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Commentary

Conducting Research on the World’s Changing Mediascape: Principles and Practices

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Abstract

As digital technology sweeps across the globe, bringing far-reaching changes to the media environment and beyond, international research on the nature and impact of these changes is essential. This commentary situates media research within the broader flow of knowledge and offers a critical perspective on the principles and practices that should guide that research to maximize its potential contribution to both knowledge and to the public.

Keywords

engaged scholarship; ethics; international; media research; mobile media; social media; social networking

Issue

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1. Introduction

A wide swath of emerging technologies is reshaping journalism and media globally. This thematic issue of *Media and Communication* provides a series of international perspectives on the nature and impact of these emerging technologies on journalism, media and society. Within this framework, a series of authors from universities around the world offer critical analysis of four dimensions of the impact of changing technology. These dimensions include aspects related to public engagement (e.g., via social media, mobile technology), shifts in content and user interface (e.g., interactivity, augmented reality, VR, voice-based systems), evolving production methods and professional practice (e.g., the impact of algorithms, automation and AI), and economic and legal/policy implications (e.g., freedom of expression, privacy).

The present commentary critically addresses the theme of public engagement with emerging media through the lens of a unique international study the authors have conducted over the previous three years. This project is a multi-year, multi-country examination of mobile content innovation in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), funded by a grant from the Qatar National Research Fund. We collected data using multiple methods and place the findings in an international context. We argue that the design and approach utilized in studies of the nature and impact of emerging technologies can fundamentally shape the potential value of such investigations.

Citizens around the world are highly engaged in mobile and social networking media (Statista, 2019). The role of the increasingly widespread diffusion and public adoption of mobile media may be playing an increasingly significant role in public engagement in social media by

providing a continuously and ubiquitously available platform for creating, accessing and sharing media content and personal communication. The extent to which this trend toward mobile, social media has diffused in the Arabian Gulf, especially Qatar and the UAE, is central to our investigation (Dennis, 2018).

2. Relevance of Qatar and UAE for This Investigation

Qatar and the UAE are especially pertinent platform for such a study. Recent data show that these two countries have the highest Internet penetration in the world, at 99%, and the vast majority of that is via mobile, and social networking, media (Kemp, 2018). Also among the factors making these countries especially relevant for examination are their significant media industries including Al Jazeera, extensive digital infrastructure (they are among the first nations in the world with an operational commercial 5G telecommunications network), and commitment of the country to mobile media use.

Early research suggests the widespread adoption of mobile media in the Arabian Gulf, including Qatar and the UAE, and that this use of mobile is linked to widespread engagement in social media network communications. Our study examines these trends in Qatar and the UAE in 2016, 2017 and 2018, and how they relate to user engagement with content designed for mobile platforms. We draw upon original data from a survey of the Qatari and Emirati national and expatriate populations as well as a sampling of social media posts in Qatar during this period.

Moreover, developments in Qatar and the Gulf region underscore the significant international development of Internet, especially social media usage. Brotman (2018) presents a comparative data on the top countries in terms of the global broadband Internet ecosystem. Among the leaders are the U.S., China, South Korea, Japan, Germany, France and the U.K.

Scholars such as Katz and Crocker (2015) have noted the significance of the confluence of social and mobile media in a digital environment. Among other consequences, this confluence has led to the growth of user-generated content (UGC), especially “selfies” (user self photographs) and their sharing online. Katz and Crocker (2015) note this trend is an international one.

There has been growing examination of the extent of such UGC in the Arab Gulf, including the intersection of privacy concerns and the sharing of self photographs (selfies) online (Harrell et al., 2017). Consequences of this confluence may extend into other content realms, including news, research suggests, including user engagement with UGC (Dunaway, 2016). Borge-Holthoefer, Muzammil and Weber (2018) have identified even farther-reaching consequences in the Middle East, including political impact. They describe:

Countries with chronic civil unrest in which digital media have largely served as mobilization tools (e.g.,

Tunisia, Egypt), and relatively stable and wealthy societies that face social change and economic hyperdevelopment (e.g., Qatar, Kuwait).

Some scholars (Scolari, Aguado, & Feijoo, 2012) have offered frameworks for beginning to understand and organize the nature of this confluence and its consequences.

