

# ON KEY TERMS AND TEXTBOOKS: TEACHING COMM101 IN DUBAI

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## ABSTRACT

A handful of words have come to the forefront in global higher education and media, including globalization, internationalization, de-westernization, among others. These concepts and their application to universities and media may have slightly different implications depending on the locale. Nevertheless, for communication programs graduating future media workers these concepts are likely to spark important considerations in the development of the curriculum. In the case of the UAE, both the higher education and media landscapes are advancing rapidly. This has created a situation where many media outlets are sprouting up, creating original content and seeking a larger share of the regional audiences, and where schools are adding programs to meet the training needs. This paper explores the appropriateness of Western textbooks given a Global South context, as well as identifies and attempts to address several key terms of increasing importance in both the higher education and media landscapes. As any instructor who has taught introductory media and communication courses will know, it is often difficult to find a 'required' textbook that exactly 'fits the bill'. All textbooks are not created (or greeted) equally in the global higher education landscape. For those who are teaching in the United States and Britain the textbooks are full of pertinent and timely examples, along with stories that help illustrate numerous points and terms. As the media industry matures globally, educational learning facilities follow suit and western-based introductory textbooks are increasingly becoming less appropriate for use in other regions.

Keywords: Comm101, global media, textbooks, internationalization, indigenization.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant difficulties in teaching in an international classroom is determining the 'field of play.' That is to say, one must learn about, and take into consideration multiple aspects of the locale and then attempt to merge this knowledge into one's courses. One's own culture and experience may help or possibly get in the way. The process is bound to be imperfect. Learning and adapting to new cultures (at both the university and country-level), is not something that happens overnight. It

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requires time, observation, patience, and much research (formal and informal) to accomplish. There are factors involved that one may not be aware of at first, or ever, and these nuances surely vary from country to country and academic department to department.

### **Globalization, Education, and Media**

A number of researchers, and research groups, have been observing from various angles the elements of global higher education over the years. We have many more 'key concepts' and definitions than ever before. Hayden (et al., 2015) wrote that "international education research includes the study of multiple topics" (p. 1) before going on to list ten such topic areas. Some of the more prominent concepts related to these topics, 'buzzwords', if we may call them such, would include: internationalization (comprehensive internationalization – CI), globalization, indigenization, de-westernization, 'international mindedness' and 'intercultural-mindset,' to name only a few (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Bodycott & Walker, 2000; De Wit, 2002; Fitch & Surma, 2006; Gray & Coates, 2010; Hellstén & Reid, 2008; Hudzik, 2011; Scott, 2005; Waisbord & Mellado, 2014; Weina, 2001). These terms have definitions relating to higher education more broadly, but also specifically to communication studies (Curran & Park, 2000), and further may even be extended to the media themselves (Thussu, 2008). Some studies examine the curricula of global schools, others look at the intercultural aptitude of faculty, while others are more concerned with the effects of cross-cultural education (Badley, 2006; Freeman, 2013; Geertz, 1988; MacLennan, 2002; Mizzi, 2017). Some papers look at the numbers (of students and schools, for example) from an economic perspective, while others are decidedly more culturally-minded.

In recent years, the equation surrounding media and higher education has been changing. As technology has become less expensive, and globalization spreads, owners and operators (governments, but indeed individual 'consumer-producers' as well) throughout the world have been joining in the creative creation of media products. There are plenty of examples of media industries developing and increasing their reach outside of the US and the UK -- two countries that are often referred to as simply "the West" or part of the "Global North." This has led to a corresponding increase in the number of schools and programs in these locations outside of the Global North, catering to a need for trained media workers, and also the fostering of media thinkers and researchers.

Arguably the pace of the global higher education observations and the studies (and books) that have been published have increased exponentially within the past decade, just as technological and media developments (namely mobile smartphones and social media) have also quickened. And yet, even though much has been written and learned, it is also clear that we still have a long way to go. For example, for one, we have much competing terminology. We may need to get together more often and discuss these concepts and constructs. We can examine the terms more closely and see where there is overlap, what we can combine, and what we have left out. And secondly, the pertinent takeaways, those items upon which progress has been made and phenomena better understood -- have arguably not been adequately communicated to the relevant high ed publics.

One area worth considering, and there are so many, is the topic of certification and licensing. While in many jurisdictions individuals need a license to go fishing, we do

not have similar requirements for those who would teach abroad. In addition, schools welcome visiting and exchange faculty and students seemingly without consideration for the myriad of issues that we now know to exist. There are many indications that the field of higher education is slowly coming to grasp some of the issues. Not to paint with too broad of a brush, however, we also see universities, and programs moving abroad to establish branch campuses long before having fully considered the enormous potential ramifications of such moves (economic versus cultural, etc.). When it comes to international higher education, one can say, there has been a lot of leaping before looking.

