Editorial: encounters with Western media theory

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Editorial: Encounters with Western media theory

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Abstract

Beginning in 2020, the Crosscurrents section of this journal featured ten provocative essays on the theme of 'Encounters in Western Media Theory.' These essays stemmed from scholars' engagements with various canonical texts in media, cultural, and communication studies that took the Anglophone Global North as a taken-for-granted site for making sweeping theoretical claims. In this editorial, we reflect on the critiques and arguments that scholars have developed to move past debates about 'internationalising' and 'de-westernizing' the field of media, communication, and cultural studies. Taken together, the essays published in this themed section grapple with the shifting terrain of academic knowledge production and the potential for redefining practices of reading, citation, and teaching.

Keywords: decolonization, de-Westernization, global media, postcolonialism, Global South, communication studies, media studies, cultural studies

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Media and communication studies is now a global academic endeavour. The field continues to expand in the Anglophone Western world, and colleges and universities across Asia, Africa, and Latin America have launched or expanded their teaching and research in this subject over the past two decades. However, even as calls for 'de-westernizing' and 'de-colonizing' media studies have gained traction, graduate programs across the world continue to rely on scholarship rooted in Western philosophical traditions. The primacy of the English language, moreover, limits our openness towards different approaches to humanistic and social scientific writing and discussion.

In 2019, the Crosscurrents section of *Media, Culture and Society* invited contributions from scholars who were interested in reflecting on their encounters with Western media theory. We were particularly interested in provocative essays that stemmed from scholars' experiences as they were introduced to various canonical texts in media, cultural, and communication studies that took the Anglophone Global North as a taken-for-granted site for making sweeping theoretical claims. Our hope was to stimulate critical reflections by scholars exploring the role of media in shaping cultures and politics in a range of contexts worldwide, and in turn, consider how we might redefine practices of reading, citation, and teaching.

Our call was taken up by scholars and students with experiences in Western educational institutions as well as those based outside the Anglophone Western world. Their contributions were published in several issues of *Media, Culture and Society* and labelled with "Crosscurrents: Encounters with Western Media Theory." We chose to publish the pieces as they were accepted, rather than to organise them in a single

journal issue, as it is usually the case with special issues or sections. *Encounters* was therefore diluted in a relatively long lapse of time, which allowed contributors to refer to each other and develop not just a range of interventions but an ongoing debate within the Crosscurrents forum. The potential disadvantage of this approach was, of course, that it offered readers a less immediate understanding of the structure of the special issue. This editorial, therefore, aims to compensate for this problem, presenting a more systematic overview of the published pieces, their approaches, and the key problems and topics that were addressed in *Encounters*.

The initial prompt for putting together the section came from a submission that was published in the journal in 2019. In his article "Reflections of an international graduate student in a North American Communication Department," Nii Kotei Nikoi (2019) examines the intellectual tensions of dealing with the underdeveloped questions of colonialism in communication theory. Among many things that are interesting and thought-provoking in this piece is the way in which the author advanced theory through a reflective consideration of his personal perspective: the point of view of an international graduate student studying in a North American university. This biographical dimension does not diminish the theoretical sophistication and thoughtfulness of the piece but rather enhances it, contextualising the call for de-westernizing media theory within precise trajectories shaped by education and scholarship in a global higher education context. Nikoi's essay serves as a powerful reminder that a critical approach to the political economy of academia (as well as of other areas), in order to be effective, needs to consider the fine-grained level through which structures of power impact on individuals and groups. Nii Kotei Nikoi's piece worked as an incitement to stimulate and collect other contributions from authors who were interested in reflecting on their encounters with Western media theory from a critical perspective, unveiling the subtle

connections between their experiences as students, scholars, and educators with wider issues and challenges of media and cultural studies as a field.

