

In Pursuit of Understanding: The Importance of Research Co-operation

En busca de la comprensión: la importancia de la cooperación en la investigación

Em busca da compreensão: a importância da cooperação na pesquisa

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Abstract: This paper reflects on the importance of international research cooperation in communication and journalism studies, emphasizing the role of scholarly associations and global research networks in fostering intellectual exchange across regions and traditions. Drawing on experiences with organizations such as the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), the International Communication Association (ICA), and the Latin American Association of Communication Researchers (ALAIIC), the article examines how collaborative initiatives have expanded knowledge production beyond traditional Western centers. Particular attention is given to large-scale projects such as the *Worlds of Journalism Study* and the *Journalistic Role Performance* project, which seek to generate comparative understanding of journalism cultures worldwide. The paper also addresses persistent challenges faced by researchers in the Global South, including political constraints, uneven participation in international projects, and the continued dominance of Western normative frameworks in academic evaluation. It argues that future cooperation should not only broaden participation but also promote alternative epistemologies and evaluative criteria that recognize the achievements and agency of journalists working under diverse political and cultural conditions.

Keywords:

Research cooperation; journalism studies; Global South; international associations; media freedom; comparative research

Resumen: Este trabajo reflexiona sobre la importancia de la cooperación internacional en la investigación en comunicación y periodismo, destacando el papel de las asociaciones académicas y las redes globales de investigación en la promoción del intercambio intelectual

entre regiones y tradiciones. A partir de experiencias vinculadas a organizaciones como la Asociación Internacional de Investigación en Medios y Comunicación (IAMCR), la International Communication Association (ICA) y la Asociación Latinoamericana de Investigadores de la Comunicación (ALAIC), el artículo analiza cómo las iniciativas colaborativas han ampliado la producción de conocimiento más allá de los centros tradicionales occidentales. Se presta especial atención a proyectos de alcance global como *Worlds of Journalism Study* y *Journalistic Role Performance*, orientados a generar una comprensión comparativa de las culturas periodísticas en todo el mundo. Asimismo, se examinan los desafíos persistentes que enfrentan los investigadores del Sur Global, incluyendo restricciones políticas, desigualdades en la participación internacional y la persistencia de marcos normativos occidentales en la evaluación académica. Se sostiene que la cooperación futura debe ampliar la participación y, al mismo tiempo, promover epistemologías y criterios de evaluación alternativos que reconozcan los logros y la capacidad de acción de periodistas que trabajan en contextos políticos y culturales diversos.

Palabras clave:

Cooperación científica; estudios de periodismo; Sur Global; asociaciones académicas; libertad de prensa; investigación comparada

Resumo: Este artigo reflete sobre a importância da cooperação internacional na pesquisa em comunicação e jornalismo, destