

Global media/tion in and out of context

Edited by
Todd Joseph Miles Holden and Timothy J. Scrase

medi@sia

medi@sia is a path-breaking, cross-disciplinary study that employs ethnographic methods and sociological and cultural perspectives to examine the uses and influences of various media in a large number of contexts inside and flowing out of Asia today.

The book introduces the concept of the *media/tion equation* where the compound of information technology (media) and its content (communication) are touched by and associated with the economics, politics, social organization, cultural practices, and values in the everyday lives of users. The role of context – the complex spaces influenced by and within which *media/tion* transpires – is captured in 11 key studies of TV, film, music videos, popular song, romance novels, Internet bulletin boards, comics, brand characters, and advertising. Beyond the contexts of contemporary Asia – many of which have been neglected by conventional media and cultural studies – are the spaces in the world touched by the sweep of Asian-originated media flows. Through this perspective, *medi@sia* proffers a newer, antithetical “map” of globality; one that moves decidedly East to West.

Contributing to discourse in a large number of scholarly areas including globalization theory, media sociology, the anthropology of media, cultural studies, communication studies, and Asian studies, *medi@sia* charts a new interdisciplinary area of inquiry within the current literature and, as such, establishes a precedent for future research.

T.J.M. Holden is Professor of Mediated Sociology and current Chair of the Department of Multi-Cultural Societies in the Graduate School of International Cultural Studies at Tohoku University in Sendai, Japan.

Timothy J. Scrase is Deputy Director, Centre for Asia Pacific Social Transformation Studies (CAPSTRANS) and Senior Lecturer in Sociology in the School of Social Sciences, Media and Communication at the University of Wollongong, Australia.

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and Timothy J. Scrase**

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Contributors

Adrian M. Athique, is a postdoctoral fellow at the Centre for Critical and Cultural Studies, University of Queensland. His research interests include cultural studies of media, audiences and the sociology of media consumption, the cultural dimensions of nationalism and transnationalism, and digital environments for teaching and learning. Adrian has written extensively on the Indian media; his most recent publication is: 'Watching Indian Movies in Australia: media, community and consumption,' *South Asian Popular Culture*, 2005, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 117–133.

Bart Barendregt is an anthropologist who is currently lecturing at the Institute of Social and Cultural Studies, Leiden University, the Netherlands. He is finishing his Ph.D. research entitled 'From the Realm of Many Rivers: Memory, places and notions of home in the southern Sumatran highlands,' which focuses on the concepts of pilgrimage, ancestral cults and place lore. He has published on Indonesian martial arts and theater, material culture and popular music. Recent publications include 'The Sound of Longing for Home: Redefining a sense of community through Minang popular musics' (2000, in *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land en Volkenkunde* 158 (3) 411–451) and 'Popular Music in Indonesia; Mass-mediated Fusion, Indie and Islamic music since 1998' (with Wim van Zanten, 2003, *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 34).

Hakan Ergül is a researcher in the School of Communications, at Anadolu University, in Turkey. He was awarded a Japanese Ministry of Education Scholarship in 2000 and received his Ph.D. from the Graduate School of International Cultural Studies at Tohoku University, Japan in 2006. His Ph.D. thesis dealt with the infotainment phenomenon and televisual discourses in contemporary Japanese television, utilizing a multi-perspectival approach. He has published articles and written chapters on media, popular culture, discourse, ideology and language. He is the author of two books: *Televizyonda Haberın Magazinellesmesi* ('Tabloidization of Television News,' İletişim, Istanbul, 2000) and *Krizanteme Adanmış* ('Devoted to the Chrysanthemum,' anthology of stories, Can, Istanbul, 2003). He is a member of numerous academic associations, including

the Association for Cultural Studies, International Association for Multicultural Discourses, Japan Society for Studies in Journalism and Mass Communication, and Anthropology of Japan in Japan.

Katherine Toland Frith is an Associate Professor in the School of Communication and Information at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore where she has worked since 1999. Prior to working in Singapore, she was Chair of the Advertising Department in the College of Communications at the Pennsylvania State University in the United States. She has also taught as a Fulbright Professor in Malaysia and Indonesia. Her books include *Advertising in Asia: Communication, culture and consumption* (Iowa State University Press, 1996); *Undressing the Ad: Reading culture in advertising* (Peter Lang, New York, 1998); and *Advertising and Societies: Global issues* (with Barbara Mueller, Peter Lang, New York, 2003).

