

Political Communication Report Fall 2023 - Issue 28

“De-westernizing PolComm Theories and Research:
More Perspectives, New Directions”

<http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-41232>

De-westernizing Political Communication: Why? How?¹

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De-westernizing communication studies

This forum is a timely opportunity to take stock of current efforts to de-westernize the field of political communication. These efforts are part of a broader interest in communication studies in the West to interrogate its epistemological foundations, recognize particularities and limitations of findings and arguments, and become aware of the conditions of production in the context of global academia. These issues have gained relevance amid the intensification of global connections among university programs, professional associations, conferences, journals, and scholars in past decades.

Various concepts have been used to refer to this process. *De-westernization* refers to examining critically the position of Western knowledge within the inequalities of global academia and broadening perspectives by integrating non-Western scholarship. *De-centering* calls into question sharp divisions between core and peripheral scholarship and underscores the need for taking global and cosmopolitan positions. *Decolonization* refers to the critique of historical systems of colonialism in academic institutions and global flows of ideas (Magallanes-Blanco 2022). It criticizes the global domination of Western scholarship through the imposition of institutions and paradigms, as well as its universalistic and racialized premises. It warns about the perils of intellectual colonization as pioneer anti-colonial thinkers did in the past. It foregrounds epistemological counter-movements from the Global South (Gómez-Cruz, Ricaurte, & Siles 2023).

Here I prefer to use “de-westernizing” given that my primary interest is this process in the Global North. Decolonizing and decentering are appropriate concepts depending on the objectives and sites of intervention. Semantic differences should not overshadow

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commonalities; these concepts are animated by similar concerns and aspirations to foster critical reflexivity and inclusivity in global academia.

Current interest in de-westernizing communication studies is welcome for two reasons.

First, academic work should constantly probe its epistemological assumptions, as well as the scope and the validity of studies and arguments. On this issue, it is important to note significant differences between the Global North and the Global South. De-westernization is hardly new in the Global South given the towering presence of Western scholarship. Western ideas have been obligatory points of reference for scholars as well as for anyone doing intellectual and creative work – fiction, poetry, theater, films. The situation is quite different in the West, where scholars are rarely exposed or pushed to engage with research produced in the Global South. Although this can be attributed to several reasons, asymmetrical flows of scholarly work and the lack of strong incentives to engage with non-western scholarship surely play a part.

The situation is different elsewhere. In Latin America, for example, communication studies has historically been positioned at the intersection of foreign and local scientific and intellectual currents. Scholars have long been exposed to scholarship originated in the United States and several European countries. Much attention has been devoted to discussing the applicability of Western theories to the study of local and regional developments (Fuentes-Navarro 2016). Scholars have long sought to (re)interpret and challenge Western epistemologies and to produce indigenous and hybrid approaches.

Second, de-westernizing is necessary given the dominant position of Western scholarship and institutions in global academia – universities, doctoral programs, journals, research funding, and professional associations. Globally, Western institutions and scholars occupy a privileged position. This is reflected in the volume of productivity, citation patterns, international university rankings, funding opportunities, and awards/recognition. Also, Western institutions (including professional associations, conferences, publishers, and journals) have been central to the consolidation of global academia (not only in communication studies). The basic institutional infrastructure of global scholarship has its primary residence in the West. Therefore, de-westernization demands revamping institutions originally created to serve and support US and European scholars in ways that ensure they accommodate and elevate scholarship about the Global South, too.

In summary, de-westernizing demands a double shift: adopting more inclusive, cosmopolitan perspectives, and rebooting the Western-based infrastructure of communication studies.

Why de-westernize political communication?

Engaging with these issues in the field of political communication is overdue. For the past decades, the field has consolidated in North America and Western Europe. It straddles a vital zone of intersection between communication studies and political science, with influence from other fields, including cognitive psychology and computational social science. It has a clear ontological core and wide-ranging theories and models; solid numbers of scholars and university programs; specialized, well-ranked journals; and popular divisions of national, regional, and global professional associations.

The field remains essentially grounded in Western scholarship, notwithstanding growing awareness about this issue (as this forum reflects). It has a strong Western focus in terms of subjects of study in countries with distinctive and exceptional political and communication and media histories, structures, and dynamics. It rests on intellectual foundations built on findings, arguments, and theories from a relatively small number of Western countries. It is anchored on epistemological assumptions and theoretical frameworks grounded in intellectual and scientific traditions of Western academia.

These patterns are not surprising. Knowledge is inseparable from socio-historical contexts, experiences, and traditions. What we study, what research questions we ask; what theoretical and epistemological traditions we tap into; and how our work is assessed in terms of significance and excellence are closely connected to political, communication and social places. The local and the national are both appealing and constraining.

Thus, although we want to be part of a global academic community, local and national events and patterns continue to shape research, funders' priorities, publications, and so on. The current prominence of topics such as digital disinformation, right-wing populism, polarization, and migration in political communication scholarship primarily reflects important contemporary developments in *Western* democracies. However, topics that matter to scholars in Western countries do not have similar relevance elsewhere, and topics that are significant elsewhere have limited or no presence in the West. Whose research agenda dominates scholarship is not a small matter.

For example, contemporary political communication in Latin America has a different focus that reflects developments in the region. It remains interested in understanding communication structures and dynamics in authoritarian regimes, as well as in democracies with significant challenges: problems of representation and instability, social and political violence, protracted conflict, armed parastate actors, abysmal levels of poverty and exclusion, and entrenched histories of systemic racism. It pays considerable attention to mediated activism in both legacy media and online spaces. It continues to study distinctive features of media systems in the region, including clientelism, corporatization, newsroom precarity, the instrumentalization of state-owned media, as well as community media and advocacy journalism.

Unsurprisingly, these questions have limited presence in current political communication scholarship in the West. This is not part of a deliberate plan to ignore what happens in the rest of the world. It is the outcome of the inevitable, intertwined relationship between academic knowledge and place – what happens in communities and countries where scholars and institutions are based, and limited interest in what happens elsewhere.

Epistemological traditions influence scholarship, too. In the West, political communication has a strong positivist tradition, particular disciplinary approaches (i.e., political psychology), and theoretical frameworks. Specific lines of inquiry (i.e., psychological effects of message design) and methodologies (i.e., experimental methods), too, have a strong gravitational pull. These traditions do not have the same presence elsewhere. In Latin America, qualitative methodologies as well as critical, institutional, and structural analysis anchored in social theory and the humanities, continue to have a significant presence (Waisbord 2013). Yet, it is not ensured that these analytical currents have similar chances of getting published. One can

speculate that research about and/or from the global south that fits popular interests and epistemologies in the West has better chances of receiving attention and being published.

For Western political communication to deepen its commitment to global scholarship, it needs to reimagine its global position, visibility, and resources. It should broaden its ontological and epistemological focus. Such a shift may encounter disinterest or resistance, but it is the right path forward. Everyone benefits. Openness and support for global scholarship broaden research agendas and perspectives, complicate arguments, and strengthen theoretical concepts and propositions.

How to de-westernize?

Global inclusiveness does not happen naturally or overnight. It demands sustained commitment; it is a deliberate choice by scholars and institutions. Also, de-westernization should not be conceived as a silo – what some scholars and institutions do, or just another area of specialization. Instead, it is a collective endeavor that demands strategic and continuous actions driven by curiosity and intentionality.

In lieu of a plan of action, I propose ideas that build off previous suggestions (Waisbord 2022).

First, it is necessary to recognize obstacles to global diversity and inclusivity. Successful actions need to be guided by a clear diagnosis of the roadblocks. Otherwise, it is not clear what needs to be done and for what purpose. What stands in the way? Is it a lack of curiosity about studies outside the West? Are there concerns about “making room” and recognizing work that falls outside the conventional boundaries in terms of topics, methodological approaches, and analytical frameworks? Are structural inequalities in global academia primarily responsible for persistent problems? Are there lessons from other fields in communication studies, such as journalism studies (Mellado, Georgiou & Nah 2020) and media activism (Pal, Cruz, and Munish 2023), that have become more globally diverse and inclusive?

Second, making effective changes demands identifying points of entry. What needs to be done to address what obstacle? Training, mentoring, supporting language skills, offering funding, and/or fostering participation in professional associations and networks? Raise awareness and change perceptions?

Third, it is necessary to discuss and prioritize actions. Here is an incomplete to-do list: Form global research partnerships, incorporate Southern scholars into Western-focused projects, set up research and conference travel grants, advocate for North-South collaborations with funders and universities, build theories grounded on research insights from around the world, and globalize editorial boards and conference panels.

Although much work remains to be done, it is worth noting that many actions have already been implemented. This includes the diversification of editorial boards and developing institutional ties with academics and universities in the Global South. These actions may not rapidly overturn structural inequities in global academia, but they are steps in the right direction. Also, they have symbolic significance for they convey interest in fostering inclusivity and broadening perspectives.

Changes in micro attitudes and behaviors could help, too. Find out what colleagues working on issues in the Global South are studying. Read research outside our standard thematic, epistemological and geographical lanes. Reviewers should refrain from asking authors who write about issues in the Global South to indicate the country of study in the title (when they do not expect Western scholars to do so). They should also ask about the theoretical and empirical relevance of studies, regardless of whether they are conducted in the Global North or the Global South. Let's not confine non-Western scholarship to catch-all categories, such as specialized journal issues or conference panels, unless there are analytical merits to do so. Be curious and *show* curiosity.

Understanding why and how global diversity enriches a field of study is essential. De-westernizing political communication demands continuous dedication, collaboration, and actions on multiple fronts.

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