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**Special Section:  
New Media in International Contexts  
Introduction**

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Guest Editors

The study of the relationship between media and society has a long and varied history in the social sciences and the humanities.<sup>1</sup> From the Frankfurt School's theories of the culture industries and McLuhan's focus on the relationship between the medium and the message to work on mediation, remediation, and the network society, media continue to be viewed as a driver and a lens for understanding social, economic, and political life. Indeed, the first wave of research on new media—particularly on the Internet—explored how access to networked forms of communication and information may lead to transformations in notions of community, identity, and the nature of being human (Castells, 2000; Van Dijk, 1991; Katz & Rice, 2002; Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2002; Miller & Slater, 2000; Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1995; Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002). Research on mobile phones, portable music players, and gaming (desktop and console) began to explore the embeddedness of new media in everyday life (Boellstorff, 2008; Castells, Qiu, Sey, & Fernandez-Ardevol, 2006; Horst & Miller, 2006; Ito, Okabe, & Matsuda, 2005; Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Ling, 2004; Ling & Donner, 2009). Exemplified by sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google, and others, the presence and participatory properties of new media in the contemporary moment represent an opportunity to reconsider the relationship between media and society in light of the changing media ecology. Are new media technologies appropriated in a similar fashion in what Thomas Friedman calls a “flat” world? Or do particular engagements with such technologies arise from specific local contexts? Even when new media technologies appear to be appropriated in a similar manner (on the surface, anyway), what local sociocultural, economic, or political factors contribute to such appropriations?

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This special section of the *International Journal of Communication*, *New Media in International Contexts*, explores the relationship between new media practices, policies, and industries as these are constitutive of social change through five case studies of Brazil (Horst), China (Wallis), Ghana (Sey), India (Schwittay), and South Korea (Ok). Drawing upon a combination of academic research, policy documents, "gray literature," and other resources, the authors examine how a range of new media—social media, gaming, mobile communication, blogging, and production of music, videos, and software—have been appropriated in each sociocultural context. "Traditional" media are also discussed to the extent that their usage converges with the use of new media. Each of the articles analyzes the interrelationship between local appropriations and the ways in which governments, NGOs, companies, and "the public" have envisioned the role of new media technology. Rather than focusing on a regional frame that draws together countries based on geographic proximity or anthropological notions of culture areas (Guyer, 2004; Thomas & Slocum, 2003), the articles in this special section reveal the continuing salience of the national context for organizing and influencing the use of new media technologies.

In the remainder of this introduction, we outline how the nation frames new media and technology use by focusing on two core questions. First, how do particular sociocultural, economic, and political conditions shape the use and appropriation of new media technologies? Second, how are youth in these countries at the forefront of such appropriation, and how does their age intersect with other axes of identity, such as gender, class, and ethnicity, in the ways they use and understand new media technologies? We conclude with a brief reflection on what case studies of national contexts contribute to the study of new media practices and society.

### **Production, Consumption, and Appropriation**

Whether one ascribes to the rubric of the network society, the information society, or the digital age, it is clear that a number of key relationships have changed as the centers of production and consumption of new media technologies have shifted along with the movement of people, goods, money, media, and technology across national borders (Appadurai, 1996). For example, over the past decade, there has been an increasing recognition of the novel practices and innovative potential located outside of Western Europe and North America. Whether these innovations come from the advanced industrialized countries of East Asia, from the "BRIC" countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) with large populations and emerging economies, from migrants employed as engineers and developers, or through the workarounds developed by some of the world's poorest populations, the flow of ideas, communication, innovation, and practice do not necessarily move from center to periphery.

Many of the changes arising within this new media ecology can be captured through the concept of "prosumption." Defined as the collapse or convergence of production and consumption, prosumption highlights how users (formally seen as passive consumers) both create and consume their own media content (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). In the case of technology designers, this shift has meant a new focus on what users do with particular technologies. In some instances, it shapes and influences future design. As the emerging field of ICT4D (Information and Communication Technologies for Development) emphasizes, many of the most innovative examples of new media practices have emerged from the Global South, where appropriation of new media technologies by first adopters and the wealthy co-exists—and at

times, intersects—with that of low-income users (Donner, 2008; Donner, 2010). Key examples of this trend appear in the case studies of India and Ghana. In her article on new media practices in India, Anke Schwittay outlines a variety of middle class patterns of appropriation around Orkut, gaming, and mobile phones, highlighting the ways many of these same technologies have been used in the name of socioeconomic development. With a large population living below the poverty line in India, Schwittay observes a coalescing of new media technologies (particularly mobile phones), commercialization, and Bottom of the Pyramid (BoP) initiatives, including the design of products to serve the needs of the poor, micro-credit programs, and a range of other social enterprises. Notably, the Indian diaspora has played an important role in supporting many of these ventures. A similar pattern appears in Ghana, a country that has experienced remarkable growth in mobile penetration rates and Internet use over the past decade. In her article, Araba Sey examines the emergence of “smart consumption” (Alhassan, 2004), or the strategic use of mobile phones through practices such as flashing and text messaging, tactics which are designed to reduce the amount of money spent on communication. She also explores how these more instrumental consumption patterns intersect with socially motivated appropriations. In both cases, we see differential use of the same technologies by low-income and wealthy Indians and Ghanaians, as well as the deep connection between social and economic uses of the Internet, mobile phones, and other new media.

