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The Impact of New Media on Intercultural Communication in Global Context

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Abstract. The rapid development of new media has been the main force accelerating the trend of globalization in human society in recent decades. New media has brought human interaction and society to a highly interconnected and complex level, but at the same time challenges the very existence of intercultural communication in its traditional sense. It is under this circumstance that we see more and more scholars becoming involved in the investigation of the relationship between new media and intercultural communication. Emerging topical areas in this line of research mainly include three categories: (1) the impact of national/ethnic culture on the development of new media, (2) the impact of new media on cultural/social identity, and (3) the impact of new media (especially social media) on different aspects of intercultural communication (e.g., intercultural relationships, intercultural adaptation, and intercultural conflict). This paper discusses this trend of research on the relationship between new media and intercultural communication. [China Media Research. 2012; 8(2): 1-10]

Keywords: New media, culture, intercultural communication, cultural identity

Introduction

The history of human communication began with the oral or spoken tradition. Through the course of history, the dissemination of messages progressed from simply the oral tradition, to script, print, wired electronics, wireless electronics and finally digital communication. The greatest change in message dissemination in recent history occurred with the introduction of computers and the Internet in the early 1990s. Since then, this drastic change of communication medium has significantly affected humans' perception of the media, the usage of time and space, and the reachability and control of the media.

In the present age of digital communication, time has been compressed by reducing the distance between different points in space, and the sense of space has led people to feel that local, national, and global space becomes obsolete (Harvey, 1990). In addition, the reachability of digital media can now extend to all people, instead of a limited audience. This is significant because without the confinement of time and space, the control of message production and dissemination is no longer a privilege possessed only by church, state, and government, but instead, equally shared by all individuals.

All these innovations in digital media, or so-called new media, have changed and continue to change the way we think, act, and live. For example, digitalization, as a hybridization of print and electronic media in a binary code, converts analog to digital that requires a completely different mode of production and distribution.

As Chen (2007) indicated, the impact of digital or new media on human society is demonstrated in the aspects of cognition, social effect, and a new form of aesthetics. Cognitively, new media demands a non-linear nature and the creation of expectations for

content, which directly influences the way people use media. Socially, the most manifested impact of new media is the effect of demassification, which denotes that the traditional design for a large, homogeneous audience is disappearing and being replaced by a specific and individual appeal, allowing the audience to access and create the message they wish to produce (Olason & Pollard, 2004). Visually, new media brings forth a new digital aesthetic view, which refers to, for example, "interactivity, manipulation, the prepurposing and repurposing of content across media, deliberate creation of virtual experience, and sampling as a means of generating new content" (Chen, 2007, p. 95).

New media is also the main force accelerating the trend of globalization in human society. The globalization trend has led to the transformation of almost all aspects of human society. For instance, socially and culturally, globalization has changed the perception of what a community is, redefined the meaning of cultural identity and civic society, and demanded a new way of intercultural interaction (Chen & Zhang, 2010). Economically, global competition has enormously intensified. In order to succeed in global business, a company is required to not only understand the local markets in order to meet their global clients' needs, but they must also seek out open markets globally, and foster effective management in global business transactions (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2007). In sum, due to the thrust of new media, the global trend creates new social networks and activities, redefines political, cultural, economic, geographical and other boundaries of human society, expands and stretches social relations, intensifies and accelerates social exchanges, and involves both the micro-structures of personhood and macro-structures of community (Steger, 2009).

From the scholarly perspective, unfortunately, traditional studies seldom connected well or integrated the two concepts of “media” and “globalization” (Rantanen, 2006). Three established academic fields on the study of the concepts include communication studies, media and cultural studies, and globalization studies. Communication studies began after World War II and become an academic field during the 1950s in the United States. Beginning with early studies focusing on international communication and speech communication and continuing on to recently developed intercultural communication, communication studies as an academic field tends to ignore the relationship between people and media, or how people use media in different cultural contexts, and how that closely relates to the globalization of human society.

