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John Budarick
Tracing the global themes of media and migration
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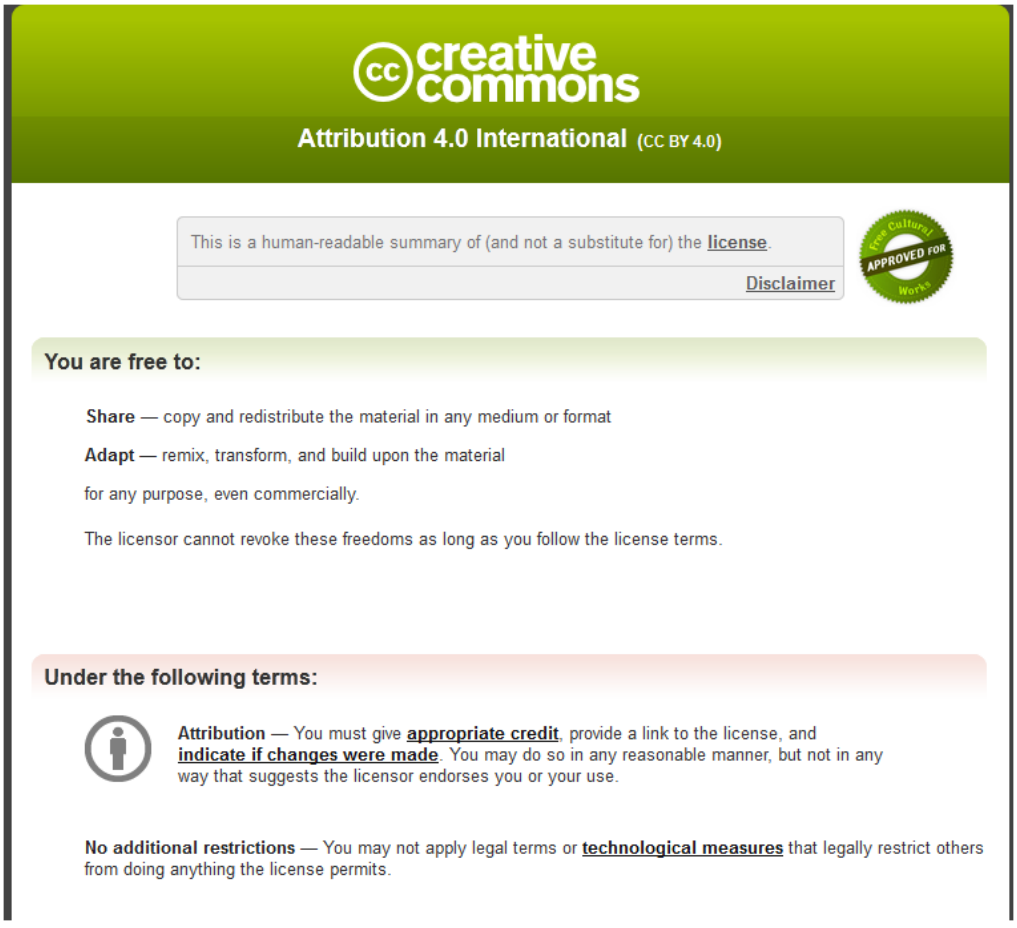

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BOOK REVIEW

Tracing the Global Themes of Media and Migration

Radha S. Hegde. 2016, *Mediating Migration*, Cambridge: Polity Press. ISBN 9780745646329. RRP AU$37.95 (pb)

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In the context of the intensification of political, economic and cultural connections between nations, states, cultures and regions, and their consequences, the central role of media in transnationalism, globalisation and migration is clearer than ever. Media, in all their forms and manifestations in texts, audiences, corporations, organisations and political economic structures, have a role to play in every facet of international migration and transnational relations. At the macro level they are at the forefront of corporate globalisation, challenging the control of nation-states over their economies and cultural identities in the push for larger global markets. At the micro level they are increasingly individualised, used by particular groups to support and sustain identities and communities that often exist on the margins, or outside, the traditional nation. Further, media, from global mass media to grassroots community media, are part of ongoing debates around borders, belonging and the nature of national identity. Far from simply crossing borders as 'flows'—a term that overlooks the generally uneven political and social terrain of the world—media also construct increasingly complex deterritorialised borders that define people and matter as out of place through complex constructions of identity, community and belonging.

Radha S. Hegde's *Mediating Migration* engages with these issues through a collection of theoretically informed observations, analyses and conceptualisations of increasingly mediated movements—both physical and symbolic—across the globe. Underlying these examinations is a constant concern with politics, power, identity and the body of the migrant as subject to

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surveillance and judgement. Two tensions that frame the book and much other work in this area are worth discussing, particularly in relation to how Hegde negotiates them. The first is the tension between media centrism and the recognition of factors that shape global migration and diasporic consciousness that are increasingly mediated but did not originate with and are not reducible to media industries and practices. The second is the tension and constant debate over the nature of movement in the 'global present' and the impacts of physical and political structures designed to impede such movement. (3)

With regard to the first tension, Hegde's approach to media is to focus on the 'process of mediation' which means addressing the constitutive power of media as one of many complex behaviours within, experiences of and responses to transnational migration. (3) This approach is preceded by the explosion of studies over the past two decades or so that have sought to understand migration, transnationalism and diaspora through the lens of cultural processes. The transnational and diasporic—discussed by Hegde through such diverse forms as Indian cooking, bodily surveillance and authenticity—are inseparable from the symbolic and communicative forms that provide new modes of interactivity, synchronicity and imagination. In this approach media technologies sit comfortably in discussions of transnational and diasporic communities, flows of people, things and images, and the emergence of new types of consciousness and identity that problematise the national imaginary. New spaces, we are told, have emerged that cannot be reduced to physical or political borders but instead incorporate new and complex modes of belonging.

