

Pathway outta pigeonhole? De-contextualizing Majority World Countries

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journals.sagepub.com/home/mcs**David Cheruiyot** 

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Abstract

Should regional context overshadow theoretical contributions of a doctoral dissertation or an international journal article? In this essay, we argue that expendable region-centricism diminishes the contributions of Majority World Countries to the media and communication discipline. We propose that ‘de-contextualized’ studies – which accentuate the theoretical, conceptual, or methodological import of research – could complement current efforts to decentre knowledge.

Keywords

Decolonizing knowledge, de-contextualized studies, journalism field, Majority World Countries, media and communication discipline, Minority World Countries

Introduction

The media and communication discipline has consistently engaged in discourses about knowledge production, and various scholars have offered an array of solutions towards more representation. There is however paucity of practical and illustrative approaches to students and researchers towards intense engagement with scholarship from Majority World Countries.¹ In this essay, we revisit the core-periphery challenge in knowledge production in media and communication studies, then attempt to propose a pathway to

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rethinking global visibility of works by scholars from Africa, Asia, the Middle East and South America.

Among scholars in the discipline, there is growing self-reflexivity and awareness of the need for diversity in scholarship while international journals are proactively responding to calls to decentre or decolonize knowledge through representation² beyond the white, male, heterosexual from North America, Western Europe or Australasia (Chakravartty et al., 2018; Rao, 2019; Tandoc et al., 2020). Media and communication scholars also argue that globalized flows, cosmopolitanization and hybridization of scholarship or global media ethics, are pathways (or entry points) towards shared epistemologies (Ganter and Ortega, 2019; Rao and Wasserman, 2007; Waisbord and Mellado, 2014). We acknowledge recent proposals towards diversity and inclusivity through, for example, global studies, collaborative works, diverse composition of editorial boards or more representative course reading lists. We however note that the centre-periphery challenge today is not so much about the extent to which perspectives and insights from Majority countries are incorporated into the discipline, but in the way research by scholars in these countries are undervalued in offering theoretical, conceptual and methodological guidance, particularly in international scholarship.

What we highlight in this essay is the pigeonholing³ of scholarship from Majority World Countries and its designation as having only the import of geographical context. We argue here that as a remedy towards more visible contribution of Majority countries in the discipline, students and scholars could de-contextualize their research to bridge the gap between two poles: the core of media and communication fields (arising from a dominant research 'agenda' from Minority World Countries) and region-centric studies (research that play up regional distinctiveness). The purpose of these de-contextualized studies can be to promote and incorporate conceptual/theoretical specificities from a broader and diverse range of scholars, as a practical fix to the epistemological bias of Minority countries. In this paper, our insights are drawn from the field of journalism studies, but we mention in general the practices in the discipline, from existing literature, that pigeonhole graduate students and scholars from Majority countries.

Pigeonholed to the core

One among the many problems of media and communication studies today is that the heart of its fields, which sets the theoretical and methodological agenda, remains strongly centralized within a distinct context, mostly Anglo-American (see, among others, Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012; Grosfoguel, 2007), while the periphery serves as a source of empirical data that explore and interrogate regional specificities. Studies, particularly those from Majority World Countries, have thus remained anecdotal and auxiliary to the core conceptual/theoretical development of the discipline. Existing studies argue how research from Minority countries, even though are substantively 'area studies', are considered as having universal application while studies from Majority countries are 'ghettoized' and their scholars considered as possessing only 'geographic and linguistic expertise' (Sarkar, 2019: 227).

An observable consequence of pigeonholing of Majority countries is that their numerous empirical research remain uninfluential to the theoretical development of the

discipline, are rarely cited, and when they are noticed, they serve as ‘raw materials’ for literature overviews or theory-building in Minority World Countries (Nyamnjoh, 1999; Sarkar, 2019). The centre-periphery disparity then best favours Minority countries because as efforts are made to promote scholarship in Majority countries through region-specific studies, they inadvertently seek to reinforce the centre, and further alienate the periphery (Chow, 2006). This is why Ganter and Ortega (2019) argue for ‘academic cosmopolitanism’ as an approach towards scholarship that attempts to dismantle the core-periphery divide through internationalized approaches that recognize interdependence between the Majority and Minority World Countries. However, studies from Majority countries still rarely set the agenda for research in media and communication fields.

