Politically Charged Media Sites: The “Right,” the “Left,” and the Self in Research

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Abstract:

Ideological assumptions about right-wing and left-wing regimes sometimes influence how scholars understand media industries in other countries as well as the research that analyzes these industries. In nations with right-wing dictatorships, the media are often understood as part of the totalitarian system, while the media in nations with left-leaning leaders are regularly depicted in romanticized terms. Even when left-wing regimes have incorporated dictatorial practices that impact media industries, scholars have tended to overlook these repressive tactics. Often, politically charged sites come with ideological baggage that skews scholarly conversations and limits the writing and reception of new research. Using my project of prerevolutionary Cuban television as a point of departure, I discuss the difficulties of writing about media industries located in nations strongly identified with the left. The piece also provides advice to young scholars on navigating these sites and preparing for the reception of their research.

Keywords: Pedagogy, Research Methods, Scholarly Independence, Community

German novelist Thomas Mann famously quipped that “everything is politics.” Even if as researchers we recognize the truth of that statement, we are often not prepared to confront the complicated politics of our own ideologically charged sites of study in media. With right-wing dictatorships, scholars generally analyze the media within the broader context of that totalitarian system. More challenging, however, are the locations in which political rule is aligned with the left but those in power have appropriated some dictatorial practices similar to those in right-wing regimes. Because intellectuals have regularly constructed these places associated with the left as somewhat utopian (for example, less racist, less elitist, less capitalist driven), they have regularly failed to critique the idealized regimes’ undemocratic practices. This sightlessness, of course, has an impact on those who conduct media research on these “utopian” sites.

I was unaware of this scholarly shortcoming until I gave a presentation seven years ago at a Society for Film and Media Studies Conference. At the time, I was beginning my research on

Cuban commercial television (1950–1960), and I wanted to share some of my early “discoveries.” My talk focused specifically on media practices from 1950 to 1953, well before the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, which was thus not mentioned in the presentation. My remarks included the terms *dictator* and *dictatorship* in reference to President Fulgencio Batista and his regime during that period. I had mentioned Batista’s name at the beginning of the talk and, for the sake of variety and avoiding repetition, I subsequently sprinkled in the other terms. Given that the audience comprised highly educated people, I assumed they all knew the basic political history involving Cuba and Batista. In other words, I assumed that at the very least, they had seen *The Godfather: Part II* (1974). Then the question-and-answer period began, and the first comment for me came from a man who said, “I do not know why you are referring to Castro as a dictator when there are much worse leaders who deserve that title and are not called as such.” Confused—in part because I had never even uttered the “C” word—I replied, “I am sorry, I do not understand.” The man repeated his question. With a smile on my face I channeled all the poise and etiquette lessons I was forced to learn as an adolescent and answered, “There seems to be a misunderstanding. I was talking about Fulgencio Batista not Fidel Castro,” and I moved on to the next question.

Perhaps the guy had been dozing during the presentation or was daydreaming about revolutions in general, or maybe he showed up late. Regardless, his comment and the assumptions behind it did more than produce an awkward conference moment for me. The experience revealed to me that revolutionary Cuba and Fidel Castro were untouchable subjects for many US scholars. As a recent article observes regarding the lack of criticism of Cuban policies by left-wing North American and Latin American intellectuals, no one has “recognize[d] it [Cuba] as a dictatorship.”² A similar process also occurs with the topic of Venezuela. As a left-wing and highly educated Venezuelan colleague recently told me, “left-wing intellectuals in the US defend the concept of the [Venezuelan] revolution, the idea. Most of the time they lack concrete data or even partial data.” But the problem with these idealized research sites is not only that many intellectuals avoid critical assessment; the problem for the researcher is that regardless of one’s political position, what is said about the media in the “utopian” sites or about media artifacts produced by people against the “utopian” regimes tends to put the scholar on one side of the ideological spectrum. As a result, scholars find it necessary to provide extra information to justify why the research is relevant. Let me provide an example.

