

Political Communication Report Fall 2023 - Issue 28

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

<http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-41234>

Imagined Academic Communities: Three Observations about the De-westernization of Political Communication¹

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This is not the first, and will surely not be the last, publication linked to a prestigious journal that proposes to de-westernize a field of communication studies, in this case, Political Communication. In the past fifteen years, scholars from all over the world have made excellent points about the need to de-westernize (Gunaratne, 2010) de-center (Waisbord and Mellado, 2014), or contextualize (Rojas and Valenzuela, 2019) social science, communication studies, and/or public opinion research. In previous work, co-authored with Pablo Boczkowski, we have examined the problems of lack of representativeness, lack of reflexivity, lack of decentering, and lack of cosmopolitanism in digital journalism research (Mitchelstein and Boczkowski, 2021). We have also proposed that the double standard regarding contextualization examined by Rojas and Valenzuela is not only a scholarly problem but also a political issue (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, 2019). Cherian George, in a thought-provoking address to a roundtable at the International Communication Association in 2022, has, instead, argued for a provincialization of political communication, suggesting a candid acknowledgment “that the field is what it is, and that what it is is Western Political Communication” (2022).

How have these initiatives fared? A cursory glance at Volume 40 of the journal *Political Communication* indicates that more than five-sixths of the research articles published are based on data collected in the United States, Canada, or Western Europe. Exceptions include a study of distrust in news in Ukraine, another one about news credibility in Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine, an analysis of anti-populist journalism in Argentina, and an examination of ethnic campaign appeals in Indonesia. Not surprisingly, almost nine out of ten authors represented in

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this volume are also based at universities in the United States, Canada, or Western Europe. The exceptions are affiliated with institutions in Argentina, Cyprus, Poland, Russia, and Singapore.

This skew, while admittedly from a limited sample, shows a blatant overrepresentation of “WEIRD” societies: western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic, or what often is called the “Global North”. Moreover, the few authors that are not based in these countries are from upper-middle income economies, and researchers from Africa, South Asia, or Central America are absent, which indicates that there are profound inequalities even within what is usually called the “Global South”. If a field of study is, to borrow Benedict Anderson’s felicitous conceptualization, an imagined academic community, *Political Communication* appears to be a “deep, horizontal comradeship” (1983, p. 7) only for some of its members. This is not only a political problem, but also an epistemic one. Focusing on issues like distrust, news avoidance, or misinformation primarily in a select group of countries with certain characteristics limits our understanding of these phenomena and may lead to misguided solutions for political communication challenges.

To attempt to focus ongoing and future efforts towards de-westernizing, decentering, and re-contextualizing political communication, I devote the remainder of this essay to three observations about the reasons and potential solutions for the overrepresentation of the Global North in the field. These observations aim not to be exhaustive or universally applicable but rather to contribute towards building a more representative academic community, and consequently, a better understanding of the phenomena under study.

1) Money Matters

There are many reasons for this underrepresentation: as Waisbord and Mellado (2014) have analyzed, scholarships from different regions vary in terms of subject of study, body of evidence, theoretical perspectives, and academic cultures. However, there is one dimension that appears to be consistently overlooked when examining differences across academia: the staggering differences in the availability of material, and, relatedly, symbolic and social resources for scholars working outside the Global North. For example, although scholarly organizations such as ICA have established tiers for membership and conference registration fees, the cost of visas, travel, and lodging at a conference remains prohibitively high for researchers not affiliated with major research universities in Western Europe or North America, and directly impossible to cover for graduate students from Global South countries. It could be argued that virtual conferences or online attendance may serve to bridge those inequalities. While these options are undoubtedly valuable, they are not as productive in establishing collegial bonds and launching joint projects.

This is not to deny that academia in the Global North also harbors deep inequalities—for instance, between adjunct instructors and tenure track professors, or across different universities—however, it is symptomatic that these inequalities also are also mostly ignored. The field of communication in general, and political communication in particular, tend to avoid discussion of social class, poverty, and material conditions of living. Unsurprisingly, this pattern is repeated when discussing inequalities within the academic community. Of course, it is not up to academic communities to solve long-standing problems in the distribution of resources. However, there are some steps that could be taken. Every year scholarly associations

distribute competitive grants to attend their annual conferences. Almost invariably, these grants are awarded to graduate students at top programs at Tier 1 research universities in the Global North. Although some funds are dedicated to scholars from non-Western countries, even with this practice in place, entry barriers remain too high for many researchers, who in some cases even refrain from applying.

2) The Global North Is Not the Norm

These structural inequalities are, in turn, reproduced in scholarly work. Rojas and Valenzuela offer insightful observations on the predicament faced by scholars engaged in public opinion research beyond the confines of the United States and Europe, for whom “it is customary to have to explain whether our findings are ‘real,’ that is, generalizable relationships that advance theory, or some kind of contextual artifact” (2019, p. 652). These authors go on to propose that all research, not only that produced outside the Global North, should be contextualized. While I enthusiastically agree with this proposal, it is disheartening to see that, four years on, this is far from being a reality. Reading through abstracts of research papers published in the 2023 volume of *Political Communication* offers one sure sign of how contextualization is mandatory for the Global South but optional for the Global North. Many of them fail to mention where the data collection was conducted, exemplified by a striking case where a content analysis of “Fox News” is described with an implicit assumption that the audience is universally acquainted with the United States’ cable news channel.

Incomplete abstracts are not, by far, the most important problem of taking the Global North as the norm. In fact, they are a consequence of this bias. Scholarship from the Global North tends to assume that whatever communication process or public opinion movement is taking place in that region is a novel phenomenon that should be studied within the existing theoretical frameworks. With notable exceptions, scant effort is dedicated to seeking comparative insights from scholarship originating in diverse regions. Relatedly, the field is often reluctant to entertain a historical sensibility that indicates that those “new” phenomena might not be necessarily new across the board.

As an illustration, research about misinformation bloomed after the Brexit and Trump elections in United Kingdom and the United States, respectively. Scholars from these countries mostly approached misinformation as a novel phenomenon, boosted by technological factors, such as the diffusion of social media platforms, and connected to the intervention from foreign countries, which would produce dire consequences for the political system as a whole and had to be curbed. Seven years on, as Weeks and Gil De Zúñiga argue, “the field has not yet consistently, systematically, and empirically outlined the conditions under which this information has major social effects” (2021, p. 282). While research on misinformation is indeed valuable, 2016 was not the first time that politicians, media conglomerates and foreign governments distributed false information to the public. During the 1970s and 1980s, dictatorships in Latin America, often with support from the United States government, regularly published false content. Ariel Dorfman (1978) has documented how the Chilean press deliberately misrepresented Salvador Allende’s government. Treating misinformation as an entirely novel occurrence overlooks crucial historical contexts, resulting in an incomplete understanding of its genesis, causes, and repercussions.

3) *What Is to Be Done?*

Solutions to the problem of Global North hegemony in political communication can be broadly classified into two kinds. The more prevalent and less contentious approach seeks to integrate non-Western scholarship into predominantly Global North academic environments, ostensibly mitigating potential charges of exclusivity. Scholars from the Global South contributing to this research often compose their work in English, having undergone postgraduate education, either partially or entirely, in the United States or Europe. Their scholarship typically aligns with the theoretical and methodological frameworks employed by their counterparts in the Global North. It is hard for me to criticize this approach, as it tends to be the one that I have taken. However, it is limited by design: few Global South scholars will be able to adopt it.

The second, more controversial one, is Cherian George's call to provincialize the field of Political Communication. While I am profoundly sympathetic to simply changing the name at the door of Political Communication to Western Political Communication and going on about our work, I doubt that this secession would solve most of the problems in the field, or, indeed, the issues I have raised here. The newly minted Western Political Communication sub-field would still miss the possibility to understand variability across diverse cases, resulting in substandard scholarship. In other words, as Mora Matassi and Pablo Boczkowski argue in their comparative analysis of social media platforms "to know is to compare (...) whatever it is that we are able to know, we do so as a result of contrasting two or more entities (...) we mean that whatever it is that we are able to know, we do so as a result of contrasting two or more entities (...) to properly contextualize and thus avoid the naturalization of specific cases" (2023, pp. 5-6).

I would like to propose that the most productive way forward would be for the entire academic community to work together towards more diverse, more representative, scholarship. I regularly meet scholars from all over the world who are willing to talk and write in English—and abandon their native Portuguese, Hebrew or Japanese—to work in collaborative projects. That willingness to translate might be imitated by native speakers of English. It could also be used to include research not originally written in English in prestigious journals, by devoting resources to translation. Rather than calling for de-westernization, making the effort to translate, in the broadest sense possible—by mentoring a young scholar from the Global South, or being willing to form diverse teams for research projects—would be more fulfilling, both for scholars and for the field.

A final note: I have written this essay in English in the hopes that it will reach the broadest possible audience. Any mistakes or unconventional expressions can be attributed to my lack of mastery of the language. To paraphrase a character from a United States sitcom, it is not that I am smarter in Spanish,² but I surely find it easier to make an argument in my native language. Decentering Political Communication need not be an easy project, but I am certain it is a worthwhile one.

² Gloria Delgado Pritchett, *Modern Family*, Season 6, Episode 7 (2014).

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