As works from students and scholars from Majority World Countries are continuously pushed to the periphery, scholarship, particularly in North America and Western Europe, is left to build and reinforce the core of the fields through continuous methodological, theoretical and conceptual contributions. A corpus of literature about ‘de-westernization’ has consistently showed the “West”⁴ has claimed jurisdiction over scientific knowledge production and has been strategically successful at exporting its model and approach with an alarming failure to acknowledge “non-Western” approaches (Chakravarty et al., 2018; Ganter and Ortega, 2019; Grosfoguel, 2007; Park and Curran, 2000; Thussu, 2009; Waisbord and Mellado, 2014). ‘Africa’⁵ is a good case study of pigeonholing in our discipline. Despite the wave of recognition of the need for diversity in scholarship, editorial practices (reviewing and citations) still designate ‘Africa’ as an *absent object* (Mbembe, 2001; cf. Nyamnjoh, 1999) and therefore its positioning in international scholarship has to be reduced to providing contextual opposites of Minority countries. North American and European scholarship is placed in a position of the ‘theoretically knowable’ while the production of knowledge in the subaltern is interpreted in terms of ‘incompleteness’ as Chakrabarty (1992: 5) has articulately expressed it.

On their part, Majority countries have continuously reinforced their ‘peripheral’ position through contributing towards studies that ‘interpret’ their marginalized position to the Minority countries (see Chakravarty et al., 2018). Curricula of media and communication programmes and other practices in academic cultures reinforce the use, translation, interpretation and circulation of literature from Minority countries leading to a ‘dependency complex’ (Moyo and Mutsvairo, 2018: 21). This means that while a researcher from North America and Western Europe can afford to engage only with researchers within their geographical (and cultural) sphere, students and researchers from Majority countries must engage with text from Minority nations to be considered legitimate contributors to core debates in fields (cf. Sarkar, 2019). Failure to engage with the dominant building blocks of our fields carries the price of low publication rates and relegation to low-tier journals. Citation choices by scholars and students in the discipline favour more established scholars in Minority World Countries (cf. Chakravarty et al., 2018). Oftentimes, scholars from Minority countries find it difficult to look beyond their regions for alternative works because of the saturation of literature from their scholars (Tandoc et al., 2020).

While scholars from multiple and diverse fields are championing for inclusivity and diversity of scholarship today (see, for example, Rao, 2019; Tandoc et al., 2020), scholars from Minority countries are increasingly placed in a position where they have to

constantly defend themselves against criticism that they do not value inclusion or proactively play a role in decolonizing knowledge (Rao, 2019).

On their part, researchers from Majority World Countries spend their energy on the question whether their research can develop regional epistemological traditions. They seek to challenge careless universalism that is the signature of the scholarship of Minority World Countries, and at the same time question the taken-for-granted Western theoretical and methodological perspectives. Although some scholars from Majority countries have insisted resources and research focus should be placed on developing 'home-grown' solutions (Kuo and Chew, 2009), the theories, concepts and methodological approaches from Majority countries can hardly match the influential theories from the Minority, at least going by the global resonance⁶ of journal articles. This means that the only way researchers in Majority countries can contribute to the debates at the core of the fields is by providing their geographical (often under-explored) empirical realities (Sarkar, 2019).

