valorization of difference and their capacity to assist people in understanding that diversity and social divisions are not only inevitable but need to be encountered in ways that are open to discovery and new insight. Jan Pieterse gave a stimulating account of the way a focus on ethnicities and on the emergence of a global multicultural helps to account for, and to foster, cultural diversity. He discussed some of the reasons for the docility of the mainstream media when it comes to challenging political actors and holding them to account for their actions. Journalists often are over-reliant on official sources, they may fail to question authority, and they all too frequently overlook arguments presented by representatives of social movements or citizens. We have seen this phenomenon again and again as globalization fractures and divides and as the results of globalization are mediated through the circuits of commercial, political and cultural relations that foster inward looking treatments of issues and conflicts.

Both speakers highlighted the many challenges of theorizing and researching the media today. The media are changing in ways that often involve collaboration between professionals and amateurs who share ideas and perspectives. Many paradoxes come to light when different viewpoints, languages, cultures, values and goals are juxtaposed in ways that alter our perceptions of distant others and this may quite radically alter how we act toward others. The Internet with its blogs and social networking sites, together with new forms of mobile media, represent a huge change. The mediated world is emerging as a complex 'space of flows' where perceptions of the risk of insecurity of mind or body are increasingly high. In the age of globalization, new forms of media and outlets for journalists and citizens may be consistent with the possibility of understanding difference, but they also embrace the potential to heighten possibilities for misunderstanding.

The new media and their mediations are bringing us into confrontation with others in ways that increasingly demand a dialogue about ethical conduct. As media researchers concerned about implications of global developments, whether they be related to financial crises, measures to tackle global warming, or efforts to find peaceful solutions to wars, we have an obligation to understand just what the potential of the media is in our contemporary world. To do so we must renew our efforts to undertake interdisciplinary research, informed by critical theory and by comparative empirical research which directly challenges prevailing preconceptions of others and brings to light the alternative narratives about how we can live in ways that remedy, or at least reduce, global divides. Annabelle Sreberny's and Jan Pieterse's presentations struck many chords in this respect, suggesting the hope that our research communities will continue to monitor and critique developments in ways that to speak directly to power.

The more media outlets enable the public or citizens to become the authors of their own news stories the more likely it is that diversity can be encouraged and respected.

When the media provide online spaces for new ways of engaging with the world and with its people, with those nearby and far away, geographically, culturally and morally, there may be a renewed basis for the hope that the mainstream media actors will become more responsible for, and responsive to, a broader spectrum of positions on the salient issues of our time. The presentations in this keynote plenary session spoke to the need to move away from America-centric or Eurocentric dialogues – to think in terms of transmodernity (Dussel 1996) or border thinking (Mignolo 2000) and to encourage a willingness to foster mediations that can support the possibility of being able to understand local histories, ambitions and desires. If this is to happen, we need research that will encourage translations that can support greater mutual understanding of global divides of all kinds. The presentations in this plenary session offered confirmation of the need to develop new theories and insights appropriate to an increasingly complex media landscape.

References

- Dussel, E. (1996) *The Underside of Modernity*. Atlantic Highlands NJ: Humanities Press.
Mignolo, W. (2000) *Local Histories: Global Designs*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

