

BOOK REVIEW

Herman Wasserman. *Media, Geopolitics and Power: A View from the Global South*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2018. 218 pp. Introduction. Notes. Index. \$28.00. Paper. ISBN: 9-781775-822264.

Changes in the South African media since the mid-1990s regarding ownership, newsroom practices, and their internationalization have been dramatic. These changes were enabled by the defeat of apartheid, which enabled South African firms to move into Africa and Asia and develop mega operations such as Naspers/Tencent. Herman Wasserman's book *Media, Geopolitics and Power: A View from the Global South* deals with the period just prior to these dramatic globalizing developments. Wasserman explains the accumulated contradictions that faced the South African media as it navigated from apartheid into an information-led, globalizing, post-colonial world. This book examines South African media in relation to global trends, elevating the discussion from previous South African-centric parochial tendencies.

By revising a number of previously published studies under one cover, Wasserman offers a highly lucid narrative. An overview is provided of debates and contestations marking the South African media's role and position at the end of apartheid. While paying attention to specific political developments, Wasserman's central argument is that global media studies have tended to marginalize knowledge production from the South by relegating it to the domain of "case studies." As always, South Africa encapsulates endless contradictions, which the book explores via eight chapters: from apartheid to democracy; viewing media studies from the South; shifting professional ideologies and markets; tabloidization; media ethics; the media in new geopolitical relationships such as those offered by the BRICS economic arrangement linking Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa; and the future of journalism.

Studies on South African media fall into two styles: insiders writing nuanced studies, and the pithy work of international authors who often lack systematic local immersion—and therefore an appreciation of dynamic experiential detail. The result—with regard to the latter—tends to be simplistic, formulaic, and lacking in "Southern" explanation. Wasserman writes with the nuance of an insider, sensitively mining the germinal studies that

precede his own work, retaining their complexity, and adding new data, including material from interviews with journalists. The resulting easy-going narrative speaks from the conditions of the time. His analysis is sensitive to the changing social formation and navigates the threats and opportunities impacting the new media practices that have emerged. His explanations of the local are couched in terms of the global, rather than in terms of exceptionalism. Overlaid on his focus on mainly newspapers is general media analysis, with discussions on “de-Westernization” and “de-colonization,” thus interweaving his explanations from the particular (the events) to the general (internationalization) and from the general (theory) to the particular (the local, the case study).

Though not an explicit political economy, the book does sweep up numerous issues through its wide-ranging essays: transitology, ethics, media freedom, professionalism, *ubuntu* (communitarianism), African culture and values, and the massive growth of tabloids among new entry black readers. This particular counter-trend is explained by Wasserman in terms of underlying factors and not as uncontestedly exceptional. The book does not offer specific and detailed case studies, but draws on those that have been done to debate bigger questions that are arising across the world relating to African exceptionalism, theories from the South, and local-global interactions. The idea is to relocate studies of African media rather as media studies that includes Africa.

Some questions remain, however. Though mainly about *South African* journalism, the book has “media” in the title. The oft imprecise use of “mainstream media” is one of my bugbears. While I suspect that I am in the minority here, it echoes the now common use of “audiences” to describe readers, readerships, and consumers of (silent) texts. Maybe I am a linguistic luddite, but these terms require better definition in the general literature. These minor idiosyncratic criticisms do not detract from an otherwise compelling read.

An explicit Southern theory, is not, however, developed. It is not clear what such a theory might entail other than the current push to “decolonization”—itself a fraught ideological contestation that often favors an instrumentalist reading of Franz Fanon over dialectical engagement with international debates of which he was actually part. One section does examine the tension between local rhetorical strategies invoking the traditional communitarian discourse of “African values” that plays to essentialism (85–94); this is done in relation to global ethical principles that place emphasis on Western-style codes of conduct and professional values. The success of the newly introduced salacious tabloids and whether or not they qualify as journalism in terms of normative theory provided a litmus test for such discussion. Until now, newspapers were serious genres discussing serious business. The tabloids appeal to the majority, but even so, actual newspaper readership in South Africa is very low. The public sphere thus suffers when citizens do not read or sufficiently engage in the social dialectic.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Wasserman, Herman. 2007. "Is a New Worldwide Web Possible? An Explorative Comparison of the Use of ICTs by Two South African Social Movements." *African Studies Review* 50 (1): 109–31. doi:10.1353/arw.2005.0144.

Windrich, Elaine. 2006. "Media in Africa." *African Studies Review* 49 (2): 187–92. doi:10.1353/arw.2006.0117.