

Kurdish Identity, Discourse, and New Media

By Jaffer Sheyholislami

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A Book Review by

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Jaffer Sheyholislami's (2011) *Kurdish Identity, Discourse, and New Media* investigates the ways in which Kurds use satellite television and the Internet to reproduce, disseminate, and articulate semiotic and discursive constructions of their collective identities. This exploration utilizes critical discourse analysis—an interdisciplinary approach that fuses social theories and theories of language and discourse. To guide the investigation of the place of communication technologies in Kurdish identity formation, the book focuses on three levels of this process: the messages communicated, the mediums through which they are transmitted, and the context (e.g., sociocultural, political, and historical) of the discursive constructs and practices involved in identity formation. The outcome of this research suggests that while Kurdish identity is specific to cultural, regional, and political locales, Kurds now know more about their collective histories due to interactions mediated by communication technologies.

The investigation of digital media and Kurdish identity formation is prefaced with a comprehensive exploration of Kurdish histories, illustrating a past of territorial, political, cultural, and linguistic fragmentation. The introduction of communication tools is traced in relation to the interactions shared between Kurds across geographical and political borders. As Kurds have gained access to communication platforms, they have experienced a process of unification, allowing them to share and learn about the multifaceted meanings of their identities. Given that Kurds are the largest people claiming the status of a non-state nation, they have faced many internal and external obstacles in the formation of a collective character.

While Sheyholislami's discussions explore how new media and digital communication technologies have served as a groundbreaking tool in the consolidation and further development of Kurdish identity, he also acknowledges the bounds of these assertions. Variables such as media ownership and political interests, which motivate censorship, frame ideologies and events that impact the ways in which audiences understand messages. These conventional mediums generally are aligned with particular belief systems and policed by omnipresent governing bodies. Although these messages undoubtedly contribute to identity formation, they also serve to protect and perpetuate specific expectations. That is, on television, identity is articulated within a general ideological framework and political interests—for instance, a dominant Kurdish political party. However, while traditional media (e.g., newspapers, radio, television, etc.) pose

restrictions and increased opportunity for state control, innovation in communication technologies allows more freedom and the ability to share and learn with greater ease.

The book provides explanations on how new media tools, such as the Internet, continue to offer non-state actors and marginalized minorities a voice in unprecedented ways. Kurds from various backgrounds and geographical locations are able to learn about others and participate in content creation with minimal interruption in comparison to television. The data used to explore Kurdish identity formation and mediation via the Internet included over a decade of observation of Kurdish online activities and sources, such as web directories, websites, chatrooms, weblogs, forums, and social networking tools. It is believed that the sample used in this analysis allowed for a rich exploration of how this platform participates in Kurdish identity formation.

The scope of this study is over the period of ten years; hence, it helps to capture trends and changes attributable to advancements in satellite television and the Internet. However, the author is cautious in attributing the interface between national identities, discourses, and communication technologies exclusively to these two mediums. Instead, Sheyholislami suggests that these elements are considered two of many factors involved in stimulating developments in Kurdish identity. The author explains that many cultural and sociopolitical changes are connected to the influences of communication technologies. Beyond the confines of the two platforms analyzed, many other factors continue to contribute to the emergence of a strong pan-Kurdish identity alongside several regional identities.

Sheyholislami suggests that the implications of the strengthening of a collective sense of belonging among Kurds are beneficial for everyone and should be welcomed as a positive development. For instance, he asserts that it may prevent or reduce tension and conflict between Kurds and potentially limit manipulation from host states and others due to the unification developing among these people. In this, host states may realize that failing to treat Kurds fairly could result in the strengthening of irredentism. To illustrate the complexities of how communication technologies have specifically aided in these positive developments, Sheyholislami describes instances in which the Internet, for example, has aided Kurds and other oppressed groups gaining acknowledgement and support.

The implications of this study are useful to further the understandings pertaining to the amalgamation and interplay between media, identities, and discourses. Being that the very notion of nationalism is thought by some scholars to be under attack in the age of globalization, Sheyholislami explores how technological innovations in this globalized world have the ability to foster a climate of unity and collectivity among fragmented groups. While many aspects of Kurdish identity was established prior to the introduction of media platforms such as satellite television and the Internet, the author explicates how media contribute to the further development and maintenance of these people. Thus, this particular study is unique in that it explores theoretical queries infrequently posited within nationalism literature.

Kurdish Identity, Discourse, and New Media provides an excellent framework for future research. It sheds light on a unique, yet minimally explored area of research—Kurdish studies—offering useful contributions to disciplines such as cultural studies, conflict studies, and Middle Eastern studies. Comprehensive, coherent, and creative, this book develops knowledge in a compelling manner through the exploration of communication technologies, national identity mediation in the context of contemporary Kurdish people.

About the Reviewer

Heather McIntosh is a Ph.D. student in Translation Studies at the University of Ottawa's School of Translation and Interpretation. She holds both her B.A. and M.A. in Communication and has participated in various extensive research projects involving the investigation of current trends in media studies, journalism, public relations, and communication technologies. Her current research examines the interplay between communication and translation studies to further explore the impact of translation flows in the creation of educational materials for minority populations in Canada.

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