Our investigation indicates that mobile media usage is almost universal and is extensive in time and frequency among Qatari and Emirati nationals and expatriates. Only about two percent of those studied say they do not use a mobile device on a daily basis, with little difference between nationals and expatriate professionals. A quarter say they use a mobile device for five or more hours in the prior day, again with little difference between nationals and expatriate professionals. From Year 1 to Year 3 the portion of Qatari and Emirati nationals using their mobile device for five or more hours in the prior day increased substantially, with more than a 20% increase.

In both years, the vast majority (about four-fifths) of those surveyed in both countries say they use their mobile device to access or engage social media in the prior day. About one in ten say they do so for five or more hours per day.

In terms of social media mobile apps, respondents reported heavy usage. Almost all in both years say they use their mobile device to access a social media app in the prior day. Among the most-widely used are Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter. It is worth noting the conspicuous absence of Facebook among the most-used platforms. Facebook is less popular because it requires users to share personal information, including photographs, in a public manner, whereas the others do not.

Immersive experiences such as AR and VR rely on mobile devices such as handhelds or wearable headsets for full engagement. Overall, more than half of the Qatari and Emirati citizens surveyed express interested in sharing their AR experiences, generated or accessed via mobile devices, through social networking media. Arab expatriate residents living in Qatar and the UAE show a similar pattern, while non-Arab expats express a slightly lower likelihood of doing so.

With regard to sharing VR experiences, more than half of each group and in both years say they are likely or highly likely to share their VR experiences. More than half of nationals and non-Arab expats say they are likely to share their VR experiences via social media. A slightly higher portion, almost two-thirds of Arab expats say they are moderately or very likely share their VR experiences via social media.

In general, these findings largely parallel trends in mobile and social media usage in much of the developed world, including countries in North America, Europe and in much of Asian, including South Korea, Japan and China, although precise patterns vary widely by individual country (Poushter, Bishop, & Chwe, 2018). Although our findings confirm the wider pattern of mobile and social me-

dia engagement seen around the globe, as we have theorized, specific trends and tendencies are also shaped in significant ways by the unique local or regional culture and associated values and media behaviors (e.g., Qataris and Emiratis are heavy users of social media especially via mobile media, but have preferences for particular platforms that align with their cultural norms).

3. Implications for Future Research on the Changing Mediascape

Fueled by rapid technological change, the world's media landscape is undergoing far-reaching and dramatic disruption. These changes include an increasingly mobile, networked, and wearable media platform featuring a host of new and innovative content and communications capabilities, including augmented and virtual reality. As this commentary has shown, this changing media landscape is bringing with it substantial consequences, including in the realm of public engagement via mobile and social media in Qatar and the UAE.

Four principles are critical to the advance of research on the development and consequences of emerging media technologies. First, the theoretical foundations of such investigations are the cornerstone of the field. Scholars should emphasize the conceptual engagement with the literature as a means to challenge, question and reimagine the field and ensure the enduring relevance of their research.

Second, international and intercultural comparative research is vital to the increasingly global media environment. Such comparative investigations can help frame media research, especially that driven by technological inquiries, in a broader context.

Third, emphasis on critical questions examining with skepticism the nature and consequences of a rapidly changing media landscape will maximize the potential value of media research. Avoiding technological evangelizing is essential in an environment where commercial forces, threats to privacy and security, and ownership of data especially in digital form are increasingly acute.

Four, collaborative research is increasingly essential in conducting this research. Collaboration has the greatly potential to bring together scholars of diverse, complementary backgrounds and perspectives. Whether blending theoretical and methodological expertise, such collaborative approaches to international, theoretically driven investigations of the evolving mediascape can heighten the potential for generating both valid and reliable investigations. Perhaps most importantly, collaborative research that cuts across boundaries both geopolitical and disciplinarily has the best capacity to situate the investigation into the changing media environment culturally and contextually.

The articles that follow in this special issue bring this altered and altering media environment into sharp relief in some half-dozen locations around the globe and highlight the principles outlined above. Through theoretically

grounded empirical research investigation, these articles offer a systematic lens through which students and scholars of media can critical engage in a vibrant analysis of the rapidly shifting environment of mediated communication in the 21st century.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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