The field of media and cultural studies emerged in the 1970s in Britain on the basis of resisting the dominance of communication studies in the United States, which was more oriented towards the empirical or discovery paradigm. Yet, most British media studies focus on the role media institutions play in the process of globalization. Many scholars in this area tend to take globalization for granted, by not making an effort to theorize the concept (Sparks, 1998; Thussu, 2000). As for cultural studies, originated from the Frankfurt School in Germany, the field suffers from the lack of concern about the impact media has on people. The problems that exist in media studies and cultural studies are like those that appear between the studies of international communication and intercultural communication. As Servaes (2008) pointed out, cultural studies in Europe and in the United States mainly pays attention to cultural issues instead of media issues.

The study of globalization began in the early 1990s, a time when the trend of globalization significantly increased its impact on human society in terms of scope and scale. Nevertheless, although scholars from different disciplines are involved in the study of globalization (e.g., Giddens, 1990; Pieterse, 2009; Robertson, 1992; Waters, 1995), and most agreed that without media and communication globalization will not emerge as such a great impetus of the transformation of human society, the role of media and communication in the theorization of the concept of globalization remains vague and less specified. Surprisingly, according to Rantanen (2006), the contribution of scholars from the field of media and communication to globalization theories is far less than scholars from other disciplines such as anthropology and sociology.

The separation problem of communication studies, cultural/media studies, and globalization studies in scholarly research has been gradually alleviated in recent years, but more studies in this direction are still needed. It is then the purpose of this paper to integrate

these concepts through the examination of the relationship between new media and intercultural communication. In order to explore how new media influences the process of intercultural communication, the discussion in this paper contains two parts. In the first part, I explicate the nature of new media and its interdependent relationship with globalization. In the second part, I explain the impact of new media on intercultural communication from different perspectives.

New Media and Globalization

As mentioned above, the rapid development of new media has been the main force accelerating the trend of globalization in human society during the last few decades. With its distinctive and unique nature, new media has brought human interaction and society to a highly interconnected and complex level. Through this convergence the mutual enhancement of new media and globalization has led to the transformation of almost all the aspects of human society. New media being considered “new” is not only because of its successful integration in the form of the traditional interpersonal and mass media, but also because of its new functions that enable individuals to equally control messages in interpersonal media, which allows them to control messages in mass media (Crosbie, 2002). New media functionally allows people to interact with multiple persons simultaneously with the ability to individualize messages in the process of interaction.

New media enjoys five distinctive characteristics: digitality, convergence, interactivity, hypertextuality, and virtuality (Chen & Zhang, 2010; Flew, 2005; Lister, Dovere, Giddings, Grant, & Kelly, 2009). First, digitalization is the most prominent feature of new media. New media or digital media dematerializes media text by converting data from analog into digital form, which allows all kind of mathematical operations. New media also makes it possible for a large amount of information to be retrieved, manipulated, and stored in a very limited space.

Second, new media converges the forms and functions of information, media, electronic communication, and electronic computing. The convergence power of new media can be easily demonstrated by the emergence of the Internet in terms of its powerful function embedded in computer information technologies and broadband communication networks. This also leads to the industry convergence displayed by the constant merger of big media companies and the product and service convergence evidenced by the successful connection and combination of media’s material, product, and service in the media industry.

Third, the interactive function of new media, i.e., between users and the system regarding the use of

information resources, provides users a great freedom in producing and reproducing the content and form of the information during the interaction. In addition, the interactivity of new media makes the interaction among different networks and the retrieving of information through different operational systems, both available and convenient. The freedom in controlling the information endows new media a great power in the process of human communication.

Fourth, the hypertextuality of new media brings forth a global network center in which information can freely move around and spontaneously interconnect. This global network phenomenon has begun to rebuild a new life experience for human beings, which in turn will lead the transformation of economic activities, cultural patterns, interactional styles, and other aspects of human society (Castells, 2000).

Finally, the cyberspace formed by new media allows people to generate virtual experience and reality. The invisible cyberspace not only induces a gap between reality and virtuality, but also effectuates the free alternation of one's gender, personality, appearance, and occupation. The formation of virtual community that crosses all the boundaries of human society definitely will challenge the way we perceive reality and have traditionally defined identity. (Jones, 1995).

With these distinct features new media pushes the trend of globalization to its highest level in human history. As defined by Steger (2009), globalization "refers to the expansion and intensification of social relations and consciousness across world-time and world-space" (p. 15). In other words, globalization is "a social process in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and people become increasingly aware that they are receding" (Waters, 1995, p. 3). It involves the expansion, stretching, intensification, and acceleration of social activities in both objective/material and subjective/human consciousness levels, or different levels of human society, including the entire world, a specific nation, a specific industry or organization, and an individual (Govindarajan & Gupta, 1997).

