



*New Media Configurations – Changing Societies? Current Research Perspectives on South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and North Africa.* DFG research network „Medialisation and social change outside Europe: South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Arab-speaking region“, 28.11.2013-30.11.2013.

**Reviewed by** Bettina Gräf

**Published on** H-Soz-u-Kult (April, 2014)

## **New Media Configurations – Changing Societies? Current Research Perspectives on South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and North Africa**

The three-day international conference was organised by Nadja-Christina Schneider (Humboldt University Berlin) and hosted by the Deutsche-Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) research network „Medialisation and Social Change Outside Europe: South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Arab-Speaking Region“ (2011–2014). It took place in November 2013 at the Institute for Asian and African Studies at Humboldt University Berlin and was composed of five thematic panels, three keynote lectures, a poster presentation, a film screening and a final discussion round. Encompassing four regions, the panels dealt with media art and documentary filmmaking (1.), the political economy of the media (2.), changing media and religious renegotiations (3.), gender and changing identities (4.) and converging media and changing practices (5.).

A remarkable aspect of this conference was the fact that it not only hosted European scholars talking about societal changes in Asia and Africa, but academics from Asia, North Africa and Europe analysing media practices and media structures in Europe, Asia and Africa. This allowed for critical assessment on at least two levels. First, it demonstrates the trend not only to „provincialise“ Europe but also to provincialise mono-directional academic research. Second, it leads to fascinating insights into changing media representations and media practices within different spatial entities. Each scale of analysis obviously needs deep knowledge of the cultural

and political histories and languages of its people, but at the same time these interconnected views show common ethical concerns and shared visions for social and cultural emancipation and political participation.

Furthermore, because of the mixed regional contexts of each panel, the discussions were not only focused on specific questions by regional experts (though that happened too), but mostly determined by comparative questions and remarks reflecting an interest in transregional and globally connected phenomena.

The conference started with a panel on research, media art and documentary filmmaking. The first paper was presented by VASANTHI MARIADASS (Bangalore) on filmmaker Harun Farocki. Inspired by critical theoreticians like Judith Butler, Mariadass discusses Farocki's films as counter-narratives to well-established accounts produced by liberal democracies on so-called „just wars“ and the use of violence in mainstream media reports. The second speaker SOPHIE ERNST (Leiden) presented an intellectual history of the PowerPoint presentation comparing cultural practices from Japan and the Netherlands from the seventeenth century onwards. ULRIKE MOTHE (Weimar) spoke about self-reflexive documentary films in India, citing the example of independent filmmaker Ranjan Palit, who has influenced the aesthetics and narrative style of non-fictional film in India since the 1970s.

The second panel looked closely at the relationship between media ownership structures and politics. The three presentations showed that neither state-owned media nor private media enterprises are necessarily a guarantee of a plural mediascape and the independent production and exchange of freely expressed opinions. MELANIE RADUE (Erlangen-Nürnberg) discussed the state-market relationships in Myanmar's recent liberalisation experiment. NADIA LEIHÄS (Erfurt) showed aspects of the multi-layered mediascape of post-revolutionary Egypt since 2011. She discussed the (dis)connections between mass-media productions, like newspapers, and informal media, like graffiti on the walls of Cairo. One example was the controversy around the blue bra, which was sprayed widely and became an icon of resistance against the military, after military police had seized a veiled woman wearing a black *abaya* on the road and violently stripped her until her blue bra was visible. OMAIR ANAS (New Delhi) introduced the results of his research on Al Jazeera audiences in Berlin, Germany. He questioned the academic tendency to overemphasise the role of new media technologies in the Arab Revolutions and showed the importance of the Qatari satellite channel for supporters of the revolutions around the globe. Since Al Jazeera does not pretend to be neutral or objective, it seems to meet the expectations of audiences who relate themselves to the Global South in general and Sunni Islam in particular.

The third panel focused on changing media and religious renegotiations. WAI WENG HEW (Berlin) talked about Sunni Muslim digital missionary practices in Indonesia and Malaysia, while JEANINE DAGYELI (Berlin) discussed the travelling of semi-professional Islamist videos from the Middle East to Central Asia. XENIA ZEILER (Bremen) presented a paper on Indian digital games and their representation of Hinduism. PATRICK EISENLOHR (Göttingen) linked the three papers, arguing that media are always part of any religious culture. His understanding of religion as an interaction with the Divine -rather than *belief* as in the Protestant understanding - allowed him to interpret the examples that were presented as the latest developments in a long history of religious mediation, representation and counteraction. What seems to have become stronger with the new media is the discourse of self-marketing and self-improvement.

