

Book Review (Ngwainmbi, 2022)

Ashlie PERRY

Endicott College, Massachusetts, USA

Ngwainmbi, Emmanuel K. (Ed.). (2022). *Dismantling Cultural Borders Through Social Media and Digital Communications: How Networked Communities Compromise Identity*. Palgrave Macmillan. \$149.99, ISBN-13: 978-3-030-92212-2

With *Dismantling Cultural Borders Through Social Media and Digital Communications*, editor Emmanuel Ngwainmbi brings together comprehensive and diverse bodies of work that examine how the flow of information and digital activities can construct new social and cultural norms. Moving beyond state boundaries that are limited to geography, this book highlights areas of strength and weakness of digital platforms. An overarching argument of the book is that culture, and as much as social identities, is impacted by digital media. Claims of misinformation and election tampering in some countries in the Global North are examined. This book also highlights how varying digital platforms have managed to change the political and social landscape in countries that belong to both the Global North and South.

The intended audience for this book includes those who work with and train others in digital media. It also includes researchers in the field of public communication. This book is also intended for those interested in the intersectionality of identities and cultures that are impacted by the various media platforms and the information that is disseminated on them. Scholars and researchers interested in identity politics can add to the breadth of knowledge. Given some of the recurrent themes found in this body of work, undergraduate and graduate students in journalism are an ideal audience; as many authors challenge those in journalism to create, and adhere, to a higher standard of ethics.

The collection is international in scope and authorship, with many of the contributors citing institutional affiliations in North America, South America, China, Africa, Europe, Chile and Vietnam. By weaving a connection between identities (i.e., political, ethnic, racial, gender, etc.) and media platforms, the contributors demonstrate how both Global North and Global South's media can shape those identities.

While reading through the chapters, themes emerged from the book. One theme that arose was that of the role of media in identity formation. In some cases, as with China and its online celebrities, media can help break negative stereotypes and create new ones, as was also found in the research on Vietnamese youth who use memes to reshape and negotiate their cultural identities. In other cases, like that of Colombian and Haitian immigrants, the media disseminates rhetoric that stokes negative stereotypes. There were similar findings in a study about Black Americans in the United States.

Another theme that reverberates throughout the book is about ethical journalism. From interest-based reporting about COVID-19 in Africa, to various cases in the United States, media outlets pushed information that suited the interest of its elite stakeholders and not what was factual, unbiased information. Such shortcomings are thought to have had deadly effects on varying marginalized populations.

On the theme of ethical journalism, another topic was that of media responsibility, from research suggesting that social media platforms be more proactive about screening hate speech, to African (and Global South) media focusing on Western style reporting. The book charges

media outlets to thwart misinformation, create balance and unbiased content, and be equitable in their representation of identities (ethnic, racial, religious, gendered, etc.)

A theme prevalent in many chapters pertains to the disconnect between the media equity of those in the Global North versus those in the Global South. Western media standards are still adopted by many media outlets in the Global South. Western media is centered, as some would argue against, around white culture as the norm. For those of different racial and ethnic backgrounds in the Global North, this makes access to, and digestibility, of information on these varying media platforms less than equitable. For those media outlets in the Global South still using this Western standard, it puts them even more at a disadvantage as it highlights content that generally does not apply to its consumers, creating an information gap.

Lastly, there is the theme of media as a collective space to discuss otherwise off-limit topics. From taboo topics about conservative dress for women in Afghanistan, to using memes to discuss sex by Vietnamese youth, media can provide a space for identities to cultivate and adapt.

With six sections, the book uses a broad spectrum of media to understand media representation of different communities in the Global North and Global South. The contents of each section are detailed below.

Section I examines ethnicity, and identities in general, from a sociological perspective. Chapter 1, “A Bird’s Eye View of Networked Communities and Human Identity” by E. K. Ngwainmbi, argues that Western media (Global North) continues to dominate information flows both in the Global North and the Global South with many consequences. Western media can portray those in the Global South as a monolith of people that need help and are all underdeveloped. This impacts places with the largest growing youth populations, in the Global South. This monopoly on the media and the flow of information leads to a breakdown in resource allocation and decision making, as decisions can be based on faulty and biased information. The Global North generally allows its citizens to freely use media. This aids in the flow of information and the cultivation of various “identities”. This is not to say that all media is equal, or that all developed countries use media freely and fairly. How media is used has, and continues, to change with the ever-shaping cultures, governmental policies, and people using them.