The powerful impact of globalization, enhanced by the advent of new media, is revealed in its dynamic, pervasive, interconnected, hybridized, and individually powerful attributes (Chen, 2005; Chen & Zhang, 2010). First, globalization is a dialectically dynamic process, which is caused by the pushing and pulling between the two forces of cultural identity and cultural diversity, or between localization and universalization. Second, globalization is universally pervasive. It moves like air penetrating into every aspect of human society and influences the way we live, think, and behave. Third, globalization is holistically interconnected. It builds a huge matrix in which all components are interconnected

with networks. Fourth, globalization represents a culturally hybridized state, which allows cultural transmission via new media to take place at a very rapid rate by permeating and dissolving human boundaries. Finally, globalization increases individual power in the new media society, which pluralizes the world by recognizing the ability and importance of individual components.

Together, the dialectically dynamic, universally pervasive, holistically interconnected, culturally hybridized, and individually powerful characteristics of globalization enhanced and deepened by the stimulus and push of the emergence of new media has led to revolutionary changes in people's thinking and behaviors, redefined the sense of community, and restructured human society.

The impact of the integration of new media and globalization can be summarized into five precise effects, namely, a shrinking world, the compression of time and space, close interaction in different aspects of society, global connectivity, and accelerated local/global competition/cooperation (Chen & Starosta, 2000). In other words, boundaries of human societies in terms of space, time, scope, structure, geography, function, profession, value, and beliefs are swiftly changing and transforming into a new pattern of similarities and interconnectedness.

Nevertheless, although the interdependent relationship of new media and globalization is evident, the specific connection between the five distinctive characteristics of new media (i.e., digitality, convergency, interactivity, hypertextuality, and virtuality), and the five manifest features of globalization (i.e., dialectically dynamic, universally pervasive, holistically interconnected, culturally hybridized, and individually powerful), remain a valuable research topic for scholars to further pursue. This paper only focuses on the discussion of the relationship between new media and intercultural communication.

The next section first delineates the impact of new media on human communication, especially from the intercultural communication perspective, and discusses the present research on the impact of new media on intercultural communication.

The Impact of New Media on Intercultural Communication

With its distinctive features new media has brought human society to a highly interconnected and complex level, but at the same time, it challenges the very existence of human communication in the traditional sense. New media not only influences the form and content of information/messages, but it also affects how people understand each other in the process of human communication, especially for those from different cultural or ethnic groups.

On the one hand, intrinsically, the new culture hatched from new media creates a continuity gap between traditions and innovations within a culture. Before the emergence of new media, according to Bagdasaryan (2011), traditions and innovations in human society co-existed in a dynamically synchronized way, but the speed and impact of the new media resulted in the inability of traditional values to keep pace with the new cultural values produced by new media. This cultural gap has caused difficulty in understanding or communication between generations and among people in the same culture.

New media also extrinsically breeds communication gaps between different cultural and ethnic groups. The fragmented nature of new media has switched traditional cultural grammar, cultural themes, or cultural maps to a new pattern, resulting in the loss of traditional cultural logic. The rearrangement or restructuring of cultural patterns, or worldview, demands that members of a culture realign their communication behaviors within their own community, and to learn a new way of interaction with people from differing cultures. New media fosters a new culture in human society, in which the degree of ambiguity and uncertainty has been reshuffled and has reached its highest point, especially in the process of intercultural communication. How to readjust to this new situation and smoothly achieve the goal of mutual understanding for people from different cultural groups in this chaotic stage of cultural change becomes a great challenge for the practical need of interaction in daily life and research in the scholarly community. It is under this

circumstance that we see more and more scholars are becoming involved in the investigation of the relationship between new media and intercultural communication (Allwood & Schroeder, 2000; Pfister & Soliz, 011; Shuter, 2011).

After examining the extant literature, we found that emerging topical areas in this line of research mainly include three categories: (1) the impact of national/ethnic culture on the development of new media, (2) the impact of new media on cultural/social identity, and (3) the impact of new media (especially social media) on different aspects of intercultural interaction (e.g., intercultural relationship, intercultural dialogue, and intercultural conflict).

