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**Social Dynamics 2.0: Researching
Change in Times of Social Media
and Convergence**

Nadja-Christina Schneider/Bettina Gräf (eds.)

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Social Dynamics 2.0: Researching Change in Times
of Media Convergence

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Nadja-Christina Schneider/Bettina Gräf (eds.)

Social Dynamics 2.0:
Researching Change in Times
of Media Convergence

Case studies from the Middle East and Asia

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Introduction

1 Doing Media Research in Non-European Regions

There has been a growing interest in recent years in the increasing influence technical communication and media exert over widely different areas of society and culture in Asia and the Arab-speaking regions. A number of critical media events, such as the 9/11 attacks (as well as all subsequent terrorist attacks), the cartoon controversy, or the suppression of the “Green Movement” in Iran, and the new developments in media technology, such as the explosion in the mobile telephone market, and the launch of countless new satellite programmes and internet applications, seem to play a major role in the rapid changes these societies experience. By contrast, it is noticeable that in the disciplines of Area and Islamic Studies these new phenomena continue to be treated only to some extent, and not systematically, as an expression of far-reaching medialisation processes, which in turn possess a significant transforming potential. This is clearly inconsistent with what is expected particularly from Area and Islamic Studies, namely to provide scientifically founded explanations for complex social phenomena in non-European and/or predominantly Muslim societies, as well as to continue to improve both empirical research and theoretical approaches.

With a view to the future perspectives of Media Studies, Claus Pias recently argued that the media question – just as the gender question – is so central and productive for every discipline that “it is essential to think about new and appropriate institution forms” in order to pursue it from within the disciplines, as it “requires a lot of knowledge, which is difficult to acquire in a general course of studies like ‘media’” (Pias, 2010: 40-41). In similar fashion to what is already the case with the gender perspective, Pias makes a case for bringing the media perspective more strongly into the various disciplines rather than removing it from them, as “paradoxically, one has to preserve the disciplines in order to change them” (ibid). This line of argumentation can be seamlessly

incorporated into the ongoing discussion over the further development of Area and Islamic studies, at least in the German speaking region. As the dedicated efforts towards a methodical opening up demonstrate, these disciplines are already strongly differentiated beyond their rich tradition and genuine focus on 'texts', something that is particularly evident with regard to the analyses of societal contexts from a social science perspective (see for example Rudolph, 1991; Poya and Reinkowski, 2008). What is currently becoming apparent – along with the much called-for stronger linking with systematic disciplines (Johansen, 1990) – especially in the scope of the humanities' adaptation to the new B.A./M.A. courses of study, is a restructuring of Islamic Studies that points in the direction of cultural studies or historical anthropology (cf. Amman, 2003; Conermann and von Hees 2007). With regard to Area studies, Houben observes a clear tendency to no longer perceive regions as geographically and culturally fixed entities, but rather to foster a production of knowledge that shows a stronger interest in crossing borders, interconnections and exchange relations, which in turn suggests a stronger commitment towards a transregionally comparative research and transdisciplinary collaboration (Houben, 2009; Houben and Rehbein, 2010).

However, it is also important to point out that these necessary changes and reorientations within Area and Islamic Studies are not a result of departmental policy alone, but are also increasingly called for by the students themselves. On the one hand, today's students belong to a generation that has grown up in the midst of a rapid expansion of media-based communication and constant reorganization of the media and have thus developed a sound interest in as well as a distinct sense for the relevance of media-related phenomena and developments. On the other hand, the individual biographies of a growing number of students and young scholars are also an example of the new connectivities which have emerged in the course of historical and contemporary migratory movements. These connectivities offer new ways of linking regions, places, social groups, but also individuals to one another – or sometimes separating them from one another –, and this makes the perspectives of these students and junior researchers particularly relevant to our discussion context (cf. on connectivity Hepp and Krotz and Moores and Winter, 2006; Tomlinson, 2002).

And finally, the enormous public, that is non-academic interest in new media and technical communication should also be acknowledged as a decisive factor that has prepared the ground for an increasing awareness and serious consideration of media developments in non-European contexts within Area and Islamic Studies. Along with the previously mentioned critical media events, this encompasses in particular the role and function of social media (Facebook, Friendster, etc.) in social and political movements, as well as the worldwide phenomenon of citizen journalism and the global success of non-Western film industries such as Bollywood or Nollywood, and not least the increasing medialisation of religion and faith. The above are just a few examples of topics of major interest not only to the media makers but also to their public. It is no coincidence that, especially in association with the currently controversial issues “criticism of Islam” and “Islamophobia”, the question about who the experts for these new phenomena are and where they can be found may remind us of Edward Said’s work “Covering Islam: How the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world” (Said, 1997), because when the “Islam” issue became a media event during the late 1970s as a result of the political upheavals in Iran and Pakistan, the “critical absence”, in Said’s words, of academic experts led to the establishment of an authority composed in part of self-appointed experts on Islam, something that is also clearly perceptible today. In Said’s view, historians and Islamic studies scholars failed to recognize the necessity of immediately becoming involved in this dangerous media discussion and global diffusion of media-produced images of Islam, thus totally underestimating the effects of these media images. This has changed fundamentally in the meantime, as, particularly within Islamic Studies, systematic-empirical research relating to the media representation of Islam, especially with regard to stereotyping and constructing an enemy concept, has become one of the most crucial media-related issues (cf. for example Hafez, 2010 and 2002; Spielhaus, 2010; Schiffer, 2010 and 2005; Amir-Moazami, 2007).