Ruchira Ganguly-Scrase holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Melbourne (1993). She teaches in the Sociology Program, School of Social Sciences, Media and Communication, University of Wollongong, Australia. She is the author of *Global Issues/Local Contexts: The Rabi Das of West Bengal* (2001, New Delhi: Orient Longman/London: Sangam Books). Her research interests include comparative sociology, globalization, gender relations in Asia and ethnographic method. Her most recent work on this theme was published in *Gender and Society* (July 2003). Currently she is completing a book with Tim Scrase on the social consequences of globalization and economic liberalization in India.

Todd Joseph Miles Holden (Ph.D., Syracuse University, 1989) is Professor of Mediated Sociology in the Department of Multi-Cultural Societies in the Graduate School of International Cultural Studies (GSICS), Tohoku University, in Sendai, Japan. He has written extensively on globalization, identity, gender, political values and societal development in a number of cultural contexts, including Japan, Malaysia and America. The media he has assayed include television, advertisements, cell phones, the Internet, novels and film. He is co-author of *Globalization, Culture and Inequality in Asia* (Trans Pacific Press, 2003) co-edited with Tim Scrase and Scott Baum, and pens a regular column on Japanese popular culture, as well as a TravelBlog, for the e-zine *PopMatters*. He earnestly dabbles in philosophical fiction, and has created and maintains a number of institutional and personal web sites. You can learn more by visiting: www.intcul.tohoku.ac.jp/~holden/index.html

Lu Jia (Master of Mass Communication, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore) is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Communication, Texas A&M University, Texas, USA. His research focuses on Chinese government policy and the development of new media technologies. Lu Jia has undertaken extensive intercultural and organizational communication research within Chinese–European joint venture operations in

China as part of his Master of Communication research. This research provides a rich contribution to the ongoing discussions of the directions of intercultural organizational communication theory building. Lu Jia has contributed to a number of publications including the *International Institute for Asian Studies Newsletter* and the China section of the book *Comparing Media from Around the World* (ed. R. McKenzie, Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon). Other work forthcoming is an article on China's Internet and self-regulation with Dr Ian Weber.

Hee-Eun Lee is a post-doctoral researcher at the Institute of Communication Research of Seoul National University, Korea. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Iowa. Her research interests include critical cultural studies, global communication, and popular culture. She has previously taught at the University of Iowa in the United States, and currently teaches in universities in Korea.

John A. Lent, a 43-year veteran of university teaching in the United States, Philippines, Malaysia, and Canada, has researched all forms of mass media in Asia since 1964. His 65 books include the very first written on Asian newspapers, broadcasting, film, popular culture, animation, and cartooning/comics. He is founder and editor of *International Journal of Comic Art*, and editor of *Asian Cinema and Berita* (which he founded).

Mark Liechty (Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania, 1994) is an Associate Professor in the departments of Anthropology and History at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His research deals with processes of class formation, consumer culture, mass media, and youth culture in Nepal. He is the author of *Suitably Modern: Making middle-class culture in a new consumer society* (Princeton University Press, 2003) and founding co-editor of the Nepal Studies journal *Studies in Nepali History and Society*. Liechty is currently writing a history of tourism in Nepal between 1950 and 1980 that focuses both on shifts in the cultural production of touristic desire (and desired tourist destinations) in the West, and on the shifting socioeconomic and cultural responses of people in Kathmandu.

Pam Nilan has a Masters Degree in Education from the University of New England, Australia, and a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Newcastle, Australia. She is currently a senior lecturer in Sociology in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Newcastle. She has conducted research on young people, gender, popular culture and social change in Australia, Indonesia and Vietnam, and published articles in *Discourse and Society*, *International Review of Education* and *Indonesia and the Malay World*. She is currently researching juvenile sex work in Australia, and youth, gender and social change in Fiji.