### **Higher Education in the UAE**

The city of Dubai, indeed the United Arab Emirates, is experiencing a kind of 'Gold Rush' when it comes to institutions of higher learning and educational programs. The number of 'international' schools entering the market has risen considerably in the past several years, and the number and variety of programs being offered by domestic institutions have also risen. Market surveys aside, to the layperson it might appear both exciting and confusing that so many schools and programs are available. There are educational exhibitions held each year which allow students and their parents to learn more about the available schools and programs; institutes also conduct advertising campaigns throughout the country. Some universities in other countries also advertise in the local papers (e.g., the National University of Singapore – NUS, advertises in the Gulf News); and several schools operate small offices for the express purpose of recruitment. In this sense, some schools are coming to Dubai (and here there is an added issue of how they may operate; Kerr, 1990), and in other cases, they are recruiting students to leave the city. Although it is not in the purveyance of this paper, one feels compelled to ask: Will the marketplace be able to support and sustain so many schools and operations? In this case, time will likely tell.

In the general field of communications (and this is a massive field with many variations acknowledged) there are several prominent players. The schools that are best known include six that have been around the longest: United Arab Emirates University (UAEU; offers the only PhD in the field), American University of Sharjah (AUS), and American University in Dubai (AUD), Zayed University, University of Sharjah, and the UK's Middlesex University (MUD). If we consider graduate programs, Australia's University of Wollongong (UWD) offers a Master's degree in communication. Several more recent additions might also be mentioned, including, Abu Dhabi University, Manipal University, British University of Dubai, Canadian University of Dubai, Murdoch University, American University in the Emirates (AUE), Curtin University, Amity University, Higher Colleges of Technology, Skyline University College, Ajman University, American University of Ras Al Khaimah, and New York University Abu Dhabi. There are numerous other schools as well if one widens the scope to include other concentrations and degree programs. For example, the UK's University of Birmingham recently opened a Dubai branch campus.

### **The Case of the American University**

The American University in Dubai (AUD), founded in 1995, is in a unique position on several fronts. Specifically, it has a few pluses over other schools when it comes to the program in communication (discussed in the next section). The campus is not very

large, but it is a clearly defined campus, self-contained, modern, well-maintained, and in the prime location of "Media City" Dubai, right on the metro and tram lines, next to the Marina, the Palm, Knowledge Park, and Internet City. AUD is a private university as opposed to a 'state' school. This means that the campus does not have gender-segregated classrooms, for one (though when women's sporting events are held on campus with other schools, men are often prohibited from attending). And, in general, the university follows an American-style curriculum. At the same time, because it is located in the Gulf, it is inevitably incumbent upon professors to take into consideration aspects of certain local 'realities' when designing course materials. These nuances and influencers might be referred to as part of the 'hybridized' or 'glocalized' process. From observation, the learning curve for professors will vary greatly depending on where they are from, and the experiences that they have had prior to the international posting. It has been said that it is not what happens to us, so much as how we respond to what happens to us that matters; a saying that any professor who travels and lectures abroad would do well to keep in mind.

In the current case, given that much of the text comes from the perspective of personal observation, a bit of information about the author is warranted. The author of this paper was born, raised, and educated in the United States, and following exchange programs to Europe in high school and college, lectured for a few years at a vocational institute in Pittsburgh, then returned to graduate school in central New York. Following graduate course-work, the doctoral candidate taught at a small liberal arts school for a few years (upstate New York), and then two years after attaining the Ph.D., accepted a posting in Singapore, and a fellowship in Taiwan, before moving to the Middle East to join the American University in Dubai. All of these previous experiences proved to be beneficial for the Dubai posting in the sense that the author had attended and taught at a few different kinds of schools (e.g., large and small, foreign and domestic, socio-economically diverse and homogenous), and developed a certain amount of flexibility as a 'global academic' of sorts. It may also be worth noting that all of his graduate school roommates were from other countries (e.g., Norway, India, S. Korea, Japan, and China). Of course, there are always new things to learn, and the experience of teaching in new environments and interacting with a diverse campus community provides constant opportunities to learn.