In the poster session that followed, four innovative projects by junior researchers were introduced: EVA EICHENEAUER (Berlin) MA research on the interrelation between language, mass media and democ-

racy in Malaysia, the PhD project on digital culture in Bangladesh by SHAMEEM MAHMUD (Hamburg), the MA research project on Twitter and the political mobilisation of Pakistani youth by QURRATULAIN ZAMAN (Bonn) and MAX KRAMER (Berlin) PhD research on representations of Kashmiri identities in digital films.

The topics of media representations of gender and the renegotiation of identities were the main focus of the fourth panel. DREDGE KÄNG showed the convergences of new media usage and Korean dance performances in Thailand. In his understanding, K-pop (Korean Pop) and cover dancing verify practices of imitation, adaptation and participation at the same time. Gay pop and transgender activities thus show novel ways of expressing the developmental aspirations of young people in Southeast Asia. XENIA GLEISSNER (Exeter) discussed female role models within the national and commercial TV culture of the United Arab Emirates, such as *mother of the nation* or *Bedouin women*. She showed that state television with its gendered strategies tries to reinforce class distinctions in Emirati society. JESNA JAY-ACHANDRAN (Amritsar) focused on online reader comments in response to the news about rapes that followed the gang rape of a young student in New Delhi in December 2012, revealing how stereotypes are produced and reproduced.

The question *What is new about new media?* was asked in the last panel on media convergence and changing practices. MARCUS MICHAELSEN (Erfurt) pointed out that we are currently living in an interesting phase of online communication worldwide, with strong political involvement and creative knowledge production processes on the one hand, and with dark mechanisms of control and censorship on the other. The issue of the commercialisation of knowledge, culture and identities makes evaluating these global developments even more complicated. SARAH McKEEVER (London) looked at SMS communication and the relationship between rumours and riots that took place in the major urban centres of Northeast India in 2012. ARNIKA FUHRMANN (Ithaca) showed examples of do-it-yourself internet television interventions in Thailand that are witty and critical. This phenomenon of critical YouTube productions by laypeople seems to be at once both locally defined and transcultural. Generations of educated youth around the globe can relate to this kind of humorous media production, while older generations may not necessarily relate to it. DINA ABOU ZEID (Cairo) talked about the use of stereotyped figures and Egyptian dialect in Facebook communication as a new type of citizen journalism

that also influences the wider public. Last but not least, FRITZI-MARIE TITZMANN (Berlin) presented mobility as a key notion in current discourses about online media and the Indian matrimonial market. She showed the cross-media-based strategies of potential partners and media professionals alike and explored the possibility of these practices to change society as a whole.

The keynote lectures each day were related to the main topics of the conference, namely *gender*, *economics* and *religion* as social practices and features of new media configurations around the globe. MAITRAYEE CHAUDHURI (New Delhi) spoke about the relationship between gender and media in India, providing an overview of what is old and what is new. Taking the example of musicians and the music industry, ZIAD FAHMY (Ithaca) lectured about the dynamics of transnational media culture and capitalism in early twentieth-century Egypt thus adding a historical perspective to the discussions. MARIWAN KRAIDY (Pennsylvania) talked about the Arab uprisings as battles of representation, where good old-fashioned journalism faces the challenges posed by new forms of media accounts that not only introduce alternative narrations but also involve new actors claiming the right to participate.

The final discussion round with NADJA-CHRISTINA SCHNEIDER (Berlin), CAROLA RICHTER (Berlin) and JOHANNA BUSS (Wien), which again triggered a lively debate, focused on methodological issues: the disciplinary framework of media-related research, the critique of conventional Area Studies regarding the construction of areas, the issue of epistemological violence in academic knowledge production, and the question of whether one should stick with the entity of the nation state as a subject of inquiry for media research.

The conference's well-chosen topics and the various contributors from different places gave an excellent example of the new disciplinary field of critical media studies. Here, media-related issues are studied in their geographical, cultural, economic and political complexities in a world that is perceived as multi-centred. Besides research topics that focus beyond developments in Europe and America and the international presence of scholars, it reflects another important issue, namely the rejection of earlier assumptions within sociology, media studies and Islamic studies (to name just a few disciplines) that through the utilisation of certain media technologies, (post-colonial) societies would enter modernity. This assumption on the part of modernisation theory has been questioned since the 1970s, yet it still continues to govern

a good deal of research, especially in media and communication studies. All the more important, then, are conferences like this that reveal that neither media-centrism nor the neglect of media-related phenomena will explain to us the full dimension of social, cultural and political life and the struggle for emancipation in the world today and yesterday. It will be an important as well as challenging task to theorise these insights in an upcoming volume.

