

Book Review: Isaac A. Blankson and Patrick D. Murphy, eds., *Negotiating Democracy: Media Transformations in Emerging Democracies* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 285 pages.

## **Media in New Democracies Agents for Change or Beneficiaries of Change?**

*Sallie Hughes*

A number of volumes comparing political, economic, and social trajectories of national media systems have appeared in recent years, but few look specifically at the experiences of new democracies and none that I can think of include such a wide variety of countries as *Negotiating Democracy: Media Transformations in Emerging Democracies*, edited by Isaac A. Blankson and Patrick D. Murphy. The inclusion of countries that less frequently reach the U.S.-based academic press is the strength of this volume. The quality of several of the case studies also makes the book worth reading. Essentially a compendium of descriptive chapters on a large number of country cases less known to the field, *Negotiating Democracy* does not present a cohesive comparative framework for theory building. Therefore, this volume can be read with Curran and Park's *De-Westernizing Media Studies*, Morris and Waisbord's *Media and Globalization*, and a few others. Hanitsch's developing project, *Worlds of Journalism*, also is promising, as he and a team of researchers around the globe assess journalistic culture along a series of theoretically derived dimensions.

The purpose of *Negotiating Democracy* is to assess the relationship between media and democracy within the broader framework of globalization, especially the effects of the spread of economic liberalism and electoral democracy on media ownership and content, as well as the interaction between media and discourses on democratic rights and practices. As Murphy states, *Negotiating Democracy* "takes as its focus the place of mass media in the political and cultural life of nations negotiating democratization while simultaneously contending with economic liberalization and privatization, the changing state, and the reformation of civil society" (p. 2).

The book begins with a brief introduction from Murphy that reviews the geopolitical history of media and globalization, making the important point that neoliberalism seems to link international and intranational actors more

---

**Sallie Hughes** is Associate Professor in the School of Communication, University of Miami. <shughes@miami.edu>

seamlessly than political and economic flows under colonialism or during the Cold War. Liberalization of media systems, he further notes, has largely been pursued to create business opportunities and lighten the load of overburdened states, not to deepen citizenship or improve the quality of democratic practice. Quoting a 2006 observation of Peruvian scholar Rosa Maria Alfaro, he asserts this is troubling because the contours of democracy are packaged in terms of consumerism instead of citizenship.

The introduction covers much ground and makes interesting points. It should be more tightly connected to the chapters that follow, though. For example, the “hope” created by “citizen-based” media that is mentioned in the introduction might have led into a discussion of Rampal and Wilkinson’s interpretations of the importance of the civic-oriented independent media early in Taiwanese and Mexican political liberalization processes. Likewise, McDaniel’s discussion of NGO-based media production in Cambodia as a foil to media controlled by political patronage, or Krady’s fascinating analysis of how pan-Arab audience interpretations of reality television have created a discursive space for democratic contestation, could have been explored.

The book is organized in three sections, without an integrating conclusion, introductory overviews, or guiding logic. The chapters can be understood separately and all individually offer interesting lessons for scholars and upper-level undergraduates or graduate students.

The first set of chapters covers regional trends by reviewing the challenges of media independence and pluralism in Africa, the monopolistic and quasi-monopolistic family-owned broadcast companies of Central America, and differences in the levels of media development, effects of European communications policy, and roles of media in ethnic conflict in Eastern European countries. The second section discusses state control and democratic reform in Cambodia, Taiwan, Nigeria, Iran, and South Korea. The third set of chapters assesses broadcasting and globalization in the Middle East, Mexico, Bulgaria, and Greece.

The most sophisticated chapter, in my opinion, is Kraidy’s assessment of reality television and politics in the Arab world. By comparing public discourse surrounding three popular reality shows beamed on pan-Arab satellite television, he explains how business and religious leaders in several Arab countries created an arena for debate about the role of mass media and politically relevant cultural values. Further, a discussion of the potential and limitations of audience “participation” in the selection of winning program contestants illuminates how entertainment programming may influence democratic values and practices. In all, the chapter paints a picture of an emerging public sphere in which groups driven by economic, nationalistic, and religious motivations vie for control of media entertainment programming that engages audiences whose members are becoming more participatory but have yet to become fully invested democratic citizens.

Most of the remaining chapters use historical narrative to introduce

readers to the media systems and contemporary issues they review. Several have interesting stories to tell. Rockwell describes media oligarchs' capture of state regulatory power in Central America. Ibroscheva and Raicheva-Stover describe how Rupert Murdoch came to control Bulgaria's strongest national network, and flooded it with translations from his U.S.-based Fox network. Semati explores the ebbs and flows of Iranian reformers' struggles to pluralize news and public debate, but unfortunately was not able to assess trends under the current Ahmadinejad government by the time the book went to press. Sims argues that a convergence of business and political interests drove Greek radio privatization, creating a quid pro quo reminiscent of Mexican and Central American broadcasting. Other chapters provide useful overviews of media system development during democratic transitions, although they sometimes lack depth of analysis.

