Laura Robinson: a Brazilianist communication scholar from abroad

Laura Robinson: uma comunicóloga "brasileira" no exterior

Interview with LAURA ROBINSON*
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SOCIOLOGIST LAURA ROBINSON is a Brazilianist whose research interests center on digital media, in particular young people and informational inequalities; she also has an enthusiastic appreciation of Brazilian media and popular culture. Her interest in Brazilian culture began while earning her PhD at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) and has continued during her work at Santa Clara University, also in California, where she is an Associate Professor and a member of the Latin American Studies Program Advisory Board. Among American researchers, her fluency in Brazilian Portuguese is notable; however, she maintains that her fluency is entirely thanks to the generosity of Brazilians and the stellar quality of Brazilian cable TV that she avidly watches at home. As a researcher, she valorizes the role of Brazil on the world stage across different projects. For example, one of the key case studies in her PhD thesis was one of our principal national newspapers, *O Estado de S. Paulo,* which she compared to *The New York Times* and *Le Monde* with an eye to revealing differing discourses and political identities vis-à-vis September 11, 2001. Her findings regarding inclusionary identities show that only Brazilians share a dominant belief in the meta-identity of *humanity* when compared to more restrictive identity discourse produced by French and Americans. Moreover, her cross-national studies including Brazil as a key case study of international importance have earned her work awards from communications organizations including the International and Intercultural Communication Division of the National Communication Association (NCA

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IICD), the Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR), and the Communication, Information Technologies, and Media Sociology section of the ASA (CITAMS). From early in her career, Laura has understood the importance of studying Latin American voices alongside their European and American counterparts. Former Chair of the Communication, Information Technologies, and Media Sociology section of the American Sociological Association and organizer of panels such as "Context Matters: Comparing Communication and Media Practices in Brazil and the U.S." at the 2015 International Association of Communication Annual Conference, she is committed to creating academic bridges between scholars of Brazil and the United States. In Brazil, since 2008, Laura has been an active participant in the *Colóquio Brasil-EUA de Estudos de Comunicação*, a biannual event organized by Intercom, which she is looking forward to hosting in California in 2020. As for the present, as Series Editor of *Emerald Studies in Media and Communications*, she is leading an editorial team that joins together the collaborative talents of researchers from both Brazil and the United States. The book, *Brazil: Media from the Country of the Future* will be published in 2017. At present, she is turning her attention to a comparative study of Brazilian and American populations who are excluded from the Information Society. Her goal is to reveal how future-thinking Brazilian policies of digital inclusion may serve as models that better promote inclusionary strategies applicable to the United States and other developed nations.

MATRIZes: You represent a new generation of Brazilianists that are researchers dedicated to examining Brazilian communication and journalism from abroad. As such, would you share a bit about your contributions as a researcher to questions about transnationalism, digital media, and social inequality.

Laura Robinson: Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak to you about my research. It is an honor to be asked and a pleasure to take part in the growing dialogue between Brazilian and American scholars.

If I were to summarize my work, I'd say that my research examines digital and popular media, digital inequalities, and identity work. Taking a transnational perspective, my projects are driven by several interrelated questions. I ask: How do cultural and social processes mediate digital media engagements in Brazil compared to France and the United States? How do digital inequalities interact with larger socioeconomic disparities in Brazilian and American societies? How are the rapid social changes taking place in Brazil and the United States refracted through the lens of cultural pro-

duction? As these questions indicate, I'm very interested in how individuals bring cultural and interactional norms from the offline world to digital communication venues and vice versa.

Whenever possible, I take a comparative case study approach to tease apart what is local and what is global about the phenomena under study. So, for example, in my first large-scale research initiative on Brazil, I took a transnational and comparative approach to examine digital discourse communities created in response to September 11, 2001. Among the newspaper fora dedicated explicitly to discussions of 9/11/01, there were three that stood out for the size and diversity of their user populations, as well as their capacity to attract national, expatriate, and international users. These three online fora were hosted by international flagship newspapers in Brazil, France, and the U.S.: *O Estado de S. Paulo*, *Le Monde*, and *The New York Times*.

In each one, there was a vast reservoir of naturally occurring discourse generated by "ordinary" people trying to make sense of the causes and consequences of the attacks for both themselves, their communities, and the world. The moderators didn't design these digital spaces to attract users predisposed to discuss specific political agendas. Rather, newspapers like *O Estado* established these spaces in response to the groundswell of reaction and allowed participants to guide their own discussions. What was really fascinating was that in each of the three cases a significant number of participants debated collective identities and probed the future of such identities in the face of catastrophe. As may be imagined, each of the communities was simultaneously a site of consensus building, civil disagreement, and passionate conflict. But it was really the Brazilian participants who shifted their own discussion from the immediacy of the attacks to a deeper discussion of what it means to be part of humanity.