Timothy J. Scrase (Ph.D., LaTrobe University, Australia, 1990) is Deputy Director, Centre for Asia Pacific Social Transformation Studies

(CAPSTRANS), and Senior Lecturer in Sociology, University of Wollongong, Australia. He has held full-time academic positions in Sociology at Charles Sturt University and at the University of Tasmania. He has previously published three books and several articles and book chapters. His books are: *Globalization, Culture and Inequality in Asia* (co-editor; Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2003); *Social Justice and Third World Education* (editor; New York and London: Garland (Routledge), 1997); and *Image, Ideology and Inequality: Cultural domination, hegemony and schooling in India* (New Delhi: Sage, 1993). His recent articles on globalization, development and social and cultural change in Asia have appeared in *South Asia, Third World Quarterly, Gazette: The International Journal for Communication Studies*, and *Development and Society*.

Ian Weber (Ph.D., Queensland University of Technology, Australia) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication, Texas A&M University, Texas, USA. His research focuses on China's media development, global media citizenship and digital broadcasting. Dr Weber has published widely in international journals including *New Media & Society*, *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, *Gazette*, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, *Social Identities*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, and *International Journal of Advertising*. Other work forthcoming includes a book chapter for the publication *SARS, Communication and Government in Singapore*, and an article for the journal *Media, Culture and Society*, titled 'China's Internet and Self-regulation: The cultural logic of controlled commodification' (with Lu Jia). Dr Weber is currently undertaking a global comparative study on digital broadcasting technologies.

Christine R. Yano is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Hawai'i, in Honolulu. Her book *Tears of Longing: Nostalgia and the nation in Japanese popular song* was published in 2002 by Harvard University Press. A 2006 book, *Crowning the Nice Girl: Gender, ethnicity, and culture in the Cherry Blossom Festival*, is published by the University of Hawaii Press. Her current work covers a wide range of subjects: from Japanese American beauty queen pageants to Japanese emoticons to the globalization of Japanese Cute in the form of Hello Kitty.

Acknowledgments

The etiology of this book lies in our earlier *Globalization, Culture and Inequality in Asia* (Trans Pacific Press, 2003), co-produced with Scott Baum. There, we took a sociological look at major changes in contemporary Asia. Advancing a cursory conceptualization of globalization in terms of “careers,” we recognized the enormous role that media play, particularly in the development and experience of subsequent stages of globality. *Media/tions*, we showed, had considerable bearing on the understanding and expression of, among others, local identity, gender relations, and orientations toward modernity, consumption and nationalism. Since media and its outcomes was only a portion of the earlier book, and because the question of context was only present inferentially, we felt that a volume specifically focused on this association was in order. We decided on a team approach, given the fact that the contexts in Asia are so divergent and exposition would best benefit from the refined expertise of area specialists. In constructing a team of researchers, our aim was to cast the broadest disciplinary net, as *media/tion in situ* taps the talents of not only media and communication researchers, but also anthropologists, political scientists, cultural studies scholars and sociologists. It goes without saying that a different team, with a different set of intellectual commitments, would have produced a different take on media in contemporary Asia. Rather than a challenge to authenticity, we offer this as an invitation to contribute to the conversation. Hopefully this edition of *medi@sia* will spur subsequent *medi@sias*, whether in support, rebuttal, revision or extension.

As with any collaborative project, there have been many obstacles slowing our progress; ill health and an excess number of outside commitments, the most intrusive. We wish to thank our contributors for the great patience and relative good cheer they displayed when our emails arrived informing them that the next iteration of revisions was due . . . in 24 hours. Personally, Todd would like to thank Takako for her extraordinary perseverance – above and beyond the mortal call; Maya and Alex, for the courage and enthusiasm they have demonstrated in embracing their recent life-altering challenge; and Joe and Nancy, for proving that one is never too old to influence the world’s future. Tim would like to thank colleagues at the Centre for Asia Pacific

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Introduction

Theorizing media in Asia today

T.J.M. Holden

In November 2004, a two-minute clip of a sexual encounter between a 17-year-old boy and 16-year-old girl from Delhi's most prestigious private school was filmed by the boy then transmitted via cell phone to a friend. Its subsequent distribution from handset to handset ultimately resulted in the video being sold for \$220 then posted on Baazee.com, India's biggest Internet auction site. Once listed with the auctioneer, a subsidiary of American-based eBay Inc., the sexual escapade could be viewed for a fee of about \$3. Although the clip was de-listed within days, police arrested Baazee's founder and chief executive, Avnish Bajaj, on charges of violating India's Information Technology Act, which, in part, prohibits "publishing, transmitting, or causing to publish any information in electronic form which is obscene."