### **Communication Program at AUD**

AUD's communication program, Mohammed Bin Rashid School for Communication (MBRSC) founded in 2008, is named after the ruler of Dubai. Sheikh Mohammed's foundation provides scholarships for qualified students; more than half of the incoming students receive funding assistance. The school offers two majors "Digital Production & Storytelling (DPST) and Journalism (JOUR). Both degree programs also provide the chance for students to enroll in English or Arabic tracks. This gives the program a slight distinction in that the programs at other schools tend to offer either one or the other, but not both. Some faculty are able to teach in both tracks, however the majority are teaching in English (this is true university-wide).

The task of preparing students for the inevitable day when they will work in the media is always in the back of a teacher's mind and for most of the MBRSC students that will mean media in the Middle East, if not precisely Dubai and the United Arab Emirates. Many of the students intern at local media companies. And the employment rate upon graduation is respectable, with many of the students going to work at such

companies as MBC, Al Arabiya, CNN Arabic, Abu Dhabi Media, Al Khalijiyya Channel, Al-Hayat newspaper, Alsayegh Media, Bell-Pottinger ME, Emaar Retail Group, and the Gulf News newspaper, OSN, ITP Publishing, among others. Some students have gone on to graduate programs. Indeed the MBRSC recently launched a Master's level program in Leadership and Innovation in Contemporary Media.

One of the first core courses that all incoming media students must take is Comm101, a standard course in many communications programs. In the case of the program at AUD-MBRSC, the course is entitled "Introduction to Global Media," and it is designed to provide students with a general overview of the media landscape. Although there are many variations to the introductory courses that exist around the world, media professors will recognize the touchstone elements to the course: history of the various mass mediums, along with aspects of their current operations, and light discussions of topical issues related to the course content often pulled from the news media themselves (if not directly from examples in the textbook). Though the term 'media' is fairly well understood, the definition for the other word in the course title -- 'global' -- raises issues regarding the definition and scope of the term. For the current case, and after a few years of deliberation, the scope tends to be indeed everything on the planet, but with specific attention placed on the UAE, and also a neighboring-regional expanse starting from Morocco to the west and over to India in the east.

The Global Media course is but one in a curriculum that was designed in collaboration with the University of Southern California's Annenberg School of Communication. Without going into detail (something that would be difficult to accomplish in a paper not explicitly devoted to that undertaking) the school has regular 'check-ups' to ensure that it is 'on the right path.' These visits come from a handful of official and unofficial bodies and representatives, all of which provide various forms of feedback to the school's administration. In addition to the external feedback, there are also plenty of sessions in which the course and program learning outcomes are assessed. This helps to ensure that the subject matter of the courses is 'on-target' and appropriate for the program. This also assists the professor in developing the right tools to reach the students and staying on track with the material. At the same time, professors have some leeway to design the course as they see fit, so long as the program and course learning outcomes are met. One of the first if not the most important decisions that a professor likely makes is picking the textbook, if there will be one, for the course.

### **Importance of the Textbook**

As any instructor who has taught introductory courses in the fields of mass media and communication will know, it is often difficult to find a 'required' textbook that exactly 'fits the bill.' In part this is because, as with the field of communication studies, introductory courses come in many shapes and sizes – and now, increasingly they are being taught in many different locations around the world. The exact nature of the course that ultimately develops is often defined in some measure by what the programs' needs are, how the curriculum has been designed and developed, and who is teaching the course and what their background brings to the table. Though to a large extent, there are probably more similarities than differences among the various iterations of these types of introductory courses. The choice of which textbook to use also plays a large role in the format and content of a class. To be sure, there are

several excellent books available. And for the most part, instructors will pick the one that most closely parallels the syllabus for the course and then simply try to make the best of it, following a weekly schedule based on the book's chapters looking at the various media (even if the order or specific materials are not an exact fit). Over time, there is a type of 'lock-in' that occurs as an instructor's lectures and exams become more closely associated with one text versus others. Switching textbooks, often tempting if a newer edition is released, requires a significant time investment; time that many instructors may judge to be better applied elsewhere. The concepts of 'vendor lock-in' and 'switching costs' are well known in the economic literature (see Doyle, 2013, pp. 56-57) and are certainly at play here. Also, keeping the same book from one semester to another is often economically favored by students who may be selling their book back at the end of the course, or looking for a "slightly used" edition themselves at the start of a new semester. It must also be acknowledged that the propensity for students to use any physical book at all is decreasing (an issue for another time).