At the same time, because the fora were designed in such a way that participants could go back and review the messages posted the previous hour, day, or week, these digital spaces facilitated ongoing dialogic argumentation. Because of this it was possible to chart out participants' primary and reactionary identity work in very real ways. This allowed me to employ a synthetic theoretical agenda that integrated symbolic interactionist and social constructionist theories of identity. This approach defined the twofold character of participants' dialogic interactions as having both endogenous and exogenous aspects. By comparing the Brazilian, French, and American communities, I was able to challenge assumptions made by theorists relying solely on Anglophone-centric models. By putting the generalizations of new media theorists

in a cross-national perspective, the research uncovers cross-national variation in how Brazilian, French, and Americans frame identities and construct moral boundaries in culturally specific ways.

This project inaugurated a larger research agenda on self-conception and digital engagements. Although my work on discourse communities and digital inequalities are different in many ways, both are driven by questions of identity and constructions of the self. After finishing my dissertation on discourses surrounding 9/11/01, I have spent several years conducting a longitudinal study probing the linkages between socioeconomic inequalities, information resources writ large, and the development of the information habitus among youths in an agricultural belt of California. From 2006 onward, I have gathered rich primary data from students attending two high schools in a town in California dependent on the agricultural industry. The focus of my research on information inequalities was among youths from a culturally diverse community with many Spanish, Mixteco, Ilocano, and Tagalog speakers, many of whom come from families and communities marked by multi-generational economic insecurity. I use a broad lens to capture the complex interconnections between youths' socioeconomic circumstances and their internet use for capital-enhancing activities in a number of life realms including school, career, and family.

The findings from this project show that there are significant reciprocal relationships between lack of resources, inequalities, social reproduction, and self-conceptions. Many of my publications draw on Bourdieu's concept of the habitus to make the argument that – although digital disparities originate in inequalities of access and skill building opportunities – they are mediated by orientations or self-conceptions that we can only understand when looking at life contexts holistically. Employing Bourdieu's concepts of skholè and the habitus reveals how the "informational habitus" emerges from ongoing experiences of scarcity and abundance, as well as how different self-conceptions become internalized over time. What we see is that advantaged youths approach their digital engagements with a substantially greater sense of social and institutional agency, as well as a greater sense of self-efficacy. Advantaged youths' enhanced sense of self-efficacy derives from the more favorable social and economic conditions. In stark contrast, their disadvantaged peers' ongoing experiences of temporal and material resource shortages. These chronic shortages result in the acquisition of the Bourdieuian "taste for the necessary" that undercuts the development of self-efficacy and agency vis-à-vis digital

engagements. In sum, the internalization of particular self-conceptions and stances towards capital-enhancing activities creates another pathway for the reproduction of disadvantage.

MATRIZes: While pursuing your PhD in sociology, when did you begin to conduct research on communication studies, media, and Latin America?

Robinson: My path to Latin America is somewhat serendipitous-and something for which I am extremely grateful. As an undergraduate in college, I studied literature, art, and culture primarily in the United States, France, Italy, and Spain. I spent my last year of college at the Sorbonne, which opened the door for me to enroll in a post-graduate course at l'Université de Paris III (la Sorbonne nouvelle) where I studied translation and culture at the Institut du Monde Anglophone. At the same time, I was given the gift of studying translation for a year with a phenomenal French mentor – week in and week out she led us as we translated texts into French and into English and discussed cultural context, as well as the importance of language and culture. It was here that I began my journey towards communication studies and media. After finishing the Certificat de maitrise, thanks to generous French colleagues and mentors, I was a member of the first cohort of students that participated in the Euromasters Programme where I specialized in European media. I wrote my MA thesis on the birth of the internet and how different countries were developing different policies to encourage adoption. *Et voilà*, that was the beginning of my trajectory as a digital media scholar. So I owe a debt to the French academics who mentored me and the French university system that gave me the opportunity to pursue graduate work in media. These experiences in France laid the groundwork for what was to come when I returned to the United States and taught French language for a year before beginning the PhD. As I began work at UCLA, I began to see intriguing parallels and differences between Latin American and Latin European cultures. It was here that I began to be very interested in further exploring these connections across the Americas.

MATRIZes: How did you become interested in Brazil? Where were you born? Did your family encourage you to become interested in things outside of North America?