To be sure there is much about these ideas that captures the current nature of media, migration and transnationalism, and Hegde engages with such themes in a sophisticated way. At the same time, she recognises the very real political factors that shape, and are shaped by, mediated processes. In the second chapter, which addresses processes of legitimisation and status, Hegde brings ideas of citizenship, belonging and the politics of the migrant body into conversation with their contextualising global histories and the (social) media that make debates over migration public in new ways. In one of her examples, the destinies and hopes of 'illegal' immigrants in the United States are played out publicly through media technologies that circumvent official labels of exclusion and humanise the voices of the *sans-papiers*. Yet communications technologies cannot be fully understood without an acknowledgement of the monitoring of the migrant as outsider, or threat. Thus, in the book's conclusion, Hegde reminds us of the 'overlaying of biographical information on the photographic image' (108) as a historical mode of racially and religiously informed border policing that continues today. This recognition of the continuing importance of political power and the constructed identity of the imagined nation places media in its rightful position as part of the wider complex system of modernity.

With regard to the second tension there is a tendency in recent writing on media, migration and transnationalism to give analytic priority to trans-border movement, the weakening of boundaries and the emergence of new transnational communities. In many accounts, 'flows' of people and images are characterised as smooth and consistent and thought to incrementally increase as new media technologies take shape. As several authors have argued, however, the notion of flows that has emerged in studies of media and migration, and the concomitant discussion of transcending borders, alludes to free and even movement as if populations were like water pooling over a smooth surface, unimpeded in their distribution across space and in time. As Hegde is well aware, such a focus risks overlooking the impediments that remain, those that have been reinforced and those that have been built anew on the back of new media technologies as historically embedded political discourses of risk and exclusion adapt to contemporary circumstances and modalities.

Hegde stops short of a celebration of flows and the uncritical acceptance of transnational communities. The reality for most of those involved is that 'flows' are uneven, interrupted and regularly impeded by political and social controls and blockages. Borders are not static barriers waiting to be transgressed but are themselves increasingly fluid, changeable and networked through the same media technologies that are supposedly crossing them. Thus, when Hegde discusses flashpoints like legitimacy, recognition and gendered publics, she does so in a way that foregrounds the constant power struggles and inequalities that accompany migration and media. The media become a site of struggle over differing expectations and understandings of 'transnational modes of political subjectivity and nation-based forms and expectations of citizenship'. (8) Her discussion of legitimacy is therefore also a discussion about the continuing power of media in defining a political landscape in which some must struggle to be seen, heard and recognised as belonging.

In the book's introduction the reader is warned against a naïve faith in what Hegde terms the *digital diaspora*. As powerful as new technologies are in the social movements of illegal immigrants, they are still only a fraction of the determinants in a wider political landscape with real and lasting consequences. Nor are these technologies, and the way they are used, free from the complex interests, divisions and histories of the communities that use them. Like all forms of communication, new digital technologies involve issues of power, identity and community. Hedge's book is a timely warning against the utopianism of the new and the neglect of existing and historical patterns of inequality.

This is nowhere made clearer than in the book's discussion of Jack Straw's published account of meeting a Muslim woman in 2006. Straw's newspaper article, which laments his difficulty in speaking to someone wearing the niqab, reveals ongoing normative assumptions about communication in modern, secular democracies. The British politician's ostensible loss for words (easily remedied by recourse to a print media unavailable to his female interlocutor) can be placed in a long history of ideas about Western civilisation's objective superiority and the need to save the victims of cultural backwardness. This example is a clear sign of the ways in which modes of communication—verbal, corporeal, virtual—come to both stand for and articulate forms of acceptable and unacceptable citizenship in the west.

In taking a nuanced and broad ranging thematic approach, Hegde traverses a range of topics, from US politics to traditional Indian music and cooking, and a vast array of media. Her methodology is thematic rather than empirical and in many ways this is her book's strength. This is not a book about media or a particular industry, location or pattern of migration. It is instead a book about the way in which international human movement is mediated and needs to be understood through a new set of concepts and ideas (as well as some old ones). As Hegde reveals, this mediation does not only come from the usual suspects of major media industries and corporations but also comes from minor political actors as they attempt to shape public perceptions of migrants and track and label people coming from elsewhere. Without doubt mediation also stems from the migrants themselves as they attempt to re-inflect the alarmist narratives and discourses coming from corporate and political elites. Just how effective such alternative visions are on dominant 'neoliberal' (116) attitudes towards migration is still open for debate but *Mediating Migration* certainly leaves us in a more informed position to have such a discussion.

About the author

John Budarick is a lecturer in media at the University of Adelaide. He has published widely on transnational and diasporic media in journals such as *Media, Culture and Society*, *International Journal of Communication* and *Global Media and Communication*.