Scholars from Majority World Countries are pigeonholed to offer data and background of their regions and not expected to contribute with scholarship that engages with the core debates of the media and communication discipline. Even students from the Majority World Countries studying in universities in North America, Europe and Australasia are strongly encouraged to focus on regional specificities in their doctoral research. In some cases, their admission into universities or award of scholarships in North America or Europe is pegged on them providing an 'international' or 'multicultural' (read, exotic) perspective to ongoing research at their institutions. Their enrolment is further seen as that of creating an image of diversity and global outlook of the institutions and research groups in Minority countries. As a result, many students and researchers resort to region-specific studies, scholarship that oftentimes does not need to engage with the core debates of media and communication fields.

The region-centric studies

Researchers from Majority countries, publishing in international journals, mostly position themselves to counteract theoretical approaches and methodologies from Minority countries and provide alternatives from their vantage positions. Owing to globalized flows and hybridization of knowledge, it is difficult today to defend specific epistemological positions because knowledge is shared, appropriated and repurposed with the aim to enrich scholarly perspectives (Ganter and Ortega, 2019; Kuo and Chew, 2009; Waisbord and Mellado, 2014).

However, because of the pressure to diversify knowledge and be inclusive, institutions in Minority countries and editorial boards of international journals increasingly seek to incorporate the epistemological positions of Majority countries, leading to practices that are sometimes seen to border on tokenism (Chakravarty et al., 2018; Rao, 2019). Ultimately, students and scholars from Majority World Countries are emboldened (and inspired) to emphasize regional epistemological positions in their research. They, for example, motivate their region-specific approaches by arguing they are researching understudied regions/countries; they are counteracting taken-for-granted Western universalisms, or; providing 'nuances' to theories from Minority countries. While these studies are certainly broadening literature in their fields, we see that they are buying into a

discourse of the Minority countries and thus further pigeonholing studies from other parts of the world. Chakrabarty (1992) has argued that Europe and its sovereign subject will always take the position of power or the superior and the subaltern will take the inferior position even when given voice (as in the case of publication in international journals).

While we are aware of structural, institutional and epistemological impediments towards decentring knowledge, we are specifically questioning the extent to which research that reflect locational peculiarities of Majority countries contributes towards developing fields. We do not imply, in any way, that research which specify regional contexts do not make contributions towards theory-building, rather we note that such works do not find space in central discourses of fields, such as journalism studies. Even when such works make theoretical, conceptual and methodological contributions, they are considered too peripheral to have any import into the core debates as dictated by scholarship of Minority countries. Further, citation and discursive practices of scholars from both the Minority and Majority countries, contribute towards the pigeonholing of these studies.

We are also not undermining the contribution of contextual richness of area studies (as this not only contributes to the development of indigenous knowledge, but increase understanding of little-known worlds/phenomena). Neither are we claiming that theoretical and conceptual work is superior in any research undertaking. What we argue, however, is that the devaluation of research from Majority World Countries is a hindrance towards an open engagement with diverse works that contribute to enriching core debates of the fields of media and communication studies (cf. Waisbord and Mellado, 2014: 368).

The ‘context of burden’

Reversing the current state of global scholarship would be a tall order. Scholarship from Minority countries grows at a faster pace and is bound to maintain prevalence in the near future. The question is, what can we do to mitigate the effects of a status quo in which approaches and perspectives of the Minority countries dominate the core of the fields of media and communication studies? How do we actively start building bridges that invite the Majority World Countries to engage with the core of our fields, beyond the frequent calls, within the discipline, for cross-cultural comparative studies, collaborative research across regions and conversations about internationalization at global academic forums?

As we earlier elucidated, to speak to the core debates in the discipline means making an influential contribution to the many subfields of media and communication studies and attaining global visibility through publications in international journals. Research that emphasizes regional specificity – and this mostly originates from Majority World Countries – often struggles to influence core debates in the fields, even when published in top international journals. Ultimately, students and scholars from the Majority World Countries continuously reinforce their positions in the periphery through works that foreground regional specificity while those from Minority countries remain influential in global scholarship.