National/Ethnic Culture and New Media

As Weick (1983) pointed out, in the international electronic exchange culture plays a significant role in affecting the process and outcome of the interaction. In other words, culture as a communication context may dictate the use of media. Chen (2000) found that three cultural factors, namely thinking patterns, expression styles, and cultural context, are the three prominent cultural factors that influence how people behave in electronic media, and the three factors are the manifestation of cultural values (Chen & Starosta, 2005). Based on the distinction of low-context culture and high-context culture categorized by Hall (1976), Chung and Chen (2007) proposed possible communication differences for members in the two groups in the process of electronic interaction (p. 285) (see Table 1):

Table 1 Differences between Low- and High-Context Cultures in E-communication

	<u>LCC</u>	<u>HCC</u>
Meaning display	explicit	implicit
Value orientation	individual	group
Personal relationship	transitory	permanent
Action base	procedure	personal
Logic	linear	spiral
Message learning time	short	long
Verbal interaction	direct	indirect
Nonverbal style	individualistic	contextual
Idea presentation	logic	feelings
Message style	detailed	simple
Credibility source	authority	communication source

It is assumed that cultural values will influence the social networking process in new media (Vasslou, Joinson, & Courvoisier, 2010; Veltri & Elgarah, 2009; Vinales, 2011). Hall's (1976) low-context and high-context cultures and Hofstede's (2001) individualism

and collectivism dimensions of cultural values are two of the most common models used in the study of the relationship between culture and media. For example, Kim, Sohn, and Choi (2010) found that cultural value orientations affect a user's attitude when using new

media. Their study demonstrates that although the motives for using social media are similar for students, those in high-context, collectivistic cultures, such as Korean college students, show more emphasis on attaining social support from existing social relationships, while those in low-context, individualistic cultures, such as American college students, tend to show more interest in seeking entertainment rather than social relationships. Moreover, Rosen, Stefanone, and Lackaff (2010) as well found that, compared to high-context, collectivistic cultures in the process of new media interaction, people in low-context, individualistic cultures tend to emphasize individual achievements and self-promotion to extend their social relations network, though the orientation may trade privacy in the network.

New Media and Cultural Identity

The convergence of new media and globalization brings about at least six new experiences for human beings, including new textual experiences, new ways of representing the world, new relationships between users and new media technologies, new conceptions of the biological body's relationship to technological media, and new patterns of organization and production (Lister, Dovere, Giddings, Grant, & Kelly, 2009). These experiences will inevitably challenge the traditional formation and definition of social or cultural identity. In other words, the use of new media is shaking the root of cultural identity by weakening or strengthening the intensity of the relationship between people and community (Hampton & Wellman, 1999; Singh, 2010). The time and space compression caused by the convergence of new media and globalization creates a universal cyberspace in which new cultural identity is emerging in different virtual communities.

The new cultural identity formed by new media may not change the traditional meaning of cultural identity as a unique product through interaction in a specific group context, which gives members a sense of belongings to the group, but it will directly challenge the traditional attributes of cultural identity, namely, temporality, territoriality, contrastivity, interactivity, and multiplicity (Belay, 1996). More specifically, cultural identity fostered by new media is no longer a product of historical development (i.e., temporality) confined in an avowal process of people in a geographical place (i.e., territoriality). It may still be a distinct collective consciousness based on the members' sense-making process (i.e., contrastivity). The virtual community is characterized by a higher degree of heterogeneity and a lower level of interconnection (Van Dijk, 1998). In addition, social interaction (i.e., interactivity) as the foundation of developing cultural identity remains unchanged in the age of new media, but the nature of interpersonal and group relationships via social interaction in the virtual community is unlike

those constructed from traditional face-to-face interaction. Finally, it is still unknown if the new cultural identity formed by new media will continue to be a multi-faceted concept or practice (i.e., multiplicity), which can contrast with the six facets of traditional cultural identity indicated by Belay (1996), including sociological identities, occupational identities, geobasic identities, national identities, co-cultural identities, and ethnic identities.