Over the following years, the Encounters special section published ten other essays, which we have organised here into three themes. The first theme includes essays that reflect on the institutional, cultural and social dynamics that shape Western-centric academia in media and communication. Within this category, Afonso de Albuquerque's piece "The institutional basis of anglophone western centrality" (2021) acknowledges that the centrality of western theories is a structural problem, but argues that this stems from the institutional dimension of the neoliberal global order of knowledge production and specific mechanisms like communication journal rankings and the imbalanced composition of journal editorial boards. The perpetuation of Western Anglophone monoculture in academia also impoverishes the quality of International communication studies research, as the Anglophone western scholars' work is treated with wide, universal applicability. In contrast, scholars in the 'rest of the world' are called upon to specify the regional or national contexts in the title of their research outputs. At a personal, interactional level, non-Western scholars who seek an international career are caught in a dilemma under such institutional arrangements. They are expected to naturalize and internalise the Anglophone academic standards within their national settings while simultaneously establishing themselves as "trustworthy" interlocutors between non-Western contexts and Western theories, which are often inadequate in accounting for local experiences. To conclude, Albuquerque calls on us to recognize such structural factors in the globalization of knowledge production as a first step towards diversifying the international academic system and scholarship.

It is to an active strategy of naturalising majority world research contexts that the next article turns. In their article on developing a "Pathway outta pigeonhole?", David Cheruiyot and Raul Ferrer-Conill (2021) explore the limits of geographically-contextualised research. In their view, it is the articulation of regional specificity that enables the 'pigeon-holing' of majority world research, and limits its uptake in wider conceptual, theoretical, empirical trajectories in the field of communication and media studies. To counter this, they propose, somewhat counter-intuitively, that what is needed is the strategic *de*-contextualisation of majority world research to counter the 'epistemological bias of Minority countries'. By refusing the regional context as the primary analytical contribution of the research, geographical de-contextualisation would allow majority world scholarship to be considered for its 'theoretical, conceptual and methodological distinctiveness' rather than its ability to speak to or from a specific region.

The last article in this category turns to the question of academic language and its potential to limit the inclusion of diverse perspectives in communication and media studies research. Ana Cristina Suzina explicitly tackles the role of English as *lingua franca* in academia, identifying its sterilising tendencies in what could be a global field of communications research. Suzina notes that the primacy of English allows for the imposition of narrow publication rankings systems in which English speakers, and particularly native English speakers, are naturally advantaged. Instead, she follows Rao's call for 'mindful inclusiveness' by journal editors who should recognise the role of language as a carrier of culture, not as something which requires those cultural specificities to be removed through translation. In this sense she advocates for Bennetts' notion of resistant translation, in which translation is not a disciplining practice, but an opening up of critical frictions and alternative epistemologies.

The second set of essays published in *Encounters* takes up specific concepts and keywords in media and cultural theory to reflect on their origins and trajectories across Western and non-Western worlds. Contributors here took up key threads of Western media theory in order to re-contextualize them within wider global contexts as well as within specific local cultures across the globe. In "Old and new questions for the public sphere: historicizing its theoretical relevance in post-Cold War South Korea" (2020), Jiyeon Kang reflects on the 'public sphere' from the particular perspective of South Korea. Her recollection of Jürgen Habermas' visit to her university in Seoul offered an entry point to discuss how the notion of the public sphere was integrated into South Korean academia and curricula in and beyond the developing field of communication and media studies. Although the concept helped South Korean scholars and students to develop a vocabulary for envisioning a postauthoritarian and post–Cold War society in South Korea, Kang's essay demonstrates that this became productive only through a complex reorganisation of the concept. As such, the piece provides an apt example of how only by challenging and reevaluating the Western-specific dimensions of communication and media theory can similar keywords become authentically useful and productive in specific local cultures and across a global world.

In "Extensions after Man: Race, Counter/insurgency and the Futures of Media Theory" (2021), Michael Litwack goes back to some of the theoretical foundations of Western media theory, particularly Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* (1964). Contributing to an emerging body of scholarship that unveils long-standing boundaries of Western media theory in terms of race (e.g. Towns, 2022), Litwack shows how McLuhan's proposition that media should be understood foremost as 'outerings' or 'extensions of man' should be reconsidered within its historical context, in which the racializing figure of "Man" and the nascent field of media studies was challenged by the crisis brought about by black (and)

anticolonial freedom struggles. To compensate for the restricted contextualization of media and the human that initially sparked the foundations of the field, Litwack points to a revisionary account of media and exteriority that also circulated in the same time: James Boggs's 'The Negro and Cybernation' (1966).

The final article in this category, Banafsheh Ranji's "Traces of orientalism in media studies" (2021) argues that in spite of efforts towards challenging the 'Western-centrism' of the field, media studies has remained reliant to the distinctions between 'West' and 'non-West' as a principal starting point for analysis. Mobilising personal experience in research and teaching, the existing literature as well as discussions with colleagues and students, Ranji shows that Edward Said's concept of orientalism (1978) remains, more than forty years after the publication of Said's book on the topic, an adequate analytical framework to encapsulate not only past but also current directions and trajectories of the field.