It is interesting to note that several of the chapters (Cambodia, Nigeria, pan-Africa, and South Korea) may not be sufficiently critical in their view of the democratizing potential of economic liberalism for mass media reform, even though other chapters (Greece, Bulgaria, Central America) are quite explicit in their descriptions of the shortcomings of faith in the market. Latin Americanists are aware that authoritarianism and private-sector media can co-exist for substantial periods of time and that structures created during authoritarian periods continue to shape media-state relations in more democratic periods. Likewise, critical political economists in established democracies have long argued that commercial media systems also support the status quo power structures in an electorally democratic society, including dominant ideologies and the actors benefiting from them. Both groups of scholars understand that media commercialism is as much a guarantee for sensationalism and depoliticization of journalistic content as it is for the creation of journalistic cultures and structures holding power accountable or promoting political and ideological pluralism. Given also what seems to be a pattern of hyper-commercialization of broadcast media and loss of identity in the oppositional press following founding democratic elections in many new democracies, the editors could have brought up this point during revision or in an integrating conclusion to the book.

Another debatable point is that the case selection for the book is justified only in that the countries are all undergoing political transition from different forms of authoritarianism while simultaneously under pressure to liberalize their economies. It would have been instructive to have selected cases based upon key analytical variables, if not to have explored a typology of new democracies. Some lines of analysis that might have been fruitful include the different starting points and pathways of transitions and their effects on, or interaction with, media system development; how globalization differentially affects national media systems in relation to countries' ability to produce and export media content; and how national media policies before and after the installation of democratic elections speeds or slows content commercialization

and the strength of citizen-focused media.

Path dependencies and holdover authoritarian structures and cultural understandings mean that the starting point matters for media transitions. Eastern European countries are transiting from totalitarian regimes and, from what I understand, most hope to completely erase vestiges of the old state-controlled systems. Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua still face problems associated with their civil wars, and the media systems that supported the most conservative elements of those wars continue without substantial modification in the first two countries. Africa is moving away from personalistic military dictatorships, but unevenly and with fears of reversal in some countries.

Of the cases in the volume, Mexico, Taiwan, South Korea, Greece, Lebanon, and Bahrain are strong enough economically to be regional media exporters, and government policy in all but the last case seems to have supported the growth of private media either directly or, in the case of Greece, indirectly. The rest (Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, Honduras, Costa Rica, Cambodia, Romania, Bulgaria, Iran, Nigeria, Ghana, Mali, Kenya, and other emerging African democracies) have weaker domestic production capacities, varying by levels of economic development and the nature of media policy content and stability. What can we learn about media system transitions, globalization, and democracy by comparing these experiences among types of countries? This would have been an interesting question to explore.

As for journalism and the public sphere, to a greater or lesser extent, the Mexican, Taiwanese, and Greek media systems moved from authoritarianism through more civic-oriented periods, during which a section of the independent media engaged prodemocracy forces, and eventually created hybrid regimes in which the market and political connections drive broadcast news production and the weakened independent press follows mixed commercial, professional, and political logics. Are there lessons here for Nigeria, Cambodia, or other states still consolidating democratic elections and, as importantly, for the rule of law? Can the comparison tell us how Taiwan, Mexico, Greece, and other neoliberal democracies might yet create media systems that deepen democratic accountability and political pluralism?

Another theme running through several chapters is how restrictive press environments in new democracies create conditions for self-censorship and restrict diversity in media sources and content. The threat of violence, hold-over authoritarian press laws, and the fear of political system reversals that are faced by African journalists similarly threaten the development of autonomous journalism in Central American and many other new democracies.

The force of transnational media conglomerates is another comparative dimension worth exploring. While foreign capital came to control Bulgaria's premier private TV network as an outlet for content created elsewhere, in South Korea, second-tier domestic commercial groups partnered with international finance and media companies to produce formidable regional media players. With the exception of Guatemala, Central America's media families have

blocked such incursions. Mexico's two national broadcast networks have ties to U.S. media conglomerates, most recently NBC, which is owned by General Electric. These transnational linkages are strengthening, even as the Mexican state finds itself unable or unwilling to open up the broadcasting spectrum to further commercial competitors or to noncommercial projects.

Considering the current U.S. administration's portrayal of Iran as a nuclear threat, I would certainly like to better understand the potential of democratic reformers and independent media in the country. Comparative analysis could help test assumptions about both groups. While Iran's unique state structure institutionalizes religion in governance, the struggle between religious conservatives and liberalizing reformers to control the media and over whether to open them to greater pluralism and democratic debate as described in Semati's chapter evokes struggles between conservatives and reformers in other societies in which liberal democracy is not, or was not, an assured conclusion. Not to discount the differences in religious and military actors, the tango between military censors and democratic reformers using cultural magazines and other independent publications to further democratization as South American military government decompressed could share similarities with the Iranian situation as well as highlight instructive differences.

In short, *Negotiating Democracy* offers to students a number of interesting descriptions of individual media systems in new or emerging democracies as they contend with transitions from authoritarian rule in a global environment favoring economic liberalization. It does not offer an overall framework for the study of media systems in transition or propose a set of analytical dimensions for researchers to use in comparative research. However, the book raises provocative questions for those interested in media and democracy and offers raw material for scholars to use in designing future studies.

