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Decolonizing Approaches to Users and Audiences in the Global South: Context, Theory, and Method, edited by Tarik Sabry, Winston Mano, and Andrea Medrado. Routledge, 2026. 350 pp., ISBN 978-1-032-59036-3.

El Makke Maagoul
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco
LLCIS Research Lab

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El Makke Maagoul is a doctoral researcher at Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, and a member of the Linguistic, Literary, Cultural, and Interdisciplinary Studies Research Lab. He obtained his MA degree in "English Literature and History of Ideas" from the same faculty. His research interests include cultural studies, postcolonial literature, and media studies.

elmakke.maagoul@etu.uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4856-7589

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Book Review

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Over the past two decades, decolonial studies has gained prominence in the Global South by interrogating Western epistemologies and developing new tools to shift the geography of knowledge and achieve epistemic justice. Within media and communication studies, new projects have been launched to decolonize audience research using non-Western methods and approaches. *Decolonising Approaches to Users and Audiences in the Global South: Context, Theory and Method* provides a subversive reading of digital audience habitus by foregrounding the "decolonial epistemological turn" in audience research. Edited by Tarik Sabry, Winston Mano, and Andrea Medrado, this volume probes alternative modalities of epistemic emancipation and justice. The book seeks an alternative hermeneutic possibility: shifting the relational totality of meaning-making and changing perceptions about audiences in Africa, Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, and the Global South at large. Rather than relying on the supposed universality of Western approaches to study audiences in the Global South, the book rethinks audience studies through decolonial lenses. It remaps new fields in contemporary media and communication studies.

This collection provides alternative narratives of how internet users have shifted the traditional balance of power, transitioning from passive consumers to active content producers who gain visibility and influence. The editors reflect on the Latin American *lo popular* approach to media users, which is distinctly differentiated from Western "popular culture," wherein audiences are often viewed as mere consumers of mass culture. New media provides ample opportunities for users to create their own stories, reflect on their lived experiences, and consequently dominate the digital sphere (Rodríguez; Rincón). *Lo popular* represents the dynamic interaction of all modes of expression, such as storytelling, music, telenovelas, and fairs, where meaning is mediated and agency is reclaimed. Rincón's concept of *lo popular* foregrounds a participatory model where meaning is collectively negotiated via the engagement of all members of society.

Democratizing the "digital sphere" in the Global South begins with the question of who controls whom, and in what way. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire's "critical pedagogy" overcomes the paradigm in which knowledge is transmitted from the knowledgeable (teacher/researcher) to the uninitiated (student/researched). Instead, it provides a democratic method of knowledge production through the participation of all "active subjects," which makes the idea of *conscientização*, or "consciousness-raising," possible (Sabry et al. 17-18). Knowledge becomes the byproduct of horizontal interaction among all participants. It involves both feeling and thinking, developing what Orlando Fals Borda calls a *sentipensante* (Fals Borda 9, qtd. in Sabry et al. 17). This process of knowledge production in Freire's

Contact ✉ elmakke.maagoul@etu.uae.ac.ma
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conscientização and Fals Borda's *sentipensante* inspires the participatory model of audience research by foregrounding the influence of media users, representing them as active participants rather than passive objects of study.

Within the context of this participatory model, Sabry, Mano, and Medrado observe that African audiences are becoming more "digitally literate, civically engaged," and, drawing on L. Lusike Mukhongo's own 2020 research, more likely to speak truth to power: whereas the old paradigm of "media power" considered audiences passive recipients of content, the participatory turn has shifted media power toward audiences who become active creators (11). Mukhongo's own chapter in the collection turns to more recent examples of this same dynamic, among them Kenyan internet users' use of hashtags such as #SomeoneTellCNN and #RejectFinanceBill2024 to contest global media narratives and mobilise digital activism.

The book is divided into four sections, articulating different ways to decolonize audience research in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. The editors' introduction traces the genealogy of audience research in the Global South and maps new modalities of South-South cross-cultural dialogue and emancipation. This is followed by a dialogue between Tarik Sabry and David Morley, where Morley reflects on de-Westernizing media studies using a non-media-centric approach. Utilizing an ethnographic perspective, Morley argues for the potential of audiences in the Global South to subvert Western communication technologies and gain global visibility. Heading the Africa section, Tanja Bosch's chapter argues that the digital lived experience varies across the globe. Traditional audience research methods, she argues, may not always be adequate for "capturing users' unique perspectives and experiences" in the Global South or majority world (Bosch 74).

Mukhongo's chapter in this collection aligns with the decolonial turn in Africa. Digital activism, she argues, provides new ways to challenge what Couldry and Mejias describe as the construction of societies "under total algorithmic control" (qtd. in Mukhongo 94), a hegemony that African digital activists are actively contesting. Despite the inequality of digital infrastructure in Africa, new media users actively participate in dismantling biases, raising awareness of the power of digital activism to change perceptions, and contesting global narratives. Mukhongo coins the term "carcerality and systemic eradication of Indigenous knowledge" for what Western-centric research methodologies have enacted in the Global South (92). From an Afrokological perspective, she argues for the power of indigenous technologies to promote self-representation in media by celebrating local experiences and narratives.