Yet even though the situation today is fundamentally different, with academics being aware of how much they rely on the media especially when researching media-related phenomena, we consider it very important – not least in view of the threat of persisting but also new essentialising terms such as „cyber jihad“, „cyber Islam“, or „iMuslims“ – that disciplines like Area and Islamic Studies pay more attention to distributing knowledge and compe-

tences pertaining to phenomena of medialisation not only in research but also in academic teaching (see in this respect Wilke, 2002).

The following assumptions have given rise to three key considerations in this edited volume:

- I. A stronger and more systematic commitment towards in-depth research on medialisation with respect to non-European and/or predominantly Muslim societies is necessary if we want to attain the level of density which has long been standard in media-related research on Europe and North America.
- II. Advanced knowledge of the respective region, including regional language skills, is an important prerequisite when researching the distribution, appropriation and effects of the media in Asian and Arab societies, also in order to avoid a mere transference of concepts based on the specific historical conditions and developments in Europe and North America (cf. Curran and Park, 2000; Thussu, 2009).
- III. The conceptualisation of both existing and new research projects should take into account more clearly than in the past the reflexive relationship between media technologies – including their formative context – and the manner in which these media are appropriated and used in local contexts.

2 Focussing on Internet-based Communication

Since the dawn period of the internet as we know it in the early 1990s, the world's largest computer network of public and private users has been the subject of many promising and visionary ideas. Through the fast, uncomplicated and distance-eliminating communication opportunities, people would be able to experience a direct and decentralised communication culture, emancipated from any forms of hierarchy. There was talk of more democracy, interactivity and immediacy (Amerika, 1996: 262). However, doubts were raised too, particularly in view of the unequal distribution on a regional as well as on a strata-specific level (Wurzbacher, 2000). Today, over one billion people use the internet. The doubts remain, but the developments go on. With the beginning of the 21st century came Web 2.0, also known as social media or

social networks. These expressions identify a new generation of internet technologies allowing users to create content themselves, with the term *prosumer* describing this new mixture of producer and consumer of information (cf. Kösch, 2007, see also the term *produsage*, Burns, 2008). Some examples of these new applications are wikis, blogs and chat rooms, as well as social networks such as Facebook and MySpace, which enable users to create so-called user profiles and upload photographs and videos. Also, commercial service portals such as Flickr allow users to upload photographs on a website and make them available for others to view. Wikis are a good example for illustrating the novelty of these applications. Whereas communication, including such on the internet, formerly consisted of one writer and one reader and was still regarded as mass communication since it constituted a one-sided but public transmission of a message to many others (Baumann and Schwender 2000), many people today can contribute to a common text – the so-called hypertext. Accordingly, users can not only read information, but are also able to change it, comment on it or even delete it in principle, though certain rules apply to the latter (cf. Amerika, 1996; Kösch, 2007). An old dream that Bertolt Brecht had envisaged in his theory of the radio finally seems to come true (cf. Wurzbacher, 2000).

Yet what type of change are we really dealing with? Are the traditional structures of communication between author and the public shifting? Has our communication in and through the net become more emancipated? Which topics are of interest to most people, and are the old promises kept? What contents concern users regarding the region they live in, the political and social problems they are confronted with, and the political structures they are involved in? So far, research on phenomena associated with the electronic media and non-European regions has been unsystematic and fragmentary. Albrecht Hofheinz has subdivided the research work on the Arabic-language internet into two groups, the separating line being the critical event of September 11, 2001: Before 9/11, a major part of this literature dealt with new politics and emerging public spheres in the 1990s, and from 2001 onwards, “terrorist activities” and the media as battlefield emerged as the new focal areas of internet-related research (Hofheinz, 2004).

Besides focussing on political events and major political topics, one needs to address the particularities of the use of digital media in non-European lan-

guages while also taking into consideration the imbrications and cross-linking within the global media environment in terms of the content published as well as of the technology, the financing and the players involved. A regional allocation of certain players, for example, is not so simple to undertake due to the fact that Saudi investors co-finance the American satellite television market, and also because most companies and private persons in the Middle East make use of American internet services, such as Google, Facebook, YouTube, BlogSpot or Amazon (see for example Sakr, 2005; Khater, 2010). But then again, we observe specific local or national processes of change in connection with gender relations (see for example Wheeler, 2004), relationships between generations (see for example Braune, 2008), and relations of religious authority (cf. Khamis, 2010; Sakr, 2007), brought about through the active use of the media.