Most graduate students from the Majority World Countries would already be familiar with an approach in which the regional focus takes precedence in their dissertations. After all, this is a path well-trodden. They find inspiration from doctoral students who have gone on to become accomplished researchers in their home continents or in Minority

countries. Most dissertations or journal articles from Majority countries would therefore employ extensive backgrounds because there is almost always an expectation from examiners and reviewers to ‘overcontextualize’ if the research is to have global relevance and resonance. There is no equivalent expectation of broad contextualization of research about Minority countries. Most journal reviewers rarely expect, for example, an explanation why *The New York Times* is a good fit for an empirical study in print journalism, or question why a paper about public service media takes the BBC as the ‘gold standard’ for broadcast media. Few scholars from the United States and United Kingdom bother to justify the countries as case studies in their research papers. However, if the object of study is a news organization from Majority countries, for example, Indonesia’s *Kompas*, questions about context (mostly likely about the state of press freedom) would be raised by reviewers or examiners.

From ‘exotic’ to ‘assistive’ contexts

We consider that too much contextual description takes up space and energy to focus on more substantive theoretical and conceptual issues. For example, thick descriptions of the geography of Majority countries in dissertations are not always relevant to the general aim of the study. If for example, one studies how print journalists interact with news sources in the context of Ghana, a three-page Wikipedia-like description of the country cannot necessarily be helpful. But at the same time, the often taken-for-granted thin contextualization of studies from Minority countries cannot be said to be helpful either (e.g. if one is studying how journalists interact with local politicians, taking the case of the *Weekly Alibi*, a newspaper in Albuquerque city, New Mexico state in the US). Contextual focus is obviously necessary for any kind of study, but it is an *assistive* background that can situate the study in a proper theoretical/conceptual discourse.

Further, broad backgrounds of the cultures studied should not aim to sell their contextual ‘particularities’ (cf. Ferguson, 2006; Obonyo, 2011), but draw contextual nuances that may inform a broader understanding of the phenomenon under study. Yet we see an apparent need to find the ‘exotic’ intricacies from places that are uniquely different in the eyes of scholars from Minority World Countries, for example, India’s caste system, Brazil’s favela or Rwanda’s genocide (also informed by flawed images of the countries).

De-contextualized studies could de-emphasize backgrounds that only serve to feed the curiosity of the reviewer or doctoral examiner in a Minority country. While motivating case studies from Majority countries, researchers do not need to amplify the particularities of context that are unique to that of Minority countries. While political, social, cultural or geographical dimensions may be necessary in a journal article or dissertation, especially in cross-national comparisons, the common contextual romanticization of the context of Majority countries overshadows their contribution to the core debates of the discipline. Further, case studies must not serve as ‘negative inversion(s)’ of Minority countries (cf. Willems, 2014: 426), but rather as alternative sites of the phenomenon under study. In playing down context, research from Majority World Countries can ventilate on theoretical or conceptual questions.

As a first practical step towards creating avenues for scholars from Majority countries to engage more with core debates in fields (and even set mainstream research agenda),

editorial boards and doctoral supervisors should de-emphasize thick descriptions of geographical sites of studies. A study which de-emphasizes geographical context plays an interpretative role, serving as a conduit for empirical studies towards speaking to core debates of fields of media and communication studies (and thereby Minority countries), while still retaining their regional distinctiveness. In other words, de-contextualized studies could diversify the central pole of core studies as one way of contributing to decentring media and communication studies. In the field of journalism studies, for example, while cultural and regional specificities are important, it is the core of the field debates that define its commitment to research, for instance, the study of professional norms and values. As important as regional specificity may be, what really matters is to consider that journalism as a practice is universal in the broad sense (see, e.g. Josephi, 2013). Years of institutional isomorphism; diffusion of news routines and technologies; similar teaching curricula, as well as; converging news paradigm, news conventions or forms and style, have ensured commonalities in the profession across the world (see, e.g. Høyer, 2005). We contend therefore that regional distinctiveness does not necessarily have to eclipse theoretical and conceptual contribution of research in journalism studies or any other field of media and communication studies.