In sum, new media continues to establish different kinds of new communities without the limit of time and space, which makes cultural identity more dynamic, fluid, and relativized, and imposes austere challenges to the autonomy and stability of cultural identity (Tan, 2005; Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2010). The impact of new media on cultural identity has become one of the issues intercultural communication scholars are most concerned about (e.g., Chen & Zhang, 2010; Cheong & Gary, 2011; Chiang, 2010; Halualani, 2008; Huffaker & Calvert, 2006; Kennedy, 2006; Koc, 2006; Wang, Huang, Huang, & Wang, 2009; Wang, Walther, & Hancock, 2009; Weber & Mitchell, 2008; William, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009)

New Media and Intercultural Interaction

The impact of new media on different aspects of intercultural interaction is apparent and has attracted more and more studies from intercultural communication scholars. This part discusses the influence of new media on three common aspects of intercultural interaction in the global context: intercultural relationship, intercultural adaptation, and intercultural conflict.

Intercultural relationships

New media, especially social media such as Facebook, blogs, MySpace, YouTube, Twitter, and the iPhone, have enabled people from every corner of the world to represent themselves in a particular way and stay connected in cyberspace. It is obvious that the flexibility of information presented and shared in the new media will directly affect, either positively or negatively, the development of intercultural relationships in the virtual community through the creation of a network of personal connection (e.g., Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Donath & Boyd, 2004; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lanmpe, 2007; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Walther, 1992).

Moreover, Elola and Oskoz (2009) found that in foreign language and study abroad contexts, the use of blogging not only showed a positive effect on the development of intercultural relationships, but also increased the degree of participants' intercultural communication competence. In addition to intercultural relationships on a personal level, social media also helps to establish international business relationships

(Jackson, 2011). Nevertheless, new media may also produce a negative impact on intercultural communication. For example, Qian and Scott (2007) found that revealing too much personal information in blogs, especially negative information about one's friends, employer, and others, tends to jeopardize or cause problems in establishing constructive human relationships intraculturally and interculturally.

Finally, McEwan and Sobre-Denton (2011) argued that computer-mediated communication can promote and develop virtual cosmopolitanism and virtual third cultures. The authors indicated that through the construction of third culture space, a new, hybrid culture is created, in which interactants from differing cultures are able to gather cultural and social information, build online communities, and form intercultural relationships.

Intercultural adaptation

Because new media enables individuals across the globe to exchange messages for the purpose of understanding people from different cultures, it has become popular for sojourners or immigrants to use new media to communicate with their friends, classmates, and relatives or family members in both their native and host country in their learning process or daily life (e.g., Chen Bennett, & Maton, 2008; Trebbe, 2007; Tsai, 2006; Ye, 2006). As shown in W. Chen's (2010) study, the longer immigrants reside in the host country, the more they communicate with the host nationals via new media, but the frequency of surfing their original country's websites is decreasing. W. Chen also found that the use of new media shows a significant impact on the process of immigrants' intercultural adaptation. In other words, the social interaction conducted through new media by immigrants proves to be a critical element that can determine whether they can successfully adjust to the host country.

In addition, Sawyer and Chen (2011) investigated how international students use social media and how it affects their intercultural adaptation. The authors found that social media provides an environment for international students to connect with people in both their home and host countries, which in turn helps them strengthen personal relationships and fosters a sense of belonging to the host culture. The use of new media obviously helps international students cope with cultural barriers in the process of intercultural adaptation. The study also found that, due to the influence of culture shock, sojourners tend to rely more on social media in the initial stage of arriving in the host country, to keep connected with those people they know in their home country in order to gain a sense of comfort in the new environment. As time moves on, the use of social media was switched to interacting with the host nationals to help them better integrate into the new culture.

Furthermore, Croucher (2011) attempted to propose a theoretical model through the integration of cultivation theory and ethnic group vitality to illustrate the relationship between social networking and cultural adaptation. Croucher successfully generated two propositions: (1) "During cultural adaptation, the use of social networking sites affects immigrants' interaction with the dominant culture" (p. 261), and (2) "During cultural adaptation, the use of social networking sites will affect immigrants' in-group communication" (p. 262). According to the author, the propositions provide great potential for future research to investigate the impact of social media on the process of immigrants' adaptation in the host culture, which may include

frequency of interaction with dominant culture, their use of dominant and ethnic media, perception of the dominant culture, familiarity with dominant language or cultural norms, identification with dominant or ethnic culture, involvement in the dominant political system, and motivation to acculturate. (p. 262)