An “Islamic internet”?

In addition, some research work deals with the so-called Islamic internet and with websites pursuing an Islamic agenda. Though they only constitute a small part of the internet-based communication in and from Asia and the Arab-speaking world¹, these sites are a phenomenon that has been booming during the last ten years and remains very popular both with journalists and with students. The history of those sites is explained by Jon Anderson und Yves Gonzales-Quijano (2004) in three stages: at first, it was Muslim students of science or technical subjects at Western universities, who began to use the internet during the 1980s. Here they found more like-minded people who were also searching for answers as to how to apply Islamic rules on everyday life. These discussions were characterised by the absence of contributions from *ʿulama* (Islamic legal scholars). The first IT companies specialising in Arab-language software (for example *Sakhr*, which was established in Kuwait in 1982) came into being during the same period. During the second phase in the 1990s the internet gained popularity, and official institutions, be they governments, political parties, social and political movements, or educational institutions, started producing websites with Islamic content. Those sites were no different to the representations of the respective institutions outside the internet in terms of their content („they preserved their formats and dictions

.....
1 8% religious, i.e. Islamic, websites were among the 100 most-visited sites on the Arabic-language web in November 2003. (cf. Hofheinz: „Das Internet“, 2004: 460).

of formal, official pronouncements“ (id., 63). The third phase saw the expansion of the Arabic language on the internet thanks to the Internet Explorer 5.0 by Microsoft. More and more programmers and producers of content became involved, which led to a diversification of the Islamic internet. New technological accomplishments, such as interactive modules or the ability to upload and save large amounts of data, further contributed to the development of the dynamic Islamic internet we find today: „It is multi-dimensional, user-oriented, modulated to the settings and concerns of professionals, and set within the concerns of pious middle classes“ (id., 65).

Websites with representative functions continue to exist, yet the number of religion-related projects run by individuals or groups in the shape of portals, blogs, and videoblogs is continuously rising in today's Web 2.0. As of 2007, for example, we find Islamic adaptations of the video portal *YouTube.com*, named *IslamTube.com* and *FaithTube.com*. With a few exceptions (see, for instance, Bunt 2009 and Richter, 2010), these latest developments have not yet been critically incorporated in scientific publications, but are reflected on in the form of journalistic articles. Research on the developments described as phase three of the Islamic internet by Anderson and Gonzales-Quijano has so far concentrated largely on fatwas (Islamic legal opinions), which is no surprise inasmuch as fatwas are an interactively oriented genre of Islamic law (see Bunt, 2000 and 2003; Brückner, 2001). The study of media fatwas can help to fulfill a desideratum in the research of the internet in non-European societies, namely to take up and process knowledge traditions and concepts of the regions over which we concern ourselves in association with media and communication related research (cf. Gräf, 2010).

However, the question that needs to be asked is how fortunate the choice of the description „Islamic internet“ is, as it implies that all users are Muslims who communicate exclusively with other Muslims and discuss solely Islam-related subjects. The above assumptions are inadequate essentialisations. Yet we must ask ourselves how specific religious, political, and cultural phenomena of internet-based communication can be researched without the need to be labelled as, for example, „Christian“, „leftist“, or „pop culture“ internet.

3 Diversity, Dynamics and Contextualisation of Internet-based Communication

In many respects, the contributions to this edited volume demonstrate new perspectives and lines of thought. First of all, communication over the internet has manifold formats and platforms, which is reflected in the various articles within this volume. The media practises of bloggers are examined, as is the importance of websites and web portals to political movements. The authors are concerned not only with the content produced, which is often politically alternative, but primarily with the ways different players handle this content both offline and within social networks like Facebook. The diversity of internet-based communication forms is illustrated not only by means of political issues, but also through the analysis of new social practises, such as the search for a life partner in matrimonial websites.

Yet the authors do not focus exclusively on the one medium, the internet; they also examine the interaction between different forms of media and the associated processes. SARAH YURKIEWICZ in her contribution about the Egyptian and Lebanese blogospheres demonstrates how blogs commenting on news and articles which originate from so-called traditional media and, reversely, the references to blogs in the established press bring about a convergence of communications produced online and in the press, which makes hitherto marginalised opinions accessible to a wider readership. At the same time she refers to the issue based and temporary character of activities of many bloggers as a new form of political and social action. In YURKIEWICZ's article, the content analysis of blogs goes hand in hand with the question about the reasons behind people's commitment to public writing in the form of blogs. Often it is one's personal interests and professional career that play a significant role, as the author identifies in her article about individual bloggers, thus putting into perspective an important concern of this volume, namely the contextualisation of internet-based communication (see also Silver, 2000).

A further aspect is her dealing with counterpublics (as defined by Nancy Fraser, 1992), a concept normatively charged with the history of European and American societies. She delves into the question how this type of political counternarrative and alternative presentation of news by means of blogs can be conceptualised in academic work, even (or especially) when the societies