Further, bridging the core and the periphery of media and communication studies implies researchers employ a toolbox of theoretical, conceptual and methodological approaches as a means towards contributing to knowledge in the field. Decontextualization does not imply the researcher is oblivious to the politics of knowledge production, but instead frees them from being pigeonholed in global scholarship. Bridging regional context and theoretical importance is helpful in studies where researchers from Majority World Countries seek to show the relevance of the phenomenon or practice in their regions in a global context. Such studies could be positioned as ‘global projects’ (Wasserman and de Beer, 2009), which means a researcher is deliberate about engaging with core debates in a field as a way to broaden the understanding of the cultural importance of media and communication in a complex world.

Conclusion

While scholars from multiple and diverse fields are championing for inclusivity and diversity of scholarship today, scholars from Minority World Countries are increasingly placed in a position where they have to constantly defend themselves against criticism that they do not value inclusion or proactively play a role in decolonizing knowledge (cf. Rao, 2019). Our proposal for de-contextualized studies relates to the institutionalization and establishment of a shared awareness within our discipline that theoretical and conceptual involvement in knowledge production needs to encompass a broader global perspective. We consider that it is the role of well-positioned publications that set the agenda of fields of media and communication studies to take the lead in that process.

We have proposed that scholars from Majority World Countries de-contextualize their studies to instead promote the theoretical, conceptual and methodological distinctiveness of their research rather than the contextual distinctiveness. Our proposal is borne out of the idea that today’s scholar, studying the complex phenomena shaped by the rapidly changing nature of technologies, needs to develop an ‘analytical mindset’ (Waisbord and

Mellado, 2014: 365) to understand the import of theories in diverse contexts across the globe. We however cannot also belittle the fact that working towards diversity in context of our scholarship has much to do with ‘self-reflexivity’ (Willems, 2014) and self-initiative towards solving today’s core-periphery challenge in knowledge production.

Lastly, more research needs to problematize the epistemological challenge that comes with establishing the ‘core’ of a field. If today the core is defined by the ‘Minority World Countries’ (mostly Anglo-American) approaches to theory, concepts and methodology, it is upon the media and communication scholarship to establish de-contextualized studies that welcome a global effort and contribution.

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Notes

1. ‘Minority World Countries’ (North America, Europe and Australasia) and ‘Majority World Countries’ (Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East) are terms increasingly used in place of the misleading ‘Global North/South’ or reductionist ‘West/Rest’.
2. In May 2020, for example, the *Journal of Journalism Studies* tweeted that it had achieved 50-50 gender parity in its editorial composition, and with members from ‘all corners of the globe’ (@journstudies) JS (2020) *We are very excited*. . . . Available at: <https://twitter.com/journstudies/status/1262466450792603649> (accessed May 19).
3. We employ pigeonholing here to refer to practices that confine the scholarship of Majority World Countries within peripheral discourses of the fields of media and communication studies, and that assign their value as only contextual and thus inferior in contributing to the growth of the discipline.
4. We use this term here because it mostly features in the debates about knowledge production and how Western Europe and North America has emerged as the ‘dominant centre’ and the rest of the world remaining in the ‘periphery’, but we acknowledge here that it is reductionist.
5. It is important to clarify that while this paper does not refer to the various ontologies of ‘Africa’ (since they are subjects of specific studies in areas studies), the authors are aware that there are several meanings here, which include a geographically defined place, an empirical site or a ‘social constructed category’. See among others Ferguson J (2006) *Global shadows: Africa in the neoliberal world order*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
6. For example, a cursory search of articles whose titles mention regions of the Majority World Countries in *Journalism Studies* shows that the numbers of ‘citations’ and ‘views’ are often too low in comparison to those focusing on North America or Western Europe. See also: Cushion S (2008) Truly international? A content analysis of Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism and Journalism Studies. *Journalism Practice* 2(2): 280–293.

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