From Digital Occupation to Digital Revolution? Media Infrastructures as Borders

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This talk addresses the politicization of technology and the formations and negotiations of new kinds of borders in the age of globalization, based on a political economy and critical geography analysis of media infrastructures. It begins with an analysis of the Palestinian-Israeli case as a means of understanding ‘digital occupation’ and moves through an analysis of the importance of infrastructure so as to question the notion of ‘digital revolutions’ in the current uprisings in the Middle East and beyond.

First, the paper theorizes media infrastructures as borders by focusing empirically on broadcasting, telecommunications and the internet in Palestine-Israel. Based on an analysis of technological, legal, and physical limitations imposed by Israel on these infrastructures, the argument is made that infrastructures function as bordering mechanisms. These boundaries are contradictory however, and serve as a lens through which to understand the forces of localization and globalization. Media infrastructures highlight how Palestinians are at once incorporated into a global ‘network’ (of technology, international development, capital, etc.) and simultaneously how local and global forces prevent the nation-state from coming into being.

Second, drawing from the Palestinian-Israeli case, the paper challenges views of digital networks as open, liberatory, and non-political spaces. The paper posits media and its infrastructures as material, physical, and mostly visible processes. From this perspective then, it becomes easier to analyze how the materiality of media infrastructures matter: politically, economically, geographically, and otherwise; and consequently recognize the ways in which infrastructures can also function as bordering mechanisms. Finally, the paper speaks to the role of media infrastructures across the Middle East region and questions the notion of ‘digital revolutions’ and suggests that we are witnessing the transformation and abstraction of borders in the Middle East and across the ‘global digital age’.