The media/tion equation

This brief vignette about mediated communication in an Asian society brings into focus the many points of intercept between media, its content, and a globalizing world. More than any of these elements, though, at heart this episode captures what we term here *the media/tion equation*: the way that the compound – information technology (media) and its content (communication) – is touched by and associated with the economics, politics, social organization, cultural practices, and moralities in the everyday lives of its users. As we shall explain below, this is a decidedly sociological perspective, but one informed by insights gleaned from anthropological, cultural, communication, and geographically based investigations of media. It is a perspective that refuses to make hard distinctions between media and communication, preferring, instead, to recognize that both are part and parcel of social processes. As such, the *media/tion equation* implicates matters such as sexuality, gender, class, consumption, identity, and nationalism (to name a few), with an eye on their fundamental interconnectivity. Equally importantly, the *media/tion equation* views *media/tion* processes and their results as transpiring in complex spaces – concatenations of structuring elements – which, in combination, and intercalated in the processes of

symbolic production and use, elicits a myriad of *media/tion equations*, large and small. On these pages we demonstrate this by pondering 11 cases of *media/tion* in contemporary Asia.

To be sure, Delhi's high school sexcapade is not emblematic of all of everyday life in Asia – it may not be representative of most of it. However, it *is* reflective of some of it: a portion, no matter how small. Most importantly, this incident is in step with and distills the logic of contemporary media studies: examining the ways media are employed by information producers and consumers, in actual, lived contexts. In the case of this book of cases, these are studies of *media/tion* between information producers and consumers in Asia today.

Media and context

This is a book about media and a linked set of contexts. Neither media nor context is accorded precedence, because they are inextricably wed. The coupling of these two elements, and this relative equality in weight, is consistent with the emergent “thought style” (Fleck 1935) of media and cultural studies over the past decade. However, as a book organized by sociologists and equally featuring the work of anthropologists and communication researchers, this book is about neither media nor context exclusively. Let's consider these “isn'ts” in order to better apprehend what is.

Media and communication content constitute the core of every chapter. However, it would be a mistake to assume that, combined, the contributions will conjure a comprehensive survey. To be sure, a wide range of contemporary media are represented – magazines, film, television, the Internet, popular music/videos, novels, advertising, brand/characters, and animation. Because of the wide range, readers will encounter variation in the analytic approaches adopted by the authors here, as well as the themes emphasized. In part this is a by-product of having culled a multi-disciplinary scholarly crew, writers with vigorous, though divergent, theoretical commitments and substantive experiences. There are few areas of social scientific inquiry that engage as many disciplines as media and communication studies and this is reflected in the contributions here.

While a wide net has been cast, not every approach to the study of *media/tion* is represented. Further – because this text largely emphasizes *praxis* in context – empiricism is featured over theorization. More, because the contours of context are so variegated (especially in Asia), the epistemologies employed also differ. Most of the contributions fall into the qualitative camp, although two – Ian Weber and Lu Jia's study of popular dissent and the Chinese Internet (Chapter 4), and Katherine Frith's examination of beauty types in global fashion magazines (Chapter 7) – emphasize quantitative approaches. Generally, though, the favored methodological tools are ethnographic, with participant observation, depth interview, and textual analysis most common. Nonetheless, despite differences in research

site, orientation and perspective, the chapters share the aim of linking data to theoretical topics of contemporary concern, including modernity, consumption, class and identity (Chapters 1 and 2), gender construction (Chapters 1, 2, 3, 7 and 11), political order and resistance (Chapter 4), local identity and emotion (Chapter 5), national identity (Chapter 6), media diaspora (Chapters 8 through 11), religious ideology (Chapter 9), and sexuality, sexualization and sexism (Chapters 7, 10 and 11). Nearly every chapter has a dimension of globalization, as we explain further on.