The third set of essays published in the Encounters section considers the impact of Western media theory in specific regional histories and cultures. Contributors tackling this theme build theory-focused bridges between the global and the local and between international and national traditions and trajectories of scholarship. The critique of the centrality of western-centric media theory often goes hand in hand with an emphasis on focusing on the "local" or "The Rest", which might risk essentializing both and reproducing the exact binary that scholars seek to challenge. The four articles under this category suggest strategies to challenge such status quo.

In "Encounters with Western media theory: Asian perspectives" (2021), Dal Yong Jin tackled the cliched yet relevant notion of "West versus the East", calling for the broadening of media theory to comprehend multiple societies in the global context. Drawing from the development of scholarship on Asian media and popular culture, Jin identified several trajectories to internationalize theoretical frameworks in media and communication studies: organizing Asia-themed academic conferences and workshops, citing non-English academic work for scholars publishing in English, strengthening the convergence and interdisciplinary dialogues between media studies and area studies scholarship, situating new theoretical frameworks within historical developments, and reflexively forging new concepts that interpret theories in the West and also the rest.

While Jin's proposal to dewesternize media and communication theory is firmly rooted in the critical dialogue and contextualization of the rest and the West, Gregory Gondwe suggested the opposite. In the piece "*Can African scholars speak? Situating African voices in International Communication scholarship*" (2022), Gondwe first examined the causes of the lack of African-oriented epistemologies by criticizing existing research for assuming and representing Africa as impoverished and merely an exemplar of "the third world". Recent theoretical developments that rest upon technological advancements have tremendously disadvantaged knowledge produced in Africa due to the region's marginalization in histories of technological development. To seek epistemological and theoretical innovation under these circumstances, Gondwe thus calls for a decontextualization of African media scholarship, as it is only through decontextualization, African scholars could impact bottom-up changes to advocate new theoretical languages to understand the African media landscape.

Finally, the two remaining articles grapple with specific student and scholar experiences in two distinct contexts - the U.S. and Africa. Khanyile Mlotshwa's "My journey with western theory in the university in Africa" (2022) moves from the observation that most of the

knowledge that underpins universities in most of Africa is western, so that, as argued by Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2013), "'we so far do not have African universities. We have universities in Africa' (p. 11). Mlotshwa followed the implications of this recognition through a double approach located on the one hand in the theoretical insights developed by decolonial theories and on the other hand by the author's personal biography as he navigates the challenges and the affordances of Western media theory to advance the decolonial framework and approach. Sulafa Zidani (2021) also focuses on the space of the university in her article on "Whose Pedagogy Is it Anyway? Decolonizing the Syllabus Through a Critical Embrace of Difference." Reflecting on how course syllabi remain centred on an orthodox body of literature that has come to be conceived of as the canon, Zidani argues for an approach that begins the work of syllabus development by first acknowledging that student bodies have become diverse in major research universities across the U.S. (if not in aggregate numbers, in disciplines like media and communication studies). Drawing on scholarship focused on participatory cultures, critical and decolonial theories relating to pedagogy, critical race theory, and perspective derived from transnational feminism, this essay pushes for a student-centric approach to syllabus design as one modest way to counter conservative canon-building.

From an editorial perspective, the Encounters special section was the first attempt to create an open forum around one single topic that could run continuously for a significant time span in *Media, Culture & Society*'s Crosscurrents section. A new open call, entitled "Rethinking keywords in media and cultural studies during and beyond COVID-19" and published in the journal's website, is now open, and interested authors are encouraged to contribute to this conversation as well by submitting articles that respond and react to the call.

On the whole, the contributions collected in this special section and reviewed here call for the field of media, communication, and cultural studies to give further space and visibility to scholarship that advances decolonial and non-Western perspectives through a reflective and

historically-grounded effort that is able to illuminate the overall as well as the specific patterns that continue to shape scholarship, teaching and learning in the field. Although this special section is now closed, Crosscurrents will continue to be open to contributions and interventions that further advance this approach. Indeed, we hope to publish scholarly interventions that disrupt "the canon by exposing the silences in canonical texts, alongside the crucial work of centering 'marginal' perspectives" (Willems, 2022).

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