Robinson: I was born in California (Hollywood to be exact) and spent all of my childhood in the United States. But my mother had spent part of her childhood in Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic. Our family stories were always sprinkled with her experiences in Latin America. On my father's side, my grandmother was an intrepid traveler who in her 70's went to see the

Panama Canal; she took me on my first international trip outside of North America when I was 13. So you could say that both sides of my family laid the groundwork for me to become a Brazilianist by encouraging an inclination to learn foreign languages and leave home to experience other parts of the world. As for actually taking the leap and going to Brazil, Professor David Lopez at UCLA shared his own appreciation of Brazil with me. I began searching for a good comparison case to triangulate comparison of digital media between North American (the United States), Europe (France), and Latin America. Brazil became the obvious answer with its regional leadership, global economic power, and increasing cultural influence. At that time, I was able to learn Portuguese in order to study digital media in Brazil, for which another debt of gratitude is due to the Mellon, FLAS, and Tinker grant programs. As for my abiding interest in Brazil – beyond being an excellent social science comparison case study – that is entirely due to Brazilians themselves. In 2000, I went to Salvador da Bahia, within a week was entranced, and have been coming back ever since. This was in large part due to Claudia Magalhães opening her home to me and sharing the delights of Brazilian food, the warmth of Brazilian hospitality, the beauty of the Portuguese language, and the fascination of Brazilian media. Brazilians like Claudia – and the others I have met through the *Colóquio Brasil-Estados Unidos de Estudos da Comunicação* – have made me feel at home in Brazil.

MATRIZes: As of yet, there are few United Statesian researchers who speak languages other than English and yet you are fluent in Portuguese. How did you learn and how do you keep up your Portuguese?

Robinson: As we say in English, they just don't know what they are missing! Learning Brazilian Portuguese gave me a parallel way to think. On top of formal language instruction at UCLA, I became an avid Brazilian media consumer thanks to Globo's international television channel. While writing my dissertation at UCLA I started watching Brazilian telenovelas beginning with *Belíssima*. What started as a "treat" after long days of writing quickly became part of my daily routine. Ten years later, I still regularly watch Brazilian programming more than American television. Not only does it allow me to keep up my Portuguese language skills, but quite frankly it's become such a part of my daily routine that I can't imagine doing without it! I usually watch at least one telenovela (*Avenida Brasil* is still my all-time favorite) and as many mini-series as possible – especially when they are as good as the deliciously addictive *O Rebu* and *Verdades Secretas.* And I do also round out these "guilty

pleasures" by watching the news because I find it fascinating to compare how the same international events are reported very differently on Brazilian and American television news programs.

MATRIZes: Your doctorate, from UCLA in Los Angeles, *Negotiating 9/11: Cultural Repertoires and Discourses in Brazilian, French, and American Online Fora*, analyzed the September 11th 2001 attacks from a transnational perspective by comparing three distinct cultures: French, United Statesian, and Brazilian. Would you comment on your findings with emphasis on your study of *O Estado de S. Paulo?*

Robinson: Following 9/11/01, *O Estado de S. Paulo* hosted the forum entitled "The First War of the Century." In my interviews with forum staff, they reported that response to 9/11/01 ignited record participation. As with the other case studies, *The New York Times* and *Le Monde*, immediate dissensus divided the forum into opposing camps based on stances towards the United States. The most striking thing about the Brazilian discourse was that it was truly cosmopolitan, particularly when compared to parallel discourse from French and Americans.

Much of the Brazilian discourse critical of the United States is undergirded by an Arielist framework. Social actors relying on this framework implicitly assume that, no matter what role it takes, the United States will act out the role of Caliban that they characterize as being synonymous with malevolence towards rightful order. In the hours and days following the attacks, Brazilians critical of the United States symbolically extend the characterization of powerlessness to the rest of the world. Those with this ideological orientation see a world in which many collectives who have been wronged through preemptive strikes desire to avenge themselves. For them, symbolically, there are many Ariels united against a single Caliban.

Beyond the Arielist framework, many of the Brazilians critical of the United States share many similarities with their American and French counterparts. These Brazilians deplore what they perceive as the American sense of superiority vis-à-vis the rest of the world, particularly developing countries. They also express outrage against what they frame as economic terrorism conducted against all developing nations by the economically powerful and "arrogant" United States. The complicated plight of others around the world, they charge, is meaningless to Americans preoccupied with their own goals, orienting their visions inward. Therefore, according to these Brazilians Americans are not entitled to the world's empathy because of their own indifference

to non-Americans around the world. The logic of such moral accounting is applied by those critical of the US to Americans as an undifferentiated group. Few distinctions are made between the American government and the American population, or even between American elites and ordinary Americans. All Americans are exiled from what Zeruvabel calls salient "spheres of moral concern." These Brazilians use American identity to reconceptualize 9/11/01's victims and perpetrators. They employ American national identity to assess blame; they do so by defining nationality as an exclusionary tool that "others" all Americans as unworthy of empathy. Paradoxically, those critical of the United States also pursue a secondary neutralization strategy that works in the opposite direction to achieve the same end. In discussing the victims of other disasters or tragedies, critical participants seek to efface national differences in order to remove what they interpret as special claims to victimhood for American casualties from 9/11/01. These individuals redefine all victims from any tragedy as "terrorist victims." In amalgamating Americans together with victims of other tragedies, they discredit what they see as illicit and unwarranted claims of preferential status applied to Americans. This de-nationalizing strategy accomplishes the same exclusionary goal as parallel strategies to assign blame. Both operate to exclude Americans from salient spheres of moral concern. They employ an anti-American framing as a uniquely powerful supra-national outgroup identity. The very salience of this identity in immediate response to the 9/11/01 attacks indicates anti-Americanism's global appeal.