National culture and the maintenance of cultural values also represent an important dimension of local new media ecologies in the articles in this special section. In her analysis of online gaming in South Korea, HyeYoung Ok connects the explosive development of online gaming and *PC bangs* to the regulation and restriction of Japanese arcade and portable games that began in the early 1980s. She notes that massive unemployment (particularly among youth) spurred by the economic crisis of 1997 created a context where youth used their leisure time to play games and develop businesses. The South Korean government, in turn, began to support the burgeoning gaming industry and its reputation in the global sphere in the name of national development. While South Korea made efforts to support online gaming and other national commercial industries, Brazil has taken a radically different approach. As Heather Horst’s article discusses, Brazil has largely resisted participation in the global consumer environment through a range of policies around local technology and software production. These include the support of open source platform development, such as the use of Linux in government; digital inclusion efforts; and artistic expression, as well as other practices identified with Brazilian national culture. Like South Korea, Brazil imposed high importation fees on console games and other foreign technology, which inspired Brazilian designers and gamers to clone and modify foreign systems for Brazilians. However, at the national level, these modified systems are not recognized as Brazilian, and thus, they are not heralded as Brazilian cultural forms.

The importance of producing and supporting local culture and industries also appears in Cara Wallis’ article on new media practices in China. As Wallis reveals, the Chinese government has selectively supported particular types of games that incorporate Chinese legends, martial arts, and traditional Chinese values. Indeed, in 2008, the Chinese Ministry of Culture endorsed ten “healthy” games that embody these qualities. These games are promoted in opposition to games that are thought to lead to addiction and “uncivilized” behavior. In essence, what we see across the case studies in this special section is a constant evaluation of new media technologies in relation to the image, health, and wealth of the nation, as defined by the state apparatus. New media industries and practices that contradict or are

not aligned with these broader national frames receive little economic or regulatory support and, in some instances, particularly in China, become the focus of censorship.

The emergence of prosumption, and the attendant shift in the ways that we understand the relationship between production and consumption, appears throughout the five case studies' discussions of gaming and social media practices. Although it is illustrative of a general disruption of more traditional processes of consumption, it is clear that structures and institutions such as nation-states, corporations, and a range of other stakeholders continue to play a substantive role in defining and redefining how individuals, communities, and other collectives participate in the new media ecology. In the following section, we look at the implications of the changing relationships between production, consumption, and appropriation for issues of identity, power, and practice.

### **Networked Sociality: Youth, Identity, and New Media Technologies**

One of the significant points of comparison highlighted in each of the articles involves the connection between youth and new media. All of the countries featured have relatively large youth populations, and, as is often the case, these youth are at the forefront of the uptake and appropriation of new media. This articulation of youth and new media has occurred as a result of both formal policy initiatives on the part of governments, and the way youth in general have been shown to be avid adopters and shapers of new media, such as in their embrace of text messaging, social networking sites, and digital video production (Buckingham, 2008; Castells et al., 2006; Ito et al., 2009; Ling, 2004). Many of the pieces in this special section remind us, however, that "youth practice" is multifaceted and connected to class, gender, and other axes of identity.

Much of the imagination and potential of technology emerges through both policy and popular discourse around education and youth. As Horst discusses in her article, Brazil's early digital inclusion programs targeted youth in low-income areas for computer and skills training. Ok also explains how, in South Korea, in the aftermath of the 1997 economic crisis, the implementation of "ICTs in education" legislation led to a national e-learning program and the promotion of ICTs throughout the country's educational system. In India, Schwittay notes that the government has partnered with the One Laptop per Child project, in addition to undertaking other measures designed to wire Indian classrooms. Discourses surrounding the IT industry as a desirable career path then influence the willingness of parents to pay the high school fees necessary for their children to gain the requisite training to be able to enter this growing field.