A third thing that this book is not – at least exclusively – is a book about nations. Sites of lived experience *are* present, of course; geographically definable spaces provide the physical frame for nearly every chapter. This is consistent with the thought style in gestation for some decades now: one wedding insights from phenomenology (e.g. Schutz 1967), the everyday (Garfinkel 1967; de Certeau 1984; Lefebvre 1984), culture (Hoggart 1959; Fiske 1992), and macro-sociological theorization centering on the organization and operation of time, space and agency (e.g. Giddens 1990). Such thinking is embodied in, for example, research by Silverstone (1994) on the relationship between television and social relations in bounded or situated space. In *medi@sia* the insights of this thought style coalesce in the notion of observing: (a) engagements between media and human agents, (b) in bounded sites which (c) derive their logics, rhythms, ideas and practices from the resident economic, political, social, moral, intellectual, cultural, and historical elements. Often, though not always, such *media/tion equations* can be reduced to or confinable within particular State-defined spaces. Thus, the reader will encounter analyses situated in Nepal (Chapter 1), India (Chapter 2), Indonesia (Chapter 3), China (Chapters 4 and 7), Japan (Chapter 5), and South Korea (Chapter 6).

More often, however (and reflective of how media in an age of globalization has altered the fixed physical phenomena and metaphysical categories of the past), the contexts studied here are shot through with trans- and exo-national flows of *media/tion*. And, as much as nations may be featured, so, too, are “localities” (cities, states, the non-geographically defined generations and classes) and regions (Asia; Asia in concourse with the Americas, Europe and Oceania). Thus, in the case of local context, readers will encounter T.J.M. Holden and Hakan Ergül’s examination of how Japanese television (Chapter 5) consciously wields markers of identity to forge an “*uchi*” (family or community) of viewers. Importantly, this strategy is always “in context,” exploiting themes of “local” commonality, no matter the geographic dimensions of the collective. In the case of exo-local context, Mark Liechty’s discussion of Nepal’s encounters with the transnational commodity realm (Chapter 1) details how media flows emanating from beyond a country’s boundaries – specifically “out of context” conceptions of “building body,” “making face,” and “doing love” – can alter local values and practices.

Media/tion in (and out) of context

These conceptions – installed in *medi@sia*’s subtitle – of *media/tion* being “in context” and “out of context” require comment. Thinking about these terms, we wish to emphasize the dual character of the characterization. For something to be “in context” means that it is *within bounds*. In *medi@sia* we distinguish between two types of bounded realms: a physical one – as in geographic or group-defined location; and an intellectual realm – or, more specifically, a set of values or sensibilities defined by the analytic unit (be it place, group, community, society or region) under study. Similarly, when something is “out of context” it is *outside the bounds* of those twin realms: exterior to the physical locale and/or external to the prevailing local sensibilities. Contemplating these bounded conditions, one can re-imagine them as a set of analytic categories that yield a heuristic built of four permutations – four ways to specify the *media/tion equation*: (1) messages emanating from local physical context and operating within the valuational/practical logics of that context; (2) messages emanating from local physical context, but operating outside the valuational/practical logics of that context; (3) messages emanating from outside local physical context, but operating inside the valuational/practical logics of that context; and (4) messages emanating from outside local physical context and also operating outside the valuational/practical logics of that context. Let’s briefly consider these permutations with an eye toward organizing the contributions in this volume.

(1) Pam Nilan’s in-depth exploration of young Indonesian teen girls’ use of romance texts (Chapter 3) is a good example of *media/tion equations* built of elements consistent with both local geographic and valuational/practical contexts. Nilan shows that, despite conforming to worldwide genre conventions, Indonesian romance texts “also provide locally oriented advice, narratives, tools and strategies, to assist girls in managing romance risk, and to bring off successful courtship and engagement.” In the process, Nilan argues, these texts assist readers in negotiating the twin, at times conflicting, local expectations of finding one’s destined soulmate while also achieving true love. Now that these values have both been embraced in actual practice, they are embedded in the culture; they co-exist as indigenous values.

