MEDIATING CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN A GLOBALIZED PUBLIC SPACE

Edited by
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Mediating Cultural Diversity in a Globalized Public Space

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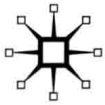

Introduction, selection and editorial matter © Isabelle Rigoni and Eugénie Saitta 2012
Individual chapters © Contributors 2012
Foreword © Myria Georgiou 2012

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First published 2012 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978–0–230–34877–6

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

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Foreword

While this book was coming to fruition, the world was in turmoil. A global financial crisis had been threatening the current world order. The Arab Spring reshuffled the political map in the Middle East. In Europe, political and economic concerns about the future of the European Union (EU) brought into the European public spheres some big political, even existentialist, questions: what and who does Europe actually represent? Who is running it? How much are people in control of the apparatus of power in the EU? In trying to manage some of the public's concerns, European leadership developed multi-targeted ideological campaigns: multiculturalism found itself under fierce attack as being part of the problem. The powerful leadership of the EU also targeted the work ethos at the European periphery as other to the *real* Europe. New and old *Others* became, yet again, ever present within and around European boundaries, 'threatening' what Europe and the West are supposed to represent. Powerful discourses of *We*-ness and of *Other*-ness have made great advances in mainstream political debates and the media. Germans vs Greeks; illegal migrants vs skilled, screened migrants; asylum vs border control are only some of the oppositions that regularly frame debates in the public sphere.

Yet, while decisions made at the centres of economic and political power exposed global subjects to major global risks, the street has responded in different ways. Public space became, at least momentarily, redefined in the street. The Arab world experienced revolutions rarely seen in our times, especially in such intensity and extent. A new movement, *Occupy*, claimed that it spoke on behalf of 99 per cent of the world's people as it protested against capitalism and greed. And the riots in the burning streets of British cities might have lacked a clear message but they shouted out despair and marginalization.

Who speaks for whom and where? Are acts of despair or of political protest in the street forming new alternatives or do they just reflect the fragmentation of the public sphere? Are the mainstream public spheres now settled into reproducing hegemonic voices that further marginalize minorities? Are there spaces that bring together 'the street' and decision-making power, and where minorities find a voice and a presence?

Saskia Sassen has been writing about 'presence' as politics, especially for marginalized groups who find little space to be heard and seen in the

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mainstream. For her, it is the city that provides marginalized groups with spaces to see themselves and to articulate their claims. Intensification of urbanization and of mediation has brought significant opportunities for political presence; it has also brought forward the need to rethink conceptualizations of the public sphere and its containment. As Sassen continues: 'The loss of power at the national level produces the possibility for new forms of power and politics at the subnational level. The national as container of social process and power is cracked' (2005: 86). If the nation is indeed cracked, what happens on local and transnational levels, on physical streets and virtual ones has consequences for the ways in which we see ourselves, we hear others, and form communities and polities.

The urban street, which Sassen talks about, is a physical space. But the 'visualness' (ibid.) that it brings to minorities and marginalized groups invites us to think of the urban street both as a physical space and as a mediated space, where 'visualness' and representation (political and mediated) beyond restrictive spaces can come to life. Ethnic, diasporic, minority media often come to life in the city, where intense juxtapositions of difference are realized and where diversity emerges as we literally rub into each other's difference. Such media represent one of those systems of communication and expression that challenge understandings of the public sphere as singular and of the nation as a taken-for-granted framework for identity and citizenship. Ethnic and diasporic media are media of local, national, and transnational reach; they are media characterized by paradoxical contradictions: claiming to represent communities; aiming to make a profit; torn by amateurism; promoting long-distance nationalism; celebrating cosmopolitanism or flying the flag of communitarianism. More than anything, in their rich, even contradictory roles, these media demonstrate something very important: the public spheres they are part of, or the public sphericules as they are often now called, are not only *Other* to the mainstream. Diasporic and ethnic media are not the marginal and poor relative of the mainstream media. These media reflect a world in itself: rich, powerful, contested, and torn apart by power struggles within and with the hegemonic system of media power. As with all media, these also make advances in mediating political and cultural life; they inform people and give space for voicing claims and self-representations; they link the urban street with the virtual and mediated street and they are part of public life. Bauman (2005) argues that publicness, especially as associated with urban life, makes it possible to live together in difference. It is this publicness of contradictory and coexisting discourses of identity

and politics that normalizes living with difference. As Bauman puts it: 'It is the exposure to difference that in time becomes the major factor in happy cohabitation by causing the urban roots of fear to wilt and fade' (2005: 78). And ethnic and diasporic media contribute to this publicness.

It is in this context that the media this book debates and analyses need to be studied and understood. As systems of representation that are complex and rich, they destabilize the dualities of a homogeneous *We* against a homogeneous *Other*. As they expand across local, national, and transnational spaces, they challenge notions of the public sphere as singular and of the public space as physically contained. And as they provide opportunities for self-representation to groups that often find themselves at the margins of society, they open up the urban and mediated street to be a space for presence, possibly and hopefully a space for democratic participation.

Myria Georgiou
London, April 2012

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Acknowledgements

Most of the chapters in this book were presented as papers at the international conference 'An Alternative Self-Representation? Ethnic Minority Media, between Hegemony and Resistances', organized by the EU Excellence Team MINORITYMEDIA and the CNRS research centre MIGRINTER, at the MSHS, Poitiers, France, 18–19 March 2010. The conference was supported by:

University of Poitiers
Maison des Sciences de l'Homme et de la Société (MSHS), Poitiers
Research centre Migrations Internationales, Espaces et Sociétés (MIGRINTER), Poitiers
Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS)
Région Poitou-Charentes
European Commission, Marie Curie Actions (6th PCRDT), Excellence Team MINORITYMEDIA (Minority, Media and Representation across Europe)
European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)
Open Society Institute and
The French National Agency for Social Cohesion and Equal Opportunities (ACSE)

The book has received the support of the Centre for Research on Political Action in Europe (CRAPE), Rennes.