### Conference Overview:

*Panel I: Research, Media Art and Documentary Film-making*

Moderation: Jamila Adeli (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany)

Vasanthi Mariadass (Srishti College of Art, Design and Technology, Bangalore, India): *Archival Practice by Harun Farocki: Effects and Affects*

Sophie Ernst (Universiteit Leiden, The Netherlands): *An intellectual history of the power point presentation: How a "new media" machine was adapted and integrated into the art of projection; a case study of Japan and the Netherlands*

Ulrike Mothes (Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, Germany): *Self-reflexive documentary film in India*

### Opening remarks

Nadja-Christina Schneider (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany)

### Keynote lecture

Maitrayee Chaudhuri (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India)

*Media and Gender in India: What is Old? What is New?*

Moderation: Nadja-Christina Schneider (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany)

### Documentary Film Screening

Ulrike Mothes (Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, Germany): *Women's Police Station* (2013)

*Panel II: The political economy of media: Politics, Ownership and Technologies*

Moderation: Carola Richter (Freie Universität Berlin, Germany) &

Bettina Gräf (Zentrum Moderner Orient Berlin, Germany)

Melanie Radue (Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany): *Myanmar's Bumpy Road to Media Freedom*

Nadia Leihls (Universität Erfurt, Germany): *Persisting Powers, Fragmentation and Trust. Transforming the Egyptian Media System*

Omair Anas (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India): *Arab media after Arab Spring: A Study of Al-Jazeera's Audiences*

*Keynote lecture*

Ziad Fahmy (Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, USA): *Media-Capitalism: A Historical Perspective on Media and Society in Early Twentieth Century Egypt*

Commentary: Bettina Gräf (Zentrum Moderner Orient Berlin, Germany)

*Panel III: Changing Media and Religious Renegotiations*

Moderation: Jens Kutscher (Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany)

Comments: Patrick Eisenlohr (Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, Germany)

*Input Statements*

Wai Weng Hew (Zentrum Moderner Orient Berlin, Germany): *Dakwah 2.0: Digital Dakwah and Its Implications in Indonesia and Malaysia*

Jeanine Dageyeli (Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies, Germany): *Pious Admonitions - Middle Eastern Islamist Videos and their Pathways to Central Asia*

Xenia Zeiler (Universität Bremen, Germany): *Renegotiating Hinduism via Digital Media: Indian Digital Games provoking Global Debates on Being Hindu*

*Poster Session*

Eva Eichenauer (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany): *Language, mass media and democracy: A Malaysian case study*

Shameem Mahmud (Universität Hamburg, Germany): *From digital divide to digital culture - emergence of online public spheres in Bangladesh*

Qurratulain Zaman (Deutsche Welle Academy, Bonn, Germany): *The influence of twitter on political mobilization of youth: A case study of Pakistan*

Max Kramer (Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies, Germany): *Representation of Kashmiri identities in digital films*

*Lecture & Afternoon Tea*

Marwan M. Kraidy (University of Pennsylvania, USA): *Plato's Digital Cave? The Arab Uprisings as Battles of Representation*

*Panel IV: Media Changing Identities: Focus on Gender*

Moderation: Fritzi-Marie Titzmann (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany)

Dredge King (Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA): *Idols of Development: The Queer Convergence of New Media and Korean Dance Performance in Thailand*

Xenia Gleissner (University of Exeter, London, UK): *Women as Representations of Class and Modernity: Gendered Public Visibility on National TV in the United Arab Emirates*

Jesna Jayachandran (Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, India): *Debating rape in India: Readers' comments in the online public sphere*

*Panel V: What is new about new media? Converging Media - Changing Practices*

Moderation and Input Statement: MARCUS MICHAELSEN (Universität Erfurt, Germany)

Sarah McKeever (King's College, London, UK): *Mobile violence: Communalism in India and ICT Intervention*

Arnika Fuhrmann (Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, USA): *Shallow News in Depth: An Internet Television Intervention in Thailand*

Dina Abou Zeid (Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt): *Egyptian Comics on Facebook as a New Type of Citizen Media and Political Activism*

Fritzi-Marie Titzmann (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin): *Media mobility and convergence within India's matrimonial market*

*Concluding remarks and discussion*

*Comments*

Johanna Buss (Universität Wien, Austria)

Carola Richter (Freie Universität Berlin, Germany)

Nadja-Christina Schneider (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany)

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**Citation:** Bettina Gräf. Review of , *New Media Configurations – Changing Societies? Current Research Perspectives on South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and North Africa*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. April, 2014.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=41497>

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