However, other Brazilians challenge this exclusionary distancing with cosmopolitan identity work. These cosmopolitan Brazilians marshal a powerful set of counter narratives and challenger frames to refute any expressions of schadenfreude post 9/11/01. To do so, they do identity work grounded in spheres of moral concern that include all peoples of all nations as equally deserving of dignity and empathy. For them, Americans are no better and no worse than anyone else. Instead, all of those suffering are framed as members of the human family independent of any other identity category. Significantly, while cosmopolitan Brazilians show solidarity with 9/11/01's victims and position themselves against anti-Americans by employing arguments about the sanctity of life for all peoples, a substantial number do not particularly like the United States. However, no matter their feelings towards the United States or the American people, these Brazilians resist anti-American identity discourse that they perceive as indifferent to human suffering and thereby unacceptable. Here, the specificity of Brazilian culture stands in stark contrast to the secular

arguments that are dominant on the French and American fora. While Americans and French do identity work that supports the victims as members of "democracies," it is only Brazilians that offer an exemplar of cosmopolitanism at its most universalizing. Cosmopolitan Brazilians argue that the suffering of all members of humanity is equally relevant. When they make such claims, these Brazilians frame the extension of empathy as a moral imperative. To a much greater degree than their French or American counterparts, these Brazilians define all members of humanity as "brothers" and explicitly denationalize victims of both 9/11/01 and other tragic events. No matter the nationality of victims, they insist on "solidarity" for all.

In addition to solidarity, these Brazilians emphasize the concept of "humanity" and discuss what it should mean to be human. These Brazilians extend their circles of moral concern to include all victims, both the living and the dead. For example, one participate says: *"Imagine the families' desperation looking for their relatives. They are lives and lives that were lost. How many fathers, family men, died – people who never think of political oppression. We should cry for this tragedy just as we should cry for people who die of violence in Brazil…We are all human... right?"* These cosmopolitan Brazilians see the collectivity of victims as humanity itself. One such Brazilian writes, "*My condolences to the Brazilian and American families, but principally to humanity, a small part of which died yesterday.*" By contrast, similar American and French participants emphasize more restrictive collectivities and engage in more circumscribed identity work. Only Brazilian cosmopolitans offer a completely inclusionary form of cosmopolitanism. By using "humanity" as the single most important identity category, they render the suffering of any human being as equally worthy of empathy and underscore the conviction that all members of humanity share in each other's pain. Even more expansive, Brazilians make connections between those suffering on 9/11/01 and larger commentaries on what it should mean to be human. Cosmopolitan Brazilians point to the potential of inclusionary identity work in which the suffering of others is shared by strangers. As these Brazilians show when such thinking predominates, "humanity" becomes the primary identity category of importance.

Equally compelling, these Brazilians reflect on what it means to be human – at its best and worst. Brazilian cosmopolitans' identity work symbolically divides humanity from those that would destroy it though violence. For them, every human faces the fundamental choice between good and evil both present in humankind. For Brazilian cosmopolitans, all members of humanity

must make their choice, as one writes, *"For me it was obvious that there are two worlds that are absolutely different: the first is made up of people who are born and work for their neighbor, for society. People like us, who despite whatever difficulty, day-to-day struggle for what is best. The second type of being, which we cannot call human, only is born to grow up to sow hatred, destruction, unjustified death, in truth the horsemen of the Apocalypse who decide who will live and who will die. We must not allow ourselves to be influenced by this feeling of hatred and in turn create more destruction."* Brazilian cosmopolitans frame this choice as the ultimate identity marker and the choice that must be made by all members of humanity in response to every kind of human suffering.

One might ask to what degree these discourses are enduring identity frames and understandings of the social world. To begin to answer this question, in 2011, I returned to new discourse fora hosted by the same three newspapers on the ten-year anniversary of the 9/11/01 opened for the public to once again discuss the terrorist attacks in retrospect. Once again, taking a cross-national perspective, I drew complementary data from *O Estado de S. Paulo, Le Monde,* and *The New York Times* to compare immediate understandings of the events with commentary looking back on the events from a longitudinal perspective. In a recent article in *Information, Communication, and Society,* I compare discourse in immediate response to the attacks with discourse produced a decade later. I find that although one might expect differing interpretations of September 12, 2001 to evolve in the ten subsequent years, many essential interpretations remain static. More specifically, my findings reveal that participants' political agendas and ideological identifications do not change but continue to influence the moral lenses through which they apprehend the social world. Rather, as the analysis shows, participants' negotiation of boundaries between the morally worthy "us" and the morally unworthy "them" remains stable over time. In so doing, the research casts light on the stability and enduring nature of identity work and identity categories in Brazilian, French, and American digital discourse fora.