(2) Examples abound of *media/tion equations* based on the intersection between the local context and elements exogenous to its operant values and practices. Importantly, however, the outcomes are far from identical. Consider John Lent’s contribution (Chapter 11), which shows how Japanese *manga* and *anime* and Korean *manhwa*, along with comics and animation from other Asian countries, have adopted more globalized characteristics. Among these are greater commonality in content, appearance, production and distribution. Contrast this with Frith’s offering, where cultural flow in fashion advertising has been inward. Within the context, though, exogenous content has not been homogenized. It stands in marked contradistinction to endogenous content. As such, exogenous messages are selectively

interpreted by local image consumers, often used as foils that reinforce local values. In such *media/tion equations*, incoming content helps reproduce gender and racial stereotypes.

(3) Also extensive are *media/tion equations* built of the confluence of elements outside the local context and values and/or practices indigenous to it. Here, as well, the signatures of flow and patterns of reception can differ strikingly. For instance, Hee Eun Lee's exploration of South Korea's experience of the music video form of popular music marketing (Chapter 6) is not at all like Bart Barendregt's study (Chapter 8) of *nasyid*, a form of a Islam-tinged popular music spreading across Asia today. For Lee, while the local effects of exogenous flow possess the potential to alter local values and practices, what we might call "scale-breaches" (i.e. media flows that jump boundaries) appear to have had the effect of hardening local values, of solidifying constructions of local identity, and providing voice to previously under-articulated local identifications. She refers to this last aspect as "a process of pluralizing others within us." Barendregt's offering, by comparison, reveals how messages emanating from outside the physical locale can achieve wide diffusion not just in one context, but across and within numerous other physical spaces. This spread owes to the intellectual receptivity of cultural consumers in those numerous locales. *Nasyid*, the author concludes, has revealed a "transnational consciousness" that defies local bounds.

(4) Christine Yano's rich study of the character/brand Hello Kitty (Chapter 10) captures *media/tion equations* in which *media/tion* produced outside of the local context also embodies values and/or practices alien to the message consumers within a target context. Employing an approach reminiscent of Hall (1980), Yano demonstrates the various types of decoding – from enthusiastic to critical to subversive – elicited by recipients' encounters with Kitty. Whereas Yano explores the flow of messages beyond the borders of one nation, Ruchira Ganguly-Scrase and Timothy J. Scrase (Chapter 2) detail message flow within one nation. Still, in documenting the experience of a regional population to what amounts to exogenous messages delivered from outside their class and geographic consciousness, the authors uncover a *media/tion equation* no different from Yano's. Above all, messages in "indigenous" Bollywood movies, television advertising and music videos uncover a general sense of moral anxiety among their respondents; a belief that exo-Bengali influences are threatening Bengali culture by eroding or even expunging customs, traditions, and language.

A sociology of mediated knowledge

Viewing *media/tion* in terms of dis/connections with context places a twist on our understanding of media in society. For decades now, the communications field has labored under a rift – or, better, a turf war – between competing schools: one emphasizing transmission or "process", the other favoring

“meaning”. Students of communication studies know that this has often been reduced to a debate about how “effective” media are (if at all), and whether this should be the appropriate measure of *media/tion*. Over time, this became codified as a contest pitting communication researchers against cultural studies adherents; or, as characterized by Tuchman in her lucid sketch of the field (1988): on one side well-funded, often conservative American-based researchers opposed by poorly funded, often left-leaning British academicians. While the birth of these traditions was temporally staggered, they ultimately became coterminous, persisting into the present.

This is most relevant when viewed through the prism of sociology of knowledge, for it enables us to recognize not only the misspent energy but also the great promise of the discipline. In a word, it enables us to locate means of transcendence. Begin with the observation that process and meaning belong to distinct intellectual traditions, emanate from different geographic locales, and exert a hold on a large base of practitioners. This signals that they are akin to Fleck’s “thought styles” – what Kuhn (1962) later coined as “paradigm”. In particular, process was a way of seeing the world, a gestalt or *idée fixe* that served as the organizing logic of inquiry. Picking up the Kuhnian thread, process became the concept that delivered “normal science” in media and communication studies. Process – and ultimately its outcome, effects – was the filter through which communication studies were passed and around which a sense of crisis arose. It was because of the inadequacies in the process model – the emergence of anomalies that led to notions of “minimal effect” (Klapper 1960) – that crisis, then the “revolution” (in which a rival thought style and subsequent paradigm – meaning) emerged.