In her seminal essay, “Greater Cuba,” film scholar Ana López takes up the task of charting the creative trajectory and artistic production of Cuban exiles and Cuban American filmmakers from the 1970s to the 1990s.³ Early in the piece she raises an intriguing quandary: why is it that when cinema scholars analyze exile cinema, the studies unavoidably focus on the production of exiles escaping conservative and murderous regimes, leaving aside the creators who have left socialist states such as Cuba? As López writes regarding the marginalization of Cuban exile filmmakers, “Although buttressed by official U.S. policies and actions against Cuba since 1961, Cuban exile film- and video-makers have paradoxically had a difficult time articulating their arguments and being heard. Within artistic circles, their exile has, in general, not been a privileged position from which to speak.”⁴ While López convincingly explains the relevance and ideological diversity of the Cuban exiles’ cinematic productions, the fact that she needs to justify her analysis or clarify that not all Cuban exiles are reactionary rich people who want to see the system collapse reveals some of the issues facing those researching politically charged media sites. Certainly, in López’s case, the fact that she is a Cuban American scholar probably

added another layer of meaning to her writing on Cuban exiles' films. As a Cuban American woman (and accordingly a daughter of Cuban exiles), she is already grouped with the ideological right wing regardless of her own political views. But despite a researcher's ethnicity, dealing with politically charged sites invariably comes with left-wing or right-wing baggage that might impact the reception of one's research. Believe me, no one will question your political views if your research topic is *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013), *The Golden Girls* (1985–1992), or the rise and decline of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003). How then should one deal with the complexities of politically charged media sites? How do you prepare for the guy who might have been dozing and who thinks you called Castro a dictator?

I asked colleagues who conduct research in Cuba and Venezuela to provide some advice to graduate students and young scholars who are researching politically charged media sites. The following tips would in fact apply to most research sites. However, given the complexities of "utopian" sites where the political terrain can be slippery, the tips below from my colleagues and me are important to stress.

1. Do not reject or embrace a particular ideological position before conducting the research.
2. Have a strong historical understanding of the location, its political shifts, and its media industries before conducting the research.
3. Be fluent in the language of your research site and engage with the literature produced in the site as well as the one produced outside the site (beyond the United States).
4. Treat institutional responses, pamphlets, and information as sources to be questioned and analyzed, not as "the truth."
5. If possible, talk to people from a diverse range of political positions.
6. Always remember to be respectful of other people's opinions even if you disagree with what is being said.
7. Recognize your own assumptions and remember that those assumptions may not translate to other places. For example, saying that market competition among networks and cable has improved the quality of US programs might be offensive to people who are critical of capitalism.
8. Support your claims with solid data rather than with romanticized generalizations.
9. If you are being questioned or attacked at a conference, be calm and always go back to your sources.

While paying heed to this advice, one should also enjoy the research process. I found it very rewarding to spend time with people who, while sharing the same language and many cultural traits, had a drastically different upbringing and worldview from my own. And yes, I need to admit that even though I was cautious about the comments I made at the center where I conducted my research in a socialist country, some members of the Communist Party were nonetheless shocked by some of my "cautious" remarks. Live and learn. However, despite a few awkward moments and the risk of being called a Castro hater or a Castro lover, I do not regret the selection of the topic and research site. What I do regret is that, because of the politics of academia and the left-wing and right-wing baggage associated with Cuba, in the introduction of my forthcoming book I felt the need to disclose my ethnic background and discuss the fact that I have no personal investment in the past, present, or future of Cuba. I

would never have needed to make that sort of qualification if I were simply analyzing sexuality in *The Golden Girls*.

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 - ² Duanel Díaz Infante, [“Revolución Cubana, Crítica Latinoamericana, y Academia Norteamericana,”](http://www.diariodecuba.com/de-leer/1367137602_2990.html) *Diario de Cuba*, accessed April 29, 2013, http://www.diariodecuba.com/de-leer/1367137602_2990.html.
 - ³ Ana López, “Greater Cuba,” in *The Ethnic Eye: Latino Media Arts*, ed. Chon Noriega and Ana López (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 38–58.
 - ⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

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