MATRIZes: In your opinion, given that both Brazil and the United States are countries with vast geographical expanses, diverse regions and populations, what are the similarities and differences in our historical, societal, economic, political and media contexts?

Robinson: This is the paradox: Brazil and the United States are so similar and yet so different. Brazilians and Americans are simultaneously the same but different. What we share can be traced across our nations and cultures in

a number of ways. Not only do both countries have rich natural resources and enormous land masses in their respective continents but they also have considerable regional diversity and flavors that in some cases, and at some times, can supersede our Brazilian-ness or American-ness. At the same time, the regional differences that divide us within our respective nation states are often sublimated when Brazilians and Americans rally around national identities, particularly with sports. Such is the case with the 2016 Olympic Games held in Rio with great success (kudos to Brazil). Looking at the spectators, there is equal fervor supporting the *green and the yellow* as there is in the *red, white, and blue*. Our athletes also point to another similarity and shared strength: the power of diversity. Our nationalisms are based on similar narratives of nation-building as countries of immigration, something that continues to the benefit of both Brazil and the United States today.

At the same time, we see our historical trajectories differently – for example in the way we date our "founding" moments. I first went to Brazil in the year 2000 when Brazil celebrated its 500 year anniversary. While Americans could use 1607 as our starting date with the first English colony in Jamestown Virginia, we are taught that our true history as a nation commences with the signing of the American constitution in 1776. One might argue that this disjuncture points to a self-conception of ongoing evolution in the Brazilian case compared to a crystallization of identity in the American one. Both are positive yet have potentially different implications for our senses of self-identity and collective identity vis-à-vis Europe. The American *Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms* from 1775 has a rather different feel to it than *O Dia do Fico* in 1822. And yet today both Brazil and the United States are dominant cultural forces on the world stage that none-the-less maintain "special relationships" with their respective European founders. Perhaps to the chagrin of some in the United Kingdom and Portugal, both Brazil and the United States have redefined their respective languages in ways that make our English and Portuguese vibrant forms of their European counterparts.

This pattern of innovation is also particularly true in connection with Brazilian and American media production. Brazil, like the US, exerts considerable global influence through cultural exportation. One only has to think of samba and jazz, *bossa nova* and rock, to see how Brazil and the United States are epicenters of musical innovation and genre creation. In a similar vein, Brazilian media exports telenovelas that are second to none on a global scale. Both Brazilian and American media exports well to other contexts because

certain aspects of our cultural production exemplify aesthetics with universal appeal. But here the paradox enters again: both Brazil and the United States are simultaneously producers of globalized media production from very constricted power centers. Arguably the tensions between Los Angeles and New York are comparable the tensions between Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo that are also formidable media and financial powerhouses. These centers of power are related to yet other tensions between urban versus rural" regions of the United States, which is also true for Brazil.

Speaking of the latter, I myself come from an agricultural belt of California, which like its Brazilian counterparts has country music, rodeo, and barbeque. While the actual barbeques from the Californian Central Coast look very similar to Brazilian barbeque thanks to Portuguese influence in this area of California, we sadly do not have *churrascaria*. While our country music has many of the same themes as the *Tristezas do Jeca* no one would confuse the sound of Brazilian *sertanejo universitário* with American pop country. Nonetheless, the themes of suffering common to both forms of country music call to mind other similarities between our socioeconomic contexts in which our ideals do not match our realities as often as we would like them to. In both Brazil and the United States, we face challenges of social stratification and inequalities that are perpetuated in cycles of generational inequality despite the fact that Brazilians and Americans are by and large hard working peoples hoping for a better tomorrow even if dreams are deferred for some.

Yet here Brazil offers hope because despite any present troubles, it is Brazil that has done so much in recent years to challenge the status quo of "haves" and "have nots" for tens of millions of Brazilians. Creation of a new Brazilian dream on this scale is an accomplishment worthy of the highest praise. In like manner, it also has been Brazilian innovation that has lead the way in certain alternative energy and green technologies that are among the most advanced in the world. Clearly, Brazil *is* the country of the future. In this future-orientation, Brazilian and American strengths and similarities converge to the greatest degree. Some of the words that Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his 1844 lecture *The Young American* might also be applied to Brazil in 2016 "*It seems so easy for America to inspire and express the most expansive and humane spirit… It is the country of the Future… it is a country of beginnings, of projects, of designs, and expectations*." We are both future-looking countries that innovate to an extraordinary degree in our technology and cultural production. Further, just as Brazilian media is a force of cultural change within and beyond South

America, media from the United States holds a similar phenomenal power to change how people interpret the social world beyond North America. On the global stage, as relatively young nations, both Brazilian and American cultures exert incredible influence with ripple effects far outside of the Americas.