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1

Democratizing the Public Space? Ethnic Minority Media in a Glocal Context

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The communication practices of ethnic minority groups can only be properly understood if we situate them in the context of globalized exchanges and the widespread democratization of access to technological tools. Our aim in this introduction is therefore to set up a number of ways forward in thinking about how we understand contemporary phenomena of mobility, new conceptions of space, and the transformation in information and communication technologies (ICTs), which together contribute to the reshaping of the relationships within and between ethnic groups, as well as interrogating the notion of public space.

ICTs, media, and migrations

A series of questions and research around ICTs, media, and migrations first developed in the 1980s, becoming more pronounced from the 1990s when the internet took off. The available literature approaches this theme from a variety of angles and at the intersection of several disciplines (for a review of the literature, see Mattelart, 2007, 2009). One line of questioning falls within the sociology of inter-ethnic relations and the issue of migration and mobility, and relates to the role of ICTs in processes of identification and belonging, and how migrants maintain links with their families and their networks in their countries of origin. A second line of questioning arises within the sociology of journalism and media, and concerns the struggles over representation in relation to immigration – between mainstream and minority media production within the host country, as well as over how these are perceived by migrants. A third line of questioning comes from the sociology of social movements, and focuses on the emergence of

a collective migrant voice in public space as a result of ICTs, and more generally on new methods of political participation, collective mobilization, and civic engagement.

At the heart of this book lies a focus on ethnic minority media. We thus take seriously Husband's proposal (1994, p. 14) that we should analyse 'the situation of ethnic minorities as active agents in media production'. We should clarify that the concept of media that we use here goes beyond a legitimist definition which is concerned only with mainstream media and thus recreates the 'indigenous' hierarchies within journalism, to take account of other less conventional forms of media, such as posters, blogs, and online music or video platforms, etc.

Although this book falls squarely within the tradition of works on ICTs, media, and migrations, it also tries to learn something from them so as to avoid a number of pitfalls. Our first critical position is that we are not celebrating the new per se. Three arguments serve to question the notion of a 'technological tipping point' at the turn of the 1990s. The first is the long tradition of migrant use of ICTs to keep in touch with their country of origin – Dahan and Scheffer (2001) cite letters sent by post horses as well as by sea, or even by telegraph. The second is the idea that, rather than replacing previous methods of communication, the new technologies complement them and merge with them, thus constituting a range of possibilities. Looking at the ways in which migrants organize collective mobilization, Bimber (2000) demonstrates the extent to which the distinctions between 'traditional civic engagement' and 'technology related civic engagement' are blurred, and practices are intertwined, such that it seems artificial to separate them. The third argument encourages us to consider the transformations at work in the ways in which migrants make use of ICTs: although it may not be the case that 'new' technologies replace 'older' ones, nonetheless over time we can observe a change in usage. This celebration of the new is inseparable from a further implicit assumption, that of the primacy of the internet, which we challenge here: this is our second critical position.

In extolling the virtues of 'computerized communication', 'electronic intervention', and 'rapid communication' as leading automatically to democratization, some writers have been unable to escape a certain technological determinism (Appadurai, 2008). Two arguments lead us to take stock of the limits of the internet, and of its effects. The first relates to the question of access to the internet. It is useful here to recall the 'digital divide' between countries, regions, and urban and rural areas; and similarly to emphasize how much this access depends on an

actor's socio-economic and cultural resources, which also dictate power relations within and between social groups (Kosnick, 2007). Access further depends on sociographic characteristics – such as gender – as Casula (2011) demonstrates when she notes how difficult it has been for Italian women to become part of the information society. The second argument regarding the limits of the internet aims to resituate analysis within the context in which the interaction under scrutiny is taking place. This context constitutes a framework of constraints – and ultimately of opportunities – which requires analysis at several scales, starting with the national, state scale. At the end of a discussion of how the Chinese state controls the means of communication 'to shape a sense of national community in a society opening to external influences' (Ong, 1999, p. 63), Ong advocates examining the 'national, transnational, and political-economic structures that enable, channel, and control the flows of people, things, and ideas' (1999, p. 11). To our analysis of external constraints, we must also add the constraints which exist within the media. This book thus adopts a third critical position: that of not promoting an uncritical vision of ethnic minority media.

To forearm ourselves against a lack of critical distance, we need to dispel three preconceived ideas; the first of which is a view of ethnic minority media as a uniform and homogeneous whole. Several writers have demonstrated the very great range of positions occupied by these media in the journalistic field. In this present work, Ferrández Ferrer and Suárez Navaz (Chapter 5) thus distinguish three strategies (instrumental, clientelist, and organic) used by Latin American journalists in Spain. The second preconception is to assume that these media and those working within them are intrinsically subversive by the very fact of their ethnic identity. This is in effect to forget both the conditions of production within which these media operate (for example, some are driven by the demands of the business; see Ben Amor-Mathieu, 2000; Naficy, 1993) and the conflicts of identity (professional, ethnic, etc.) which journalists from ethnic minority backgrounds may experience (Husband, 2005); or the question of the 'burden of representation', a term first used to describe the situation of black film-makers who felt under an obligation to take advantage of every opportunity to represent the interests and viewpoints of the Afro-Caribbean community (Cottle, 1998, p. 306). The third preconception would be to assume a hard distinction between ethnic minority media and mainstream media based on a binary conception of media space. This would be to deny the complexity of journalism and the relationships which exist between different types of media. Thus, just as it seems not useful to

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