In addition to formal educational initiatives, government policies of "informatization," combined with local entrepreneurship (and in some cases, with the work of NGOs), have led to the widespread diffusion of a space that is predominantly youth-centered: the Internet café. Discussing Ghana, Sey shows how Internet cafés are a primary means for people to be able to go online, and how, in many cases, youth use the online space as a means to escape a difficult life through a foreign connection, or to enjoy a foreign locale virtually. Ok notes that, even though most South Korean youth have access to the Internet at home, the *PC bang* has emerged as an important space for youth sociality, through gaming and the use of social network sites. Schwittay, Horst, and Wallis all discuss how Internet cafés (or LAN houses in

Brazil) in particular serve marginalized youth—lower caste in India, *favela* dwellers in Brazil, and rural-to-urban migrants in China—who usually cannot afford a personal computer and Internet access.

As we have seen elsewhere (boyd, 2008; Ito et al., 2009; Rodrigues & Smaill, 2008), the wide-scale adoption of new media technologies by youth has spurred a broader concern with the moral implications of such technologies. In the countries profiled in this special section, quite often, the desire for the economic growth assumed to come with the diffusion of digital technologies is in tension with concerns about the potential for such technologies to bring alternative lifestyles and challenges to traditional values. The use of mobile phones to cheat on exams in South Korea (Ok, this special section) and the deployment of the Internet to perpetrate fraud and scams in Ghana (Sey, this special section) show that such fears can be rooted in singular events or uses that then dominate public discourse. In China, as Wallis discusses, anxiety about Internet addiction, often associated with gaming and Internet cafés, is fueled as much by government and media discourses as it is by actual user behaviors.

Moral panics are particularly likely to emerge when new media technologies are used in ways that defy the established gender order, and in most cases, the emphasis is on policing and controlling young women's sexuality. Schwittay explains how, in India, for example, the Delhi Public School Scandal—where a very brief camera-phone video of two high school students kissing went viral—led to a public uproar and regulations regarding mobile phone use in schools. As Wallis discusses, QQ, an instant messaging platform, has generated concern due to its use for anonymous sexual solicitation in China. Also in China, sex blogger Mu Zimei challenged conventional norms about women's expression of sexuality, and in doing so, she brought the practice of blogging to a wider public. Sey notes that, in Ghana, an unemployed woman who nonetheless owns a mobile phone is considered disreputable. In such cases, what Schwittay states about India is found to be true in the other countries profiled here as well: While mobile phones and the Internet incite panic among older generations, young people use these devices to counter such discourses, and to debate issues of control, regulation, and censorship of new media.

Indeed, debate and deliberation in the online sphere, which frequently overlaps with or motivates activism offline, is another area of interest that emerges in the articles in this special section. As Wallis shows, given the various modes of censorship in China and the limits on political expression, BBS forums, social networking sites, microblogging, and text messaging have become crucial means for disseminating information, debating issues, and voicing discontent. Such media have been used as well to mobilize various types of public demonstrations. Schwittay also discusses how, in India, "online publics" have emerged—for example, through nationalistic protests or responses to terrorist attacks. In South Korea, new media were used to organize the "Candlelight Protests," with the image of the "Candlelight Girls" at the forefront of the demonstrations (Ok, this special section). While certainly not only youth are involved in these movements and public spheres, their presence is, indeed, critical.

Although some of the examples just discussed might draw attention to the spectacular or newsworthy—moral panics, public protests—all of the articles emphasize how young people are using new media technologies to build and sustain relationships, whether through "cying" in South Korea, participating in Orkut in Brazil and India, texting or flashing in Ghana, or using QQ or taking part in BBSs in China. Such networked sociality—sustained through low- or high-tech means—is perhaps the most

crucial affordance of new media technologies for all of the youth highlighted in this special section.

### **Conclusion**

Although our focus has been on particular national contexts, we want to be clear that we do not wish to present these case studies as “models” to be emulated and replicated. Rather, our goal here has been to speak to the diversity of experiences and appropriations, rather than to posit “representative” depictions of new media use. Indeed, there remains an intentional unevenness in the selected cases; we have not, for example, tried to “cover the globe” or be “regionally representative.” There are also clearly issues that deserve attention in their own right. For example, more work on the relationship between religious (trans) nationalism and new media technologies would be a fruitful area of inquiry, one that only appears on the margins of the case studies focused on India and Ghana. In addition, the issue of language and translation dramatically shapes research, funding, and the dissemination of research results and, in turn, the “presence” of particular countries and areas of the world in academic journals, blogs, and other online sources.

Moreover, as is the case with new media practices more generally, the trends and trajectories that are highlighted in the articles in this special section are constantly transforming and evolving. Skype and a range of webcams may clearly change the ways in which sociality occurs in networked spaces, and the closure of social network sites such as Twitter and Facebook in response to civic unrest stands as an important reminder of the national control over the new media technologies used and the varied stakeholders invested in the consumption of new media. Our hope is that, through mapping various themes that have emerged as new media technologies have been taken up in different national contexts at particular moments in time, this special section will not only contribute to our knowledge of the transformative role of new media in culture and society, but will also inspire new questions for future research.

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