MATRIZes: Since 2008 you have participated in the Brazil-U.S. Colloquium on Communication Research organized by Intercom (Brazilian Society of Interdisciplinary Communication Studies) and will be the U.S. organizer for the meeting that will take place in California in 2020. How would you evaluate the similarities and differences in communication research between the two countries? For example, Brazilian researchers are known for their use of qualitative methods. Your research also is also based on ethnographic methods, interviewing, and content analysis. In your opinion, is the use of qualitative methods similar in Brazilian and United Statesian social scientific communities?

Robinson: I am honored and delighted to be serving as the U.S. organizer for Brazil-U.S. Colloquium on Communication Research organized by Intercom under the leadership of Sonia Virgínia Moreira. I'm sure I speak for all of the Colloquium participants in saying that I hope that you will all come to California and join us! Truly, participating in the Colloquium has been one of the highlights of my scholarly trajectory. It has been, and continues to be, a place to come home to intellectually. Everyone there is committed to pushing the field of media and communications studies forward and learning as much as we can from one another. We come together for a few days in a lively dialogue bridging the Americas. We share an implicit understanding that Brazilian and American scholars have much to share and valorizing the importance of comparative and cross national work. In addition, Brazilian scholars are incredibly skilled in their use of qualitative methods. As a whole, their work builds more on classical ethnographic methods and is grounded in a scholarly community in which qualitative methods hold greater sway. Brazilians are also skilled interviewers who understand the importance of building rapport with respondents as the cornerstone of good interviewing practice. Brazilian researchers have a deep respect for preserving their respondents' voices, members' meanings, and dignity – all of which contribute to their well-deserved reputation of excellence as qualitative methodologists. I, like other American qualitative researchers, share these goals and aims. However many of us work in a scholarly environment where, unfortunately, our methodological approach has not always been at the center of the

field. In this we have much to gain by moving towards the Brazilian model to better ensure that qualitative methods have greater visibility in the field. Thankfully, we have begun to do so; our field has experienced a resurgence of qualitative data analysis, especially to capture meaning-making activities and mediated social life. This is particularly important for scholars of media and communications whose work relies on qualitative methods. The importance of qualitative methods will continue to grow as the information society expands because an increasingly significant portion of individuals' interactions and lives will unfold in and through mediated interfaces enabled by information technology.

MATRIZes: You have worked to create bridges between two social scientific communities. How do United Statesian researchers engage with studies by Brazilian researchers? What is your perception of how United Statesian researchers are received in Brazil? How does English act as kind of lingual imperialism as the dominant lingua franca of the contemporary academic world? In addition, United Statesian researchers are often more generously resourced than their Brazilian colleagues – how does this influence the ability of Brazilian researchers to conduct competitive research?

Robinson: By and large, American researchers are eager to engage with studies that advance the field and invigorate their own inquiry. It is not a lack of desire but rather a lack of language skills that inhibits many American researchers from enjoying better dialogue with their Brazilian homologues. There is also a problem of abstracting and indexing of scholarly work. If the scholarly databases that house Brazilian work are not included in databases accessed by American researchers they remain invisible, which is a great misfortune as any failure to share relevant knowledge globally works to the detriment of all. This challenge holds true for all language barriers but in particular for non-English speakers. Should they wish to have greater exposure among English speakers, they must publish their work in venues that are potentially less accessible to their own national scholarly communities in which everyone cannot be expected to speak English. This puts a double burden on researchers working in languages other than English who must translate their work into English. They must acquire two additional skill sets: English proficiency and translation skills, which is not the same as proficiency but rather the skill with which to capture the style and flavor of one language and replicates it in another. Further, this dilemma is particularly hard for qualitative methods researchers because we strive to preserve the

beauty and truth of respondents' voices, as well as the aesthetics of our data that captures the tone and meaning that can be lost in translation. Even when translation is an option, it puts a tremendous burden on scholars to either master English or to hire translators, both of which are cost prohibitive. As this indicates, finances matter. In the academy financial and temporal resources are subject to the Matthew Effect just as any other resource. While Robert K. Merton's coining of the term speaks to the sociology of science, it is true in other life realms as well. Indeed Merton's use of Jesus' parable of the talents from the *Gospel of Matthew* tells an enduring, albeit tragic truth: "*For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them*" (*Matthew* 25:29 *New International Version*). This certainly holds true in the academy: those with resources are able to use those resources to generate even more resources. We can make these comparisons between Brazilian and American researchers but also between those at higher and lower prestige institutions – both show the effects of relative disadvantage. Relative disadvantage creates chasms of difference even in a prosperous nation like the United States where higher prestige facilitates the temporal and financial resources that enable high quality research. By contrast, the corollary is that researchers with less prestigious positions lack financial resources and are often more burdened with greater teaching and administrative duties that eat up scarce temporal resources as well. For all of these reasons, there is a deep need for organizations such as the Brazil-U.S. Colloquium on Communication Research that facilitate research collaboration and partnerships between Brazilian and American researchers. At both the Colloquium and the greater scholarly community of Brazilian media and communication researchers, I have been grateful to Brazilian scholars who have shared their work with me and offered valuable critiques of my own work. For me, such exchanges are fertile ground for all of our work to grow, thanks to collaboration and dialogue between researchers from South and North America.

MATRIZes: As the lead editor of the book *Brazil: Media from the Country of the Future*, with *Emerald Studies in Media and Communications* –a press with over half a century of tradition that houses scholarly journals and academic book series with its headquarters in the United Kingdom – you have experience publishing social science research from Europe, the United States, and Brazil. You have also acted as an ad hoc reviewer for almost 30 international peer-review journals. In your opinion, what would boost the Brazilian

social scientific community to enjoy greater strength, visibility, penetration, and impact on the international stage?

Robinson: To boost the Brazilian social scientific community on the international stage, we need committed international partners who publish collaborative works that highlight both Brazilian and American research. This certainly is the case with the fine editorial work done by Sonia Virgínia Moreira who has worked assiduously with the help of Daniela Ota to create such joint publication ventures from scholars participating in the *Colóquio Brasil-Estados Unidos de Estudos da Comunicação*. As a series editor of *Emerald Studies in Media and Communications,* my editorial team and I designed our 2016 call to highlight Brazil and Latin America. Assembling a team of Brazilian and American co-editors, we are publishing two volumes: Volume 12 *Digital Empowerment: Opportunities and Challenges of Inclusion in Latin America and the Caribbean* and Volume 13 *Brazil: Media from the Country of the Future.* Volume 12 *Digital Empowerment: Opportunities and Challenges of Inclusion in Latin America and the Caribbean* highlights the work of several Brazilian and Brazilianist scholars. I and co-editors Jeremy Schulz and Hopeton S. Dunn are indebted to our joint Brazil-U.S. team of regional editors. Significantly, this volume makes clear the importance of comparative work not only between Brazil and the United States but also with other countries and regions in the Americas, in particular the Caribbean. Our authors seek to address important development themes in both small island developing states in the Caribbean sub-region like St. Lucia, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica and in larger nation states in Latin America such as Brazil, Colombia and Peru. Our Brazilian and Brazilianist authors tackle themes including media education and civic engagement, social media's empowerment of women, memory and heritage preservation, Weberian analysis of media functions, and public access Wi-Fi. Our goals in assembling research from across Brazil and the Americas were to offer insights relevant not only to Latin America and the Caribbean but also to the wider global community. Our editorial team comprised of many Brazilian scholars put together a powerful collection of diverse voices that examine both the promise and the challenges posed by information and communication technologies in a region with great cultural and social diversity. All of these same editors are joined by Sayonara Leal and Apryl Williams, are currently editing Volume 13 *Brazil: Media from the Country of the Future.* We have identified five key themes that will shape the volume: the new face of news and journalism, social movements and protest, television, cinema,

publicity and marketing, and media theory. We will finish editing the volume this year for a publication date in early 2017. I am sure that I speak for all of us when I say that we are excited about the range and quality of research from Brazilians and Brazilianists that will allow the volume to explore the evolving media environment of one of the world's most fascinating societies: Brazil.

MATRIZes: One of your research interests is the study of identity and digital inequality. How do you understand the notion of identity at present in a period with increased numbers of people are fleeing violence in their own countries? In a world marked by a global economic crisis, how can we understand the idea of borders? In the context of financial and technological globalization, how does digital inequality increase and worsen social, and economic in the world?

Robinson: Among the many themes which have dominated the public stage in recent years, two are inextricably intertwined: the growth of uncertainty and the inexorable rise of communication technology and the internet. On a global level, we can see several intersecting trends. First, there is a resurgence of regionalism and nationalism across the global north and the parallel decline in cosmopolitanism relative to the turn of the century. Second, there is the hollowing out of nation-states in the global south in regions such as Africa and the Middle East. The conjunction of these trends gives rise to the vast flood of refugees from the deteriorating states of these regions provoking nationalist resistance to immigration in the global north. There has also been a failure to build effective supra-national institutions to govern the world's interconnected financial markets and other systems which operate across borders. As Saskia Sassen has written, financial capital has become hypermobile, even as human capital faces numerous barriers to free movement. Within this context of increasingly concentrated economic power, the spread of digital technologies has two contradictory effects. On the one hand, it can enable even greater concentration of economic power – look at the economic clout of the Big 5 (Amazon, Google, Facebook, Microsoft, and Apple) which control large parts of various tech markets and extract huge profits from consumers and other firms. On the other hand, with the right kinds of technologies in the right hands, it can create opportunities for disadvantaged individuals and groups from all over the world to do things which would have been impossible. So for example, mobile phones are already having a positive impact on the practices of African farmers who can now keep track of prices for their products and the health of their livestock.

As these trends indicate, digital media opens doors for some creating even greater disparities for others. Much of my work on digital inequality examines this double-edged character of digital resources in today's information society. For economically privileged segments of the population, digital resources can serve as transformational forces remaking many arenas of social life, ameliorating disparities, and opening up opportunities. However, where inequalities are concerned, digital resources can replicate offline patterns of practice and power or beget new disparities unique to the information age. This double-edged character serves as a starting point for all of my analyses of digital inequality. Across my projects, my research takes as its starting point the rejection of technological determinism but recognizes the capacity of digital media to reshape identities and power relations in different cultural contexts. From this starting point, my work is driven by the central theoretical question: How do social processes mediate the use of digital media on the part of social actors with unequal access to resources? Taking my cue from Bourdieu, I develop a theory of the information habitus, a spectrum of orientations internalized by youths with more versus less constrained digital media engagements. I use a broad lens to capture the complex interconnections between youths' life contexts and their digital media practices, especially for capital-enhancing activities. I bring a holistic perspective to bear on digital engagements as they result from institutional and family environments, economies of time and material resources, and social relationships. As my findings show, all of these factors influence youths' digital engagements in complex ways that can challenge or perpetuate distributions of power in society. Drawing on Bourdieu's idea of skholè or playing seriously, I find that highly resourced youths engage with digital media in ways that develop an agentic information habitus. By playing seriously they adopt a self-reliant information habitus that builds skills and ultimately allows them to draw further advantage from their digital engagements. By contrast, those with chronic resource shortages enact the Bourdieuian "taste for the necessary" that engenders both a task-oriented habitus and chronic reliance on others. This "taste for the necessary" creates a pattern in which agency always rests outside of disadvantaged youths' hands and hinders them from internalizing the capacity to internalize a sense of agency in their encounters with digital media. Ultimately a task-driven habitus inhibits those without resources from building skills and reaping the same benefits from digital media as their more resourced counterparts. In this way, the concept of the information habitus enriches the study of youths' digital engagements by

examining the microprocesses which translate opportunities and constraints into durable orientations and self-conceptions. As this indicates, the process of internalizing agentic self-conception puts those with resources in a position of even greater relative advantage compared to those who are digitally disadvantaged. Thus while recognizing the equalizing – and even transformative – potential of digital technologies, my research also uncovers the processes through which digital inequalities issue from and also deepen other forms of disadvantage.

MATRIZes: Finally, what is it like to study Brazil while living in the United States? Do you have plans to return to conduct new research in our country?

Robinson: Without Brazilian colleagues and quotidian access to Brazilian media it would be very difficult to study Brazil while living in the United States. Even so, it remains a long-term goal of mine to find a way to regularly return to Brazil for extended periods of time to conduct a new project on digital inequality. I am currently looking for Brazilian collaborators to launch a comparative study of digital inequality and digital inclusion. Given Brazil's rapidly growing population of internet users, the project asks: How are the two sides of the digital coin best understood? On the one hand, for Brazilians with access to material resources and skill-building opportunities, digital technologies offer extraordinary opportunities for learning and human capital development. This is particularly true for Brazil as the country with the world's third largest Facebook user base in 2014 and third largest LinkedIn membership in 2015. On the other hand, when Brazilians lack such resources, they are unable to unlock the potential offered by digital technologies. With Brazilian colleagues, I hope to map out a study of income differentials, economic mobility, and digital inclusion policies. Seeking to measure the effect of public policies combatting digital inequality, the project will target the implementation of Brazilian digital inclusion policies in public access points. The project interrogates linkages between digital inclusion policies and the recent surge in social mobility in Brazil that is now impacted by economic instability. The project will explore the degree to which differently resourced Brazilians benefit from *telecentros* and other public access points. Gathering comparative data from different neighborhoods will allow the study to examine the effects of *telecentros* on economic mobility. This kind of natural experiment will shed light on the potential of digital inclusion policies to improve class mobility and alleviate economic hardship. Importantly, Brazilian digital inclusion public policies are among the most significant in the world and far outstrip their

North American counterparts. Because future-thinking strategies central to Brazilian policies of digital inclusion may serve as replicable models that better promote inclusionary strategies, Brazilian public policy has many lessons to the United States and other developed nations seeking to level the digital playing field on this pressing global social problem.