The push/pull between competing camps conjures other theorization about sociological knowledge – specifically, Mannheim’s conception (1936) of “Ideology” and “Utopia”. On this account, the dominant ideology of process spawned a dissident, utopian, thought style centering on meaning. In time, the competition played out in the hallways and conference rooms of academies, on the pages of journals and books, and at podiums and in dining halls of conventions; the utopian view rose to challenge – if not supplant – the dominant ideology. The assault is exemplified by Gauntlet’s virulent attack on effects (1998) and championing of audience-centered meaning-based investigations (Gauntlet forthcoming). By the same token, theorization regarding effects has persisted, generating meaningful results concerning, for instance, cultivation (Gerbner 1969, 1998), frames (Snow *et al.* 1986; Scheufele 1999), and the spiral of science (Noelle-Neumann 1984). For many practitioners, the notion of media impact – whether comprehensive, focused, and/or long term – continues to organize scientific activity and, significantly, offers little hint of disappearing.

The dialectical view to which Mannheim subscribed does not culminate in a zero-sum outcome. The friction of competition between rival thought styles should result in synthesis, a third thought style emerging to organize

inquiry. This is where we find ourselves today. In *media/tion* studies, one form that synthesis has taken is the view that meaning-making is a process of production, reception and use. This line was initiated by Hall with his “circuit” of cultural production (1980). Although this work was predicated on a single medium (television), it was widely applied to all manner of *media/tions*. In fact, thinking of *medi@sia*, Hall’s model certainly could function as a convenient heuristic, capable of arraying chapters into the various parts of the circuit from systems of production, the technical infrastructure (Chinese Internet), relations of production (Japanese wide-shows), frameworks of knowledge (Korean music videos), the encoding of specific messages (*nasyid*, beauty advertising); followed by a glimpse at the worlds of message consumption – the recipients’ use of media (Nepalese consumption of a western “culture of vision”; the Indonesian negotiation of romance texts), and the process of message reception, interpretation and use (Bengali television users, Hello Kitty consumers).

As helpful as Hall’s work might be heuristically, its foremost value has been to steer communication researchers toward the audience. A quarter of a century on, one obvious outcome has been the well-traversed realm of “audience reception” – a line of inquiry with roots, as well, in the “uses and gratifications” approach (a model advanced by the effects-oriented Columbia School). Viewed thus, even in charting a path toward the audience, much work has not strayed far from the basic parameters of the original (process-oriented) paradigm.

A more productive version of synthesis, we would aver, lies in reconceptualizing the relationship between *media/tion* and society – in effect, theorizing *media/tion* sociologically. Such a turn can be found in Thompson (1994, 1995), where media are deemed influential in matters of societal configuration (e.g. societal development, reconfiguring the public and private domains), social process (interaction), social psychology (identity construction) and personal psychology (self, in society). Despite this promise, though, *media/tion* has remained conspicuously under-theorized sociologically (contr. Garnham 2000). This is not to say that studies of media and communication suffer from lack of theorization; to be sure, there is a bounty of theory concerning media function and outcome. Yet, so often, such theorization has failed to account for societal ontology. McLuhan’s technological deterministic writing (1964, 1967) – what Meyerowitz (1994) has labeled “first generation medium theory” – is a prime example; the “transmission model of communication,” “two-step flow” and frame analysis are others. Indeed, the list is rather extensive. Not all media epistemology ignores societal ontology, of course. As derided as it has been over the years, the Frankfurt School represents a strong example of “situated” theorization, insofar as it was fashioned in response to a particular set of economic and political institutions in concrete places, resulting in particular social conditions. McQuail (2000), as well, has compiled elaborate schematics over the years, detailing the myriad chutes dumping from society into media

and the innumerable ladders raised the opposite way. Doing so, however, his spotlight has remained squarely fixed on *media/tion*.

In these ways, when media has appeared in social theory, it has been more epiphenomenal; an appurtenance to society; at best a motor for, but often simply a factor in, social outcome. One can think of Appadurai's influential framing of globalization (1990) as an exemplar. This conception was not without significance for media studies, though; its major value situating media in context. And over the last decade increasingly sophisticated writings about *media/tion* and space have emerged: from attention to effects (in this case on identity) when media cross geographic lines (Morley and Robins 1995), to nuanced conceptions of mediated processes in lived space (Meyerowitz 1994; Lull 1995), to theorizing media/space phenomena, both ontologically and epistemologically (Couldry and McCarthy 2004).

