Political Communication Report
Fall 2023 - Issue 28
"De-westernizing PolComm Theories and Research:
More Perspectives, New Directions"

It is epistemic, folks!
Why our knowledge from WEIRD contexts is limited and what we can learn from Arab contexts[1]

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Why our political communication is not enough!

Vibrant—and occasionally even uncomfortable—conversations seek pushing an overdue transformation in communication studies in recent years. These conversations about diversification and internationalization take place for example, in the Editors' letters in the leading journals, the business meetings of the most established ICA divisions like Political Communication and Journalism Studies, or in the ICA podcast Architects of Communication Scholarship. Even beyond the Anglo-American academic community, we can find a similar movement towards Cosmopolitan Communication Studies and discussions about "Out of the Comfort Zone: Challenges of Communication Studies in the Age of New Global Realities" at the Freie Universität Berlin.

An increasing body of literature consistently shows that our knowledge has been produced by a structurally shaped Western-based and, white masculine gaze over decades that does not incorporate a globally inclusive epistemic gaze, by excluding entire academic and linguistic terrains (Chakravartty et al., 2018; Mutsvairo et al., 2022; Suzina, 2022; De Albuquerque, 2021). Power imbalances continue to shape who gets to speak and be heard—or cited—in our field. Race, gender, class, ethnic background, origin, geographic location, colonial past, funding, ac-

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ademic training, and language contribute to imbalanced social and symbolic capital in a ne-oliberal global academic order. Certain topics get less attention than others, such as race. #PoliticalCommunicationSoWhite shows empirical evidence that the main political communication journals discussed race less often than critical journals (Freelon et al., 2023).

Scholars also agree that the field needs to recalibrate itself towards more balance and openness, envisioning what could be an inclusive "cosmopolitan communication studies" (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014; Ganter & Badr, 2022). Bearing in mind that individual scholars cannot change exclusionary structural and cultural barriers, like the securitization of border regimes, inequalities in infrastructure, or the proliferation of stereotypes, we—as a scientific community—still have an autonomous range of agency within our capacities to diversify scholarship from below and from within our own research practices.

Slow and gradual reform-oriented steps are already taking place. These actions include ongoing and visible efforts to structurally diversify editorial boards towards a "mindful inclusion" (Rao, 2019); promotion of inclusive and nurturing reviewing practices that do not reject manuscripts merely based on language; citational practices that empower marginalized and emerging voices; and elevating inclusion and diversity as an institutionalized criterion for excellence in publications, as the ICA-affiliated journal *Communication, Culture and Critique* does for example. Higher education institutions respond to the gap in representation between a younger, more diverse student body and a more homogenous faculty by investing in syllabi diversification beyond the mainstream canons.

But are these actions enough to achieve epistemic diversity? The call to diversify political communication has more value than only normative inclusive goals: at its core lies the legitimacy of knowledge. The current transformation is still bound to a limited geographic scope and to more critical niches. The field needs to acknowledge that there are other voices, topics, and methods to produce knowledge beyond the current Anglo-American dominance. One starting point is acknowledging that the academic culture conducts research through a WEIRD gaze (acronym for Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic). Opening the field starts by giving up "the pretense that it covers political communication in some generic or universal sense [because] de facto, it represents Western political communication. It should rebrand itself accordingly" (George, 2022). The field of political communication, one of the central and oldest subfields in communication studies, has developed in Western democratic settings with a cumulative knowledge originating in the fields of elections, party campaigns and persuasion situated in US and Western contexts in the Cold War era. True internationalization needs to move away from inward-looking approaches confined to specific nations and regions into multicultural, cosmopolitan theorizing, sensitive to local concerns and perspectives (Waisbord, 2022, p. 27-28).

The first step to accepting the myth of Western universality is recognizing that the knowledge in Western geopolitics and history is not universal. De-westernization here is not a field of specialization per se: it is countering the westernized gaze on our social reality by innovating methods and theorizing. It is an epistemic way of looking at the political communication that overcomes current inward narratives originating in one region and claiming universality. Doing business as usual bears risks of marginalizing topics and views that would narrow, not broaden, the political communication scholarship.

Scholarly actions start with an epistemic shift that negotiates innovative criteria for research quality in the field of political communication. We need to forge new criteria to evaluate excellent social scientific research which learns from the critical cultural and interpretative traditions to move from centering precision, parsimony, and predictability towards rigor, credibility, transferability, and reflexivity (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2022). This entails understanding the differences in contributions between White and PoC contributions (Chakravartty et al., 2018, p. 255) and moving beyond importing theories and methodological practices outside of their original contexts. Decisions in research design need to move on from reducing non-Western contexts to mere "case studies" (Rossini, 2023).

