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journals.sagepub.com/home/mcs**Tom Boellstorff** 

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Abstract

This essay introduces the a collection of articles in a special issue focused upon ‘Media, Culture and Change across the Pacific’. It foregrounds the importance of media in reconfiguring our relationships to different categories of place. It asks the following: When does media drive culture change and when might it even act as a conservative force? How do different forms of media, with different patterns of ownership, authorship, and participation, shape social action and cultural personhood?

Keywords

change, cross-border flows, culture, media, Pacific, regions

In 1997, in *The Myth of Continents*, Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen challenged ‘meta-geography’, by which they meant ‘the set of spatial structures through which people order their knowledge of the world’ (p. ix). They emphasized that dividing the world into continents ‘may be convenient, but it does injustice to the complexities of global geography, and . . . when used by those who wield political power, the results can be tragic’ (p. 1). Around this same period, Paul Gilroy’s (1993) *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* called attention to the emergence of identities that were shared both through the historical experience of the transatlantic slave trade as well as music, writing, and other forms of popular culture. Epeli Hau’ofa’s (1993) now classic essay ‘Our Sea of Islands’ centers Oceania as a

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large world in which peoples and cultures moved and mingled unhindered by boundaries of the kind erected much later by imperial powers. From one island to another they sailed to trade and to marry, thereby expanding social networks for greater flow of wealth. They travelled to visit relatives in a wide variety of natural and cultural surroundings . . . (p. 8)

In Hau'ofa's conception, focusing upon Oceania moves away from deficiency frameworks (e.g. 'small islands') to one of connection. This, he argues, better captures the perspectives and realities of those who navigate the region.

This collection of articles follows the critiques of metageography by exploring 'the Pacific' in a manner that includes Asia, Oceania, and the Americas. Rather than a continental imaginary, the conceptual framework treats the Pacific as a set of social, economic, and cultural interchanges. It moves beyond colonial and imperial configurations of nations and subregions such as Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia as noted by Hau'ofa, yet also acknowledges the historical and situated nature of the region through the flows of power, people, and resources that have moved within and across the region for centuries. It approaches 'the Pacific' both as a series of waterways and islands, oceans and archipelagos, yet also attends to the important role of the boundaries and borders of the nation-states (e.g. 'Pacific Rim' nations) that shape these flows, and their own internal geographies that have influenced the shape and scope of these exchanges. It thereby links as well to other 'oceanic' reframings of society and space. For instance, media studies scholars can certainly benefit from deeper engagement with the rich body of work exploring the history and contemporary dynamics of the Indian Ocean with regard to culture and power (Ho, 2006; Hofmeyr, 2007) as well as alternative approaches to conceptualizing regions and area studies (Boellstorff, 2006).

Alongside our turn to 'The Pacific', the articles in this section center media empirically and theoretically. Whereas Gilroy's focus was squarely in the realm of popular culture and music created through a shared historical experience for people across the Americas, Africa, Europe and the Caribbean, Hau'ofa attended to exchange and movement across Oceania, Lewis and Wigen brought to the fore the long-standing body of work in critical geography and beyond, but media is largely absent from these accounts. We do not fault the authors for this oversight; rather, this special issue builds on to their insightful work regarding the limits of geographies and attention to cultural forms that move within and beyond national contexts. In doing so, this collection foregrounds the importance of media in reconfiguring our relationships to different categories of place. In what has sometimes been termed the 'Pacific Century', the role of media and communication in culture – and particularly cultural change – is undoubtedly massive. The precise forms such influence takes, however, are less well understood. When does media drive culture change and when might it even act as a conservative force? How do different forms of media, with different patterns of ownership, authorship, and participation, shape social action and cultural personhood? The essays in this section work outward from fundamental questions like these. In doing so, we hope to bring forms of comparative and translocal analysis to the study of media, culture, and change in the Pacific. Furthermore, we place such analysis in reframed scholarly networks that link researchers from Asia, Australia, Latin America, and North America.¹ The decentering of Euro-American knowledge practices is thus a key element that inspires our collective work.

This section consists of three short articles and two long articles. In the first short article, ‘Making migrant identities on social media’, Nell Haynes and Xinyuan Wang explore migrant identity in two ‘boomtowns’: Alto Hospicio in Chile, and GoodPath Town in China. In both cities, migrant workers use online social media to respond to the challenges they experience, but in starkly different ways. In contrast to many accounts of digital media’s effects, Haynes and Wang show how digital cultures do not have homogeneous effects; rather, the affordances of social media are consequential but contingent. In ‘The Television Families of Mexico and the Philippines’, Anna Cristina Pertierra explores a different political economy of media. Here, the focus is not on migrants, but on the elite families that have dominated the television industry in both Mexico and the Philippines. Television stations in both countries present themselves as ‘families’, drawing on models of kinship and domesticity to articulate ideologies of viewership and patronage. It is precisely through juxtaposing the analysis of an article like this, on one hand, and the work of Haynes and Wang, on the other hand, that we seek to open new avenues of inquiry with regard to media in the Pacific. We can extend such juxtaposition with the final short article in this section: ‘Decolonization, Popular Song, and Black-Pacific Identity in Melanesia’. Here, Camellia Webb-Gannon and Michael Webb reveal how some Melanesians use forms of popular song shaped by reggae to articulate Black identity. Extending Paul Gilroy’s (1993) notion of the ‘Black Atlantic’, Webb-Gannon and Webb use examples of climate change, cultural identity, and West Papuan independence to explore how reworkings of reggae and hip hop reveal forms of Black Pacific identification and activism.


The themes of digital activism, political economy, popular culture, and new social identities that appear throughout these three short articles emerge in the two longer articles in this collection. In the first, ‘*Om toleransi Om*: Four Indonesian reflections on digital heterosexism’, Tom Boellstorff explores four different periods between the 1980s and 2017 when lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Indonesians were framed by media as outside normative Indonesian citizenship. By the 2010s, we find forms of what Boellstorff terms ‘digital exclusionary populism’, the articulation of such restrictive notions of citizenship online. This has important consequences for conceptualizing the role of digital media in both ‘imagined communities’ of national belonging (Anderson, 1983) and forms of national estrangement that can have devastating consequences for selfhood, community, and human rights. The second long article, ‘Digital media, political authoritarianism, and internet controls in Southeast Asia’, looks across the Southeast Asian region to examine how state power shapes the potential democratic affordances of digital media. Aim Sinpeng shows not only how digital media are not inherently or inevitably progressive, but also how the potential for authoritarian co-optation and control is contextually specific – in this case, to Southeast Asia.


Overall, then, these articles use empirical material, conceptual frameworks, and scholarly networks that bridge ‘The Pacific’ to rethink contemporary media studies in a manner that displaces the Euro-American hegemony. Alongside highlighting connections and exchanges often missed in other accounts of the Pacific, our hope is that the individual articles contribute to a more globally inclusive framework for the study of digital media. As a collection, they additionally provide contrasts and resonances that build toward a more robust conversation regarding the truly massive impact that digital media now have across the Pacific and beyond.

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Note

1. The original inspiration for this special issue emerged at the symposium 'Media, Culture and Change across the Pacific: Perspectives from Asia, Oceania and the Americas'. Organized by Raul Castro and John Postill, the event took place at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Peru (PUCP) in Lima, Peru between 16 and 17 November 2015.

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