The limits of heuristics

In this last work, the editors proffer five analytic "levels" of so-called "mediaspace": (1) media representation; (2) the flow of images and text across space, resulting in the reconfiguration of mediaspace; (3) spaces of production and consumption; (4) the entanglements of scale wrought by the operation of media in space; and (5) the ways such entanglements are understood in particular spaces. Such a model provides a convenient way of organizing diverse studies of *media/tion* inside and across contexts and, to be sure, the chapters in *medi@sia* could be arrayed accordingly. Indeed, our chapters might be wielded as inductive guides for refining the heuristic.

- It could be observed, for instance, that representation, itself, is a phenomenon transpiring at variegated levels and between geographically distinguishable locales. Frith's Chinese fashion ads underscore that, when it comes to beauty, Asian women are depicted differently from their western counterparts. Where shots of Chinese women are often close-ups, emphasizing the face, those of Caucasian women tend to be long shots, highlighting the body. This sexualization of western women – and reluctance to similarly treat Asian women – captures geographic difference latent in one *media/tion equation* in China. Similarly, Holden and Ergül's examination of Japanese *wideshows* demonstrates the intentional encoding of local content aimed at advancing geographical distinction. Programming loads local identifications that affirm and re/produce a sense of shared difference.
- A second area for jimmying with the mediaspace model lies in the matter of textual flow. Not only is it the case that imported *media/tion* reconfigures local context – as Liechty shows in his study of changing Nepali conceptions of body, beauty, fashion and romance; it is also true that *media/tion* emanating from beyond local context works to bolster indigenous values and practices. Lee demonstrates this, arguing that

“the ... (Korean) popular music scene has been a site of cultural struggle in which people’s cultural integrity has been asserted within the wider national and global arenas that intersect these more local cultural realms.” Adrian Athique (Chapter 9), as well, opines that pan-regional textual flow can bind spatially separate contexts, evidenced by Bollywood films that forge a “contemporary inter-Asian dialogue” in nations such as Indonesia.

- Analogically, a model of *media/tion* in context ought to do more than recognize production and consumption; it should conceptually separate these dimensions of Hall’s cultural circuit. The impulse to recognize both as occupying one “level” may overshadow the relative importance one may exert in a given *media/tion equation*. For instance, as Holden and Ergül show, while TV consumers certainly influence televisual product, it is the producer’s homespun theories about audience and medium (based in part on viewer data), as well as the surrounding economic institution, that influences production. Similarly, while Yano’s discussions with Hello Kitty’s licensor yields insight into the “producer’s perspective,” this view has little to do with the global consumption she uncovers. Whereas Kitty has been produced within the spatio-valuational context of “cute,” global reception has ranged from Kitty as signifier of Asian sexuality, symbol eliciting hyper-feminist critique, passionate defense, “ironic” use by female executives, and gay male performative displays.
- Finally, when it comes to the *media/tion* production and consumption, outcomes differ by “location,”¹ as well as geographic level – a fact that a model of *media/tion* must accommodate. For example, Barendregt observes that, unlike its Middle Eastern precursors, the *nasyid* preferred by young Southeast Asians excludes religious dogma and/or avoids foregrounding *jihad*. By contrast, Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase present Bengali respondents who see media products emanating from within their own nation as slighting their (local/regional) culture. In short, because various levels are implicated in contemporary *media/tion*, a model of media/space must, at a minimum, aim at distinguishing between four geographic interfaces: (a) local/national, (b) national/regional, (c) global/local, and (d) global/national,² as well as human segments.

In many ways these refinements provide a blueprint for another kind of book, one with chapters clearly cleaved to reflect directionality of flow, the variegated geographic levels at which *media/tion* operates, the results of mediation built of intersecting levels, and the distinct stages of the *media/tion* process. It is a blueprint *medi@sia* is cognizant of; while it is not rigidly adhered to here, we hope the chapters are approached with such dynamics in mind.