What political communication can learn from non-WEIRD contexts

Political communication methods and theories can learn from what is happening outside the WEIRD contexts. In line with the call towards methodological renewal and a more opening towards qualitative methods (Brown & Searles, 2023; Gagrčin & Butkowski, 2023), the field of political communication can learn from studying the practices of political communication in non-Western contexts. Acknowledging the limitations of what we know injects the field with much-needed "academic humility" (Echchaibi, 2022) in times of uncertainty and polycrisis. Injecting the field of political communication with new theoretical and methodological horizons is needed, as otherwise phenomena remain invisible, not researched, and will therefore not contribute to our knowledge! My expertise comes from years of doing research in Arab media and communication fields limited by safety constraints, lack of data, and unpredictability. Criteria for excellence are not necessarily the generalization or large N samples, but the ability to generate trust or a meaningful response. Innovative potentials for theorizing from the Arab region are often overlooked or dismissed for lack of relevance. On illustrative example: almost 15 years ago during the Arab Uprisings, paid and orchestrated misinformation through social media called "digital committees," known in English as "click farms," were not even a media phenomenon in Western political communication.. Early research on this new phenomenon was dismissed for lack of relevance. It only gained traction when it became a phenomenon in Western democracies after the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Before that, it was regarded as an anomaly, a deviation from the Western norm. I argue that political communication scholarship can develop from theorizing in non-democratic settings. However, it needs to pass the

threshold of relevance. Therefore, posing the question "relatable to whom?" recenters our attention to produce meaningful and relevant research that emerges in its local contexts (Zakaria, 2022, p. 7). That is exactly the aim of the #ICA24 preconference Arab Communications Studies: Towards A Renewed Research Agenda and why it is vital and timely.

The other side of neglecting potential non-Western sources of theorization is the blind adoption of theories without acknowledging their particularism. For example, the linear democratization and transition paradigms that evaluate the reality according to the Western yardstick could neither explain complex Arab media realities nor respond to the local research needs in this region. In a region marked by inequalities, wars, and conflicts, it would make little sense to apply a gaze that views this research ontology as a deviation from Western theory. Therefore, joining forces with area studies, in this case Middle East studies, would enrich the political communication through a meaningful cross-fertilization that adds historicized contextualization to a geopolitically strategic region that has been often analyzed through securitization and colonial gaze. Not only does it overlook the entanglement and complexity of regional and globalized logics of interconnections, but it also departs from Western categories that simply do not exist. One prominent example is the dilemma of studying good media governance or accountability in a region marked by informality in less regulated media markets with limited media trust (Pies, 2022). In a country like Lebanon, which is radically polarized and has a fragmented media landscape, the rise of WhatsApp channels as news aggregators is a clear political message by the audiences that strips legitimacy from the legacy media landscape.

Doing political communication research in non-democratic contexts means embracing messy data and incomplete realities. The willingness to accept messy and fuzzy data sets would reflect the research reality they come from. This includes openness to data from repressive fields that can be unstructured, anonymized, or limited in scope, which at the same time attests to the researcher's ability to gain trust and access; a "fragile and valuable commodity" (Glasius et al., 2018). Another example is moving away from mainstream values which center on objectivity and dismiss the validity of subjective feelings during research. In closed media contexts, "bad feelings" like sadness, frustration, or confusion can raise important and critical questions about structural, institutional, and disciplinary conditions that do not feel right during field research (Moussawi & Puri, 2022, p. 76) or raise mental health impacts on scholars and research participants (Glasius et al., 2018).

Getting rare access and adopting survival techniques in conducting political communication research therefore constitutes additional invisible labor that is often time-consuming. It raises questions on how scholars can gain research access in closed contexts under potentially repressive conditions, where power, archives, and access to knowledge are intertwined. As (media) archives are "centers of interpretations that require epistemological and ethical credibility" (El Shakry, 2015, p. 925), accepting incomplete media samples cannot be avoided. Media materials from the Arab Uprisings are limited, as several short-lived media initiatives that thrived in

the post-revolutionary years were not collected at all. In addition, the destruction of archives in the Arab region through conflict, wars, or upheavals makes researching that phase difficult in conflict-torn countries like Libya, Yemen, or Syria. The entire Libyan newspaper archives, for example, are destroyed, and even in the Middle East collection at the -otherwise comprehensive- US Library of Congress in Washington, Libyan media archives are rare and selective. Another example of lost material is the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated newspaper *Horreya and Adala* (Freedom and Justice) which was not publicly archived, leaving an important phase of a vibrant public sphere in Egypt undocumented. Non-existing archives put analytical and conceptual barriers on knowledge production and demand the adoption of new quality criteria to evaluate and validate scholarship in these contexts.

The road towards epistemic inclusion

Broadening the criteria that investigate how and what research we produce is not a matter of nice-to-have inclusive measures or performative checklists of inclusion. Expanding the epistemic spectrum means embracing messy, inconclusive, and uncertain knowledge. It is a necessity so that the field develops new and different categories to answer meaningful questions that emerge from within their own contexts. This epistemic position should not come from a victimized, marginal position, but from a belief in the value of the contribution. Instead of timidly asking for inclusion, a new paradigm shift is needed that does not only add representation to a field whose knowledge production is still shaped by a predominantly Western-centric trajectory. It has become a necessity to keep the field of political communication alive, responsive, and legitimate. We need innovative training of future communication scholars. Identifying the imbalances is only the first step. Gaining and maintaining legitimacy to represent an international field is a long road. In this spirit, let me conclude with a verse by the Spanish poet Antonio Machado: "Traveler, there is no path. The path is made by walking!" Scholars in political communication have just started!

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