
The first sentence of James Lull’s new book reads: “You’ll have to forgive my optimism” (p. x). And there is reason to take that note seriously. This reader, at least, found it somewhat difficult to grant that forgiveness while taking part in Lull’s self-described “labyrinthine journey” (p. 196). But before getting to that, let us take a look at Lull’s overall argument. The increasing possibility of “Culture-On-Demand,” says Lull, holds the potential of defusing a range of the tensions that have been either exacerbated or provoked by cultural globalization. The keyword here is communication. Each of us—mainly within the global middle classes—has never been in a more favourable position for connecting and being informed, whereas various authorities—states, organizations—are finding increasingly difficult the acts of controlling or hiding. It is this growing “cultural transparency” (chapter 4)—and the possibly ensuing cultural understanding and tolerance—that holds that point toward a more harmonious future. Lull’s invocation of a brighter future must be seen more clearly in relation to how probable this future seems to be. To start with, however, Lull lays out the foundation of his argument by pointing to certain traits of human evolution.

“Expression is a primordial necessity” (p. 25), says Lull in the second chapter, “Human Expression”, and he underlines that this is something that goes far beyond notions of free speech, adding that the in-built “ability . . . to communicate emotions . . . offers real promise for cultivating greater corporation across cultural groups” (p. 36). More specifically, it is this “primordial necessity” coupled with an emerging “decentralization of expressive authority” (p. 41) that Lull bases his hopes on. More and more of us are thus in positions to express ourselves in a myriad of creative ways. We are increasingly “programming” our “personal supercultures” (the title of chapter 3) in what Lull calls “self-customized matrices and networks of relevant human material, and symbolic cultural elements” (p. 55). The cultural landscape within which this happens is a complex web of the “push and pull of culture” (the title of chapter 4). So far so good. But there are, of course, strong countervailing forces. On a global scale, an important element of these forces Lull describes as forms of fundamentalism, fuelled by religion, ethnicity, nationality, and market ideologies. Of these, Lull pays most attention to religious fundamentalism, and especially the variant linked to Islam.

In chapter 5, called “Globalized Islam,” Lull states that a “profound sense of moral and religious supremacy . . . a hallmark of the religion” (p. 106), but he also says that a “new Arab public” (p. 126) is emerging through the “impact of Al-Jazeera and other independently-spirited satellite TV networks of the Middle East” (p. 126). The independence Lull refers to here is a willingness to question and criticize “Islamic history, principles, and practices” (p. 126). But the new possibilities of communication—including the Internet—do also make possible the construction and maintenance of a wider regional and global Islam. Thus, he says, “media and cultural globalization facilitate both increased Westernization and increased Islamization” (p. 131). Yet, while this may be interpreted as polarization, Lull points out that we are witnessing “unprecedented levels of transcultural contact” (p. 137) and that this growing visibility of differences and the increased possibility of expression point toward a more hopeful cultural transparency.

In chapter 7, “The Open Spaces of Global Communication,” Lull proceeds to outline the stages of his hopeful developmental argument based on the building blocks outlined above. These stages are: (a) “cultural technology, industry, abundance”; (b) “global visibil-
ity and transparency”; (c) “platforms for participation”; (d) “global consciousness and public opinion”; (e) “global wisdom”; (f) “institutional channels”; and finally, (g) “utopian potential” (p. 152). Lull is aware that the global connectedness he is seeing is primarily an asset belonging to the “English-speaking middle class”; yet, it is also this “category,” he says, that “wield[s] disproportionate influence over political and cultural developments” (p. 163). These are the people, or their children, who turn out for events such as “Live 8—a true twenty-first-century communications event” (p. 167), an event that “clearly influenced the political agenda of the G8 world economic summit . . . the following week” (p. 167). Although this might not be the best example, Lull here wants to argue that more and more problems are gaining the attention of a growing “global consciousness.

As a range of discrete, eclectic, and insightful observations, Lull’s book is certainly a valuable contribution that enters into ongoing conversations about globalization, culture, and media. It spans a wide corpus of material ranging from contemporary journalism (e.g., Thomas Friedman) to evolutionary theory (Charles Darwin). However, for a number of reasons—one of which being precisely this eclecticism that intersperses authors and arguments from very different spheres and levels—as a larger and coherent argument, it largely fails.

What is more serious, however, is that Lull largely fails to show and analyze enough positive signs to sustain his optimism. Where does he actually see those cross-cultural conversations? On Facebook?! If we should believe his underlying argument about communicational possibilities, we—that is, those of us with plenty of access to means of communication—should already have crossed a range of cultural barriers and have become adequately informed about those beyond various cultural barriers. We are, as it were, free to demand those cultures. Lull fails, however, to show that a substantial amount of the culture-on-demand “transcends the limits of self-centered cultural conduct” (p. xxii). The underlying reason for this failure may be that we—Western networkers and bloggers—are not really the people he is interested in.

The subtext of the whole argument seems consistently to be about the growing possibilities of “them,” i.e., fundamentalists of various colours and/or those living with fundamentalism/authoritarian cultures, getting in touch with views from those within more liberal, moderate, nuanced, and secular democracies. The underlying premise seems not to be only about us learning about ways of life built around the individual, nor is it not about economics or commercial ideology, it is, rather, about a larger evolutionary argument through which it is pointed out that since religion came after the fundamental and individual needs of expression, we ought to be rational and reasonable enough to peel back the dark shrouds of those overarching systems of interpretation and come out as creative and free individuals. This is full force Enlightenment clad in the Rheingoldian and libertarian-communitarian robes of those who have found the golden technological nuggets of a new world order. “This is,” says an excerpt from a review on the cover of the book, “one gospel worth preaching.” And there is indeed some kind of faith here. But Lull’s church is not one of strong, religious passion; rather, it is one of an enduring faith in the potential of the free, creative individual. As such it has a range of affinities with Bay-Area, Whole-Earth, and Silicon-Valley lines to the various movements of the 1960s. But as much as I would love to be a believer in a wider global peace and understanding through interpersonal communication, I find it rather hard in a “crisis world” (Lull’s term) where cultural understanding (also) is hampered by growing inequalities. I do forgive (and envy) Lull’s optimism, but I cannot share it. But perhaps I was born in the wrong place and the wrong time.

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