In Chapter 2, “De-Stigmatization and Identity Refactoring of Chinese Online Celebrities: Case of the Chinese Economy”, by M. Mei and S. Wang, the authors examine the influence that online celebrities have on identity and the Chinese economy, specifically, destigmatizing their role in this influence. The researchers found that online celebrities have economic value, beyond being cultural symbols, that gives them commercial value as well. This research presents a different perspective on identity construction and image refactoring as it focuses on digital identities, particularly online celebrity. The video platform helps explode the de-stigmatization process for OCs. It is cheaper for companies and organizations to pay OCs to endorse products, or carry out propaganda, than it is for them to employ a superstar (i.e., movie star, music star, etc.). With the time and space barrier gone, direct access to OCs has cut out the bias found in news media, as news media are no longer the primary source of information. They have become a trusted brand from their consistent interactions with the public.

M. Xie and C. Chao aimed to examine if social media is used as a forum of accountability for civil society in China. Chapter 3, “Social Media as Mechanism for Accountability: Cases of China’s Environmental Civil Society”, argues that to understand accountability practices of organizations, both stakeholders and their power dynamics need to be considered. What may seem as an accountability practice for some may be employed by others for various reasons. Unlike previous literature, it was found that Chinese environmental civil society organizations

have limited public engagement and limited influence on policy making decisions. The lack of engagement came from the organizations using some platforms as issue-based information dissemination. Input was not encouraged from the public. Findings of the research included a recommendation for limited-resources organizations to use social media as a resource; that many organizations used their official accounts to disseminate information to remain active online; and that there was an overall lack of engagement activities for the public on the open social media platforms. In other words, information was disseminated with very little interaction with users about the information or retweets from those who the information was shared with.

Section II addresses digital media ability to impact the agenda of social media. The contributors make the assertion that specific platforms have the capacity to impact the political agenda/landscape in some fragile states.

As a researcher with personal interest in both identity politics and nationalism, Ngwainmbi's Chapter 4, "Hate Speech and the Re-emergence of Caucasian Nationalism in the United States", was of research interest. This chapter would be of interest to those in higher education or companies that control media platforms. It also provides fruitful information for those organizations dealing with hate speech.

The author examines the use of social media as a tool for spreading hate messages by nationalists in the Global North. With the understanding that speech is viewed differently in varying cultures, the paper keeps socio-ethnic differences in mind. An important aspect of understanding motivation for this type of behavior, be it hate speech or violent nationalism, is that of fear. At its core, xenophobia is about fear. The fear is a concern about the loss of identity, belongingness, and even one's place in society. Media distortions, among other things, contribute to racism via biased, or stereotyped, information about certain groups.

Hate speech is classified as a type of identity politics. Hate speech can alter the collective identity as it disrupts communication and intercultural dialogue. It is argued that hate speech fragments the larger multicultural society as online platforms provide a space to share and propagate stereotypes and violent language. Although the U.S. is a diverse country and prides itself in diversity, white culture is at the forefront of TV programming and is used as the norm in films. People in other countries, as the case in an Italy study, repeated American stereotypes and knew about American caricatures of people of color, based on what they see in American films. The expansion of global communication and globalized media has allowed biased, racist and hateful speech to reach varying cultures and locations.

Former President Donald Trump's use of derogatory remarks about minorities, particularly Black people and women, was highlighted as an example of negative social media remarks. Even the slogan "Make America Great Again" is argued as stoking to re-establish a white America. This was appealing to many white nationalists. Trump, as well as white supremacists, use the umbrella of the First Amendment to protect their words as "free speech". The debate remains if hate speech should still fall under freedom of speech.

The author makes four concluding points. First, that the use of hate speech is not limited to one racial group (White). Secondly, limited exposure to other cultures, and willful ignorance, are at the foundation of hate speech. Thirdly, those that use hate speech use fear as the mechanism to demean others. Lastly, the promotion of hate groups is perpetrated by informal groups who deem themselves as having power over others.

Eight prescriptions are given for institutions, while five steps forward are offered to social media companies. Thinking of a variety of companies and organizations that deal with hate speech, the author provides recommendations for companies in the U.S. that have restrictions around blocking content, due to the First Amendment.

Lastly, the chapter delves into what should be the responsibilities of both news media, and social media CEOs. Policies for hate language should be written and posted online with repercussions for violations (i.e., fines, having one's account blocked, etc.)

Chapter 5, also written by Ngwainmbi, asserts that the way that communication networks (Television and social media) present information to the public creates uncertainty about COVID-19. It highlights some unethical practices of journalists and media outlets, when covering information about COVID-19.

Concerns about media credibility, and "fake news" was evident in the 2016 elections. Concerns about the content of news had a large and negative impact that reverberated to the COVID-19 pandemic, starting the media at a place of mistrust at the onset of the pandemic.