Intercultural conflict

New media provides people and governments with a powerful tool to construct their own image, to define and redefine the meanings of messages, to set the media agenda, or to frame the news or messages. However, cultural dissimilarities result in different ways in media representation on the individual or governmental level. Because the underlying order, perspectives and practical limitations of the media in any society are based on their cultural value orientations, the different forms of media representation tend to reflect the asymmetry of intercultural communication and inevitably lead to the problem of intercultural confrontation or conflict in interpersonal, group, and national levels (Chen & Dai, in press; Hotier, 2011). The media coverage of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and Google's withdrawal from P.R. China are two good examples of the illustration of intercultural conflict in the media context.

According to Ni (2008) and Zhou (2007), Western media has long portrayed P.R. China as an authoritarian, backward, irrational, and mysterious nation. The P.R. China is commonly criticized by Western media for abusing human rights, political corruption, social instability, and environmental pollution. In order to construct a positive national image, the Chinese government carefully and tactically used its state-owned media to set up three agendas for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, namely, green Olympics, humanistic Olympics, and scientific Olympics. While most Western media was less prejudiced and biased in reporting the success of the Beijing Olympic Games and agrees that the games presented the image of a rising great power (Ding, 2011; Gan & Peng, 2008; Shi 2009), media

agencies such as the New York Times and Washington Post placed much emphasis on the coverage of protests during the Beijing Olympic Games by criticizing the Chinese government's failing to fulfill its promise to loosen restrictions on free speech during the time of the Olympics. As Murray (2011) argued, Western media coverage of the protest controversy is embedded in the Western beliefs in freedom of expression, human rights, individual equality, and social justice, which are in contrast to Chinese cultural values of harmony, face saving, group interest, and social order. The coverage based on different cultural values between Chinese media and Western media made confrontation unavoidable.

As for the case of Google's withdrawal from P.R. China, after the analysis of news framing between *China Daily* and the *Wall Street Journal*, Kuang (2011) found that the themes that dominated in *China Daily* were criticism of Google and the US government, Google's ploy to avoid censoring, and Google's loss and failure, while the recurring themes in the *Wall Street Journal* reports were about China's violation of human rights/government censorship, business-government relations, and international relations. The findings show that news agencies often reflect their nation's agendas, interests, and values (Bennett, 1990; Entman, 1991), which eventually sparks intercultural conflict or face-off between countries.

Conclusion

This paper examines the relationship between new media and intercultural communication in the global context. It is argued that new media not only provides a space in which people of different cultures can freely express their opinions and establish relationships, but may also challenge the existence of human communication in intracultural and intercultural contexts because of its specific characteristics that are significantly dissimilar to traditional media. With its focus on intercultural interaction, this paper explicates the impact of cultural values on new media, the impact of new media on cultural identity, and the impact of new media on three aspects of intercultural interaction, namely, intercultural relationships, intercultural dialogue, and intercultural conflict. Two implications can be made based on the delineation of this paper.

First, this paper only deals with the directional influence of cultural values on new media, new media on cultural identity, and new media on intercultural interaction. It is plausible that the relationship of new media and other variables discussed in this paper can be mutual. In other words, for future research scholars can examine, for example, the possible impact of new media on the formation of new cultural values, the transformation of or rendering obsolete old cultural values, and the impact of cultural identity on the use of new media. Moreover, in addition to the three

categories examined in this paper, the scope of the relationship between new media and intercultural communication can be expanded to other themes, such as the investigation of co-cultural variations in the use of new media to communication within and across cultures, the impact of new media on intercultural dialogue, and the potential use of new media to resolve intercultural conflicts.

Second and finally, because the impact of new media on human society is still in its initial stages, the possible effect of new media on human communication mentioned in the first part of this paper remains dynamic and still lacks systematic studies from scholars. Hence, the impact of new media on intercultural communication discussed in this paper is largely confined to the old model of media functions. How to unlock this limitation and shift from the context of traditional media to new media remains a great challenge for scholars to observe in this line of research. In other words, future research needs to observe and study the question, "Is intercultural communication possible?" raised by Shan (2010), under the context of new media in global society.

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