All textbooks are not created (or greeted) equally in the global higher education landscape. For those who are teaching in the United States and Britain, the textbooks are chalk full of pertinent and timely examples, along with relevant stories that help illustrate numerous points and key terms. There is no secret as to why the US and UK textbooks dominate the field. These classes started out and have been taught for a longer period of time than their counterparts in other regions of the world. In addition, the field of mass communication has developed and matured to the point where these textbooks, with new editions every other year, have primarily become 'the norm,' and somewhat synonymous with the "COMM 101" experience. Because western media products are well-known throughout the world, most students can follow the material to a certain degree regardless of where they live and go to school. It is also not uncommon for newer, freshly-minted instructors to be given the introductory courses to teach as they begin their teaching career. In such cases, use of a known commodity – the standard 'mass comm' textbook (with PowerPoints and test banks readily provided by the publisher in the instructor's edition) – is highly likely. To be fair, the prevailing introductory textbooks in addition to being informative, are timely, suitable, and colorful; to put it succinctly, they get the job done. The 'proof is in the pudding' as the saying goes – and many of these 'long-established' texts proliferate for good reason (e.g., Biagi, 2016; Straubhaar & La Rose, 2015; Turow, 2016).

### **Global Media and Higher Ed**

That textbooks from the West/North proliferate, follows historical patterns in other areas, of course, including the mass media. The traditional communications technologies and media were essentially invented and came to the fore earlier and thus had an eventual advantage in the global marketplace when the technology of media ultimately spread (e.g., radio and television) and content was much desired and increasingly required by foreign media owners and demanded by international audiences. A combination of forces led to this reality (i.e., technology, culture, industry). Increasingly, as any closer look at these forces indicates, the world is changing. Media is being created everywhere, and more schools have added communication and media programs to their offerings. This is certainly true in the Gulf region; the body of water around which the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries exist. As mentioned, the number of communication-oriented programs has increased

and is still growing. As the media industry too grows here, the majority of the western-based introductory media books are noticeably becoming no longer wholly appropriate for use in the introductory mass media classrooms. Even though students, of course, have some degree of familiarity with the western celebrities and media products (depending on their background and media habits), we must also acknowledge additionally that they are also familiar with their own countries' history, home-grown celebrities, and unique media products. We are now seeing slight shifts in the global flow of media, whereby smaller countries, some developing and many in the so-called "Global South," are now coming to have a greater say in the global conversation. Regardless, the media of the world are of infinite interest and should be considered and included in any classroom treatment of the subject. Introductory textbooks that cater to the global student cohort need to keep pace. While some of the Western textbooks have admirably managed to incorporate stories and examples from other parts of the globe, and again many students are familiar with the western cases, the fact is that these textbooks are inadequate and under-serving for scores of students around the world. This is not a scathing critique so much as a simple recognition of a certain reality that faces those of us who have taught outside the "Global North." Thus the need for a region-specific introductory textbook for the Middle East-Gulf Region (with limitations in the nomenclature of this 'region' acknowledged) was evident.

At the same time, the handful of concepts and buzzwords mentioned at the start of this paper have gained traction in the field of higher education (i.e., internationalization, globalization, and de-westernization) and should thus be taken into consideration when teaching courses. These concepts (relating to large-scale global realities and socio-cultural traffic) are not entirely new, but the intensity of the interactions is definitely growing (thanks in part to increased trade, cheaper airfares, and the Internet). The definitions and application of these concepts to both higher education and media will have different meanings for consumers and students in various parts of the world. Yet, they also signal a shift. No matter the specifics of an introductory media and communications course, or where in the world it takes place, these concepts are likely to be raised – and their myriad meanings and original contexts discussed.

### **Conclusions**

The worlds of higher education and mass media are rapidly 'shifting gears' to capitalize on the changes that globalization has wrought. While the history of media technologies (and indeed that which has been written on the subject) leans decidedly Western, and much of the western-originated media programming has benefitted from being first with world-wide exposure, use of media production-enabling technologies is now more economical and widespread. For the Middle East region, and specifically the UAE and Dubai, we see a growing emphasis on the creation of original media content and more wide-spread distribution. The goal has been to target the local and then regional audiences, with programming that speaks to the audiences, with perhaps a hint at creation for the wider global market only now occurring. This shift requires an increasing number of trained media workers to fulfil the roles in the expanding media field.

At the same time, educational learning institutions have been launching mass communications programs and continuously fine-tuning the curriculum in order to

locally train tomorrow's media workers and thinkers. As a result, when we raise issues about training and higher education, and the mass media, we should strive to do so on a global basis, while at the same time recognizing the specific contributions that various countries or regions have made and are now making (with greater strides) to the global higher ed and media conversation. It is clearly a monumental task, and it is on-going. Unlike the static nature of print and writing, the universities and media themselves are continually moving and changing. At the same time, we need to continue to build common international foundations in order to continue the discussions - on the way to making the changes that will benefit media companies and higher education institutions in ever more positive ways.



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