COVID-19 underscored places of weaknesses and strengths in disseminating information to the public. One of the interesting elements of the pandemic was that COVID-19 showed the limitations of the "superpower" countries (U.S., China, etc.). Globally, there was a reliance on these superpowers that led to a miscalculation of capacity for many independent countries. Both the inadequacy of the "superpowers" to respond to COVID and the hesitancy of the World Health Organization (WHO) to alert nations about the virus led to a significant amount of harm and deaths. On the other hand, COVID had a positive impact on the communication between healthcare professions, patients, and companies. Via social media networks, information about COVID was spread quickly to help study the virus. Patients were able to regularly communicate with doctors through online portals, or receive cyber treatment.

A call for ethical journalism is supported by two findings of the research. First, many consumers of the news do not verify information, making it hard to distinguish fake news from authentic news. Secondly, many consumers either do not have enough information (are under-informed) or are misinformed. This call suggests more training for employees (journalists, informants, etc.) in the hopes of better spotting fake news. The role of the consumer is addressed. As the Trump administration signed an executive order that blocked tech companies (online platforms) from being responsible for content their users disseminate, more onus is now on the consumer to spot fake news. The author provides consumers useful tools on identifying fake news, both pandemic and political news alike.

Another interesting point made in the chapter is that of media ownership and representation. As discussed in the chapter regarding hate speech and white nationalism, white/Caucasian culture is the norm for many media outlets. Many media outlets are owned by Caucasians and the new content is tailored to them. This leaves people of color in an information gap. The author suggests more black ownership of media outlets, so that information is curated for Black people specifically. This would improve the issue of being under-informed and could bolster political engagement. In the case of black-owned media in Africa, it favors the Western models of reporting to their own detriment. A challenge of the prescription of more Black-owned media is the known economic disparity that exists in the United States. People of color, on average, make less, save less and are less likely to have home ownership, let alone news media ownership. Systemic racism prevents many people of color from amassing generational wealth to achieve such goals.

In Chapter 6, Section III, M. Bonhomme and A. A. Muirhead examine the role news media plays in the racialized, and sometimes charged, representation of Haitians and Columbians. The study underscores media's role in repeating ideologies and stoking racism. The authors build on the work by McCombs and Ghanem (2001) on the "great unity" and D'Angelo's (2012) use of ethnography to approach different media types. An additional attribute of the authors'

methodology is that it also examines the life of immigrants whilst they are still in the environments that restrict them politically and socially.

The national political culture and what is deemed an important topic sway the way media portrays immigrants. The way the topic is reported can either vilify the immigrant population and deem them as threats, or it can portray them as people needing empathy or help. For the target group of this study, media representation showed elements of “violent” or “savage” framing. This biased form of reporting begets prejudice and racist attitudes towards the target population. As in the chapter on the U.S. and white nationalism, this type of media representation, paired with limited interactions with the target population, creates an “us” versus “them” atmosphere. Local perception of migrant groups is largely influenced by the media and social networks that they consume.

H. Bahar uses Afghanistan as a case study, to determine if once socially taboo topics are discussed, and challenged, via social media. The social norm, or taboo, examined is women showing their face, vs. conservative dress.

This research, unlike some social media research in the past, attempts to move away from the political context and examine the socio-cultural aspects. The author used a large, nationwide study as a base for comparison. The results were different than the nationwide survey in that many women indicated that they wore more moderate, not very conservative, covering. However, a low response rate indicated that was not a proper representation of the larger target population. Because of this, the results were not generalizable.

The first three sections of the book, Chapters 1-7, highlight that stigmatization of groups of people can lead to bias, prejudice and discrimination. De-stigmatization and identity refactoring attempts to correct those cognitive (internal) and outwardly expressed forms of bias. Another common aspect of these chapters is that of news media and the role it plays in the representation and stigmatization of certain populations.

Chapters 8 and 9, Section IV of the book, both examine the role of media in Africa. In Chapter 8, T. Owolabi and G. Tijani-Adenle explore how ethnic diversity and human capita development are impacted by digital media. Comprised of 54 independent nations, Africa, and Nigeria alike, struggle with managing diversity. Tension in Nigeria is exacerbated when resources, or political power, do not lean in favor of one group. As with discussing taboos in Afghanistan (Chapter 7), the authors acknowledge that factors like tribalism impact the views of civilians. Discussion about such norms frequently filter their way into the media, for better or for worse. The push is for media to provide a balanced view on topics that are known to create tension. The media in Nigeria is criticized for its lack of impartiality, credibility and even-handed reporting. Such shortcomings are detrimental to the consumer, as misinformation, or being under informed, causes a ripple effect in the larger community. Similarly, in Chapter 9, A. Fayoyin highlights the challenges that African media displayed at the onset of the pandemic. This led to an information crisis that proved to be lethal. The author outlines ways to spread information more efficiently, in the hope that in the case of another pandemic, media outlets will have tools in hand to help improve their dissemination process.

Section V examines the role of media in shaping national(istic) identities and cosmopolitan/urban spaces. P. T. Dang and H. T. Hoang’s chapter on Vietnamese youth, examines how youth use memes to negotiate their identities and culture. Memes are used by Vietnamese youth for more than laughs or entertainment. They are used to discuss personal and political issues, commentary on modern day events and on cultural practices, especially those that are considered taboo. In Chapter 11, V. Riegel uses São Paulo and London for case studies to investigate the role of social media in building identities in cosmopolitan migrant

communities. Riegel found that Facebook was a platform that the groups could use to create a space for interaction amongst themselves. As it was found in other sections, Riegel asserts that those who are white, or affluent and mainly from the Global North, have more access to international groups and could remain distant from the locals surrounding them. Those from the Global South, of other racial groups and of varying economic backgrounds struggled to find their place. They were restrained to interact with those from their own national group or those who live in similar environments.

Section VI examines how online communities influence the ethnicity and diversity of the geopolitical space online and in other cyber mediated communities. J. Xu's chapter on "Construction of the Consumer in the Digital Culture: American Brand and China's Generation Z", examines the use of media and branding by American companies, via the younger generation, in the Chinese markets. Using a combination of business and cultural approaches, is a way to reach China's generation Z. Both Airbnb and KFC are companies that actively use these branding strategies by engaging their stakeholders online and offline. Understanding the local political culture, both companies were able to pivot their campaigns to address the Chinese culture. Increasingly, both companies have set aggressive digital campaigns to reach their target population. In Chapter 13, F. Bourmeche also examines the digital world's influence on a target group, but focuses on social media networking in the shaping and influence on Cherokee and Native Americans ethnic identities. Bourmeche, adopting the approach from Bank (2014), examined images that included elements of Indigenous culture, such as paintings, photographs, film, videotapes, drawings, diagrams, and others. In the author's case study of the Facebook group All About the Cherokee and Native Americans, findings indicate that sharing such images with one another strengthened their Indigenous identity and created a sense of pride in their heritage. By being able to connect in the digital sphere, share artifacts and communicate with one another, the cultural identity was strengthened.

Ngwainmbi began the edited book with "A Bird's view of Networked Communities and Human Identity", and he ends with a final reprise on the topic. Social media has been shown to have many useful aspects. It allows governments to communicate with the general population during elections. As we've learned in previous chapters, it has improved patients' access to healthcare professionals during COVID-19. It has also strengthened Indigenous identities via heritage sharing online. From the rise of "fake news" shared during the 2016 U.S. elections, to media outlets sharing radicalized views of Haitian and Columbian immigrants, social media also has several areas that need improvement. Hate speech finding its home on the internet and its protection under the First Amendment are all concerns about the impact, and role, of social media.

Ngwainmbi reminds us that the younger generations use social media to mobilize themselves. In the chapters, we've learned about Vietnamese youth and their use of memes to discuss taboo topics and politics and connect with one another. Dress of women in Afghanistan, a taboo topic, is discussed on social platforms and information about the norm is shared via digital platforms. The Chinese Generation Z population is targeted by American companies via digital platforms.

One of the final topics Ngwainmbi addresses is that of globalization, cultural imperialism and marginalized groups. As discussed when thinking about hate speech, information gaps for certain marginalized populations during COVID, the vilifying of migrants and human capital development concern in Africa, all topics address media's practice of using white culture as the norm. This practice packages content in a way that focuses on the interest of a few, not on equitable access to information for all using the media. More representation for marginalized groups could lead to more informed, more politically active and engaged citizens. This leaves us

with an overarching theme of the book, a push for journalistic ethics that challenges those in corporations, higher education, and companies to vet information, spot fake news, shut down hate speech on the internet, and create a more equitable digital space for us all.

Author Note

Ashlie Perry is Associate Professor of Criminal Justice and Security Studies at Endicott College, Massachusetts, USA. Her research and teaching interests include identity politics, collective action and gendered crimes. Her publications include “Terrorism as Genocide: Killing with Intent” (*Journal of Global Analysis*, 2012), “Terrorism in West Africa: Boko Haram’s Evolution, Strategy and Affiliations” (*Mid-West Political Science Association (MPSA), Annual Conference*, 2013), “Home Grown Terrorism in the United States (US): Causes, Affiliations and Policy Implications” (*International Studies Association, Annual Conference*, 2014) and “The Impact of Governmental Strategies on Black Political Discourse Groups: Voices Heard from the Black Panther Party to the Black Lives Matter Movement” (In: *Citizenship, Democracies, and Media Engagement among Emerging Economies and Marginalized Communities* (pp. 177-202). Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).