The second part of the collection is devoted to the Asian context. Yu-Kei Tse contextualizes the influence of streaming culture in Japan during the 2010s and 2020s and its impact on television viewing. Tse examines three main Japanese Broadcast Video-on-Demand (BVOD) services, NHK On-Demand (2008-), NHK+ (2020-), and TVer (2015-), to explore how terrestrial channels survived the shift to online viewing. She frames Western industrial and audience practices as too often treated as the "default," against which other contexts are cast merely as "alternatives" (126). In the case of Japan, Tse argues, online TV viewing both maintains social cohesion and expands the popularity of Japanese culture, with anime serving as a prime example.

In the context of China, Xiaoxiao Zhang reflects on viewing practices when television was introduced to Chinese audiences in the 1980s. Zhang states that television provided entertainment to a society suffering economic hardships while simultaneously reinforcing "authoritarian governance" (Zhang 165). The introduction of TV to Chinese homes brought "boundless joy and satisfaction" to households facing widespread economic hardship, received by many as an "oasis in the desert" (170-72). Exploring contemporary China, Guobin Yang and colleagues tackle the vulnerabilities of the digital age. Drawing on mixed-methods survey and interview data gathered around the COVID-19 pandemic from 106 respondents in several

Chinese metropolitan cities, mostly but not exclusively university students, the authors reveal a shared sense that we live in a risk age. Participants noted that social media seeks to "prey upon (掠夺) consumers' time" and exposes them to a "flooding of misinformation." Consequently, users constantly try to cultivate hobbies centered on "self-control (自我把控)" or "self-watchfulness." Drawing on Michel Foucault's care of the self and Confucian self-care through self-support, the authors showcase how internet users constantly develop mechanisms to survive digital vulnerabilities by seeking help from trusted friends, a practice that can be labeled the "art of living with technology."

The third part turns to Latin America, returning to the *lo popular* framework raised earlier and testing it against two different registers. Claudia Magallanes-Blanco's chapter examines indigenous community radio in Oaxaca, Mexico, extending research into Indigenous community media in Mexico that she has pursued for more than twenty years. Indigenous-produced media, she argues, "offer possibilities for self-representation in the face of Western, colonial media discourses that construct a social imaginary about that which is Indigenous" (212). María Soledad Segura, Alejandro Linares, and Rose Dayanne Santana Nogueira then shift to a more institutional register, examining the audience ombudsman's office, a mechanism present in several Latin American broadcasting systems for representing audience interests within media policy, and asking what a decolonial framework adds to an institution more commonly studied through governance or accountability alone. Their answer is double-edged: the ombudsman's offices "were not designed from a decolonial and/or intersectional perspective," and yet in practice they still "pay attention to the diversities and inequalities inherent to" the communities they serve (224). Read together, the two chapters move from grassroots practice toward institutional analysis, giving the Latin America section a different center of gravity than the Africa and Asia sections that precede it.

The final section turns to the Middle East. Joe Khalil provides an interesting study of how historical events have mutated and transformed audience discourses in the region. Khalil states that terms such as *Ummah* (أُمّة), *Al-Jamaheer* (الجماهير), and the Arab street (الشارع العربي) reflect different socio-cultural contexts and ideologies regarding Arab audiences. He asserts that studying these audiences requires methodologies that "foreground cultural specificity and move beyond one-size-fits-all frameworks" (Khalil 261). Dina Matar problematizes the notion of the Palestinian audience in "times of permanent war and excessive mediation" (Matar 266). Taking the 2023-2024 Israeli genocidal war against Gaza as a starting point, Matar notes how dominant media privileges Israeli narratives while underreporting Palestinian suffering. Palestinians, she argues, become "de-audienced." The excessive sharing of horrific videos documenting their suffering becomes "banal and commonsensical," leading to underreporting by Western media corporations like the BBC. Tarik Sabry's chapter navigates the nuances of performing arts in the Middle East that are inherently "audience-centered," positing that the audience's mnemonic experience and *Augenblick* moments hold paramount value, rather than centering the focus entirely on the performer. The section closes with Erdem Güven's study of nostalgia for Turkish state broadcasting under the TRT era in contemporary Türkiye, a reminder that the book's Middle East is not reducible to the Arab world alone.

Decolonising Approaches to Users and Audiences is a paramount work of decolonial research in the Global South. One of the book's primary academic merits is that it provides a clearer view of how internet users interact with digital ecosystems and how new media democratizes the communicative act. It also beautifully illustrates how the subaltern invents new ways to speak truth to power, shifting the paradigms of knowledge production. Nevertheless, the book cannot single-handedly tackle all issues related to audiences in the

Global South. Yang and colleagues' study, for example, draws on a self-consciously privileged sample of educated, metropolitan internet users, as the authors themselves acknowledge, highlighting the need for further research into the digital habitus of less advantaged voices in China. Similarly, the studies by Khalil, Matar, and Sabry are foundational but not exhaustive, as every society in the Middle East holds its own particularities and socio-political conditions. Ultimately, *Decolonising Approaches to Users and Audiences* is a masterful collection that successfully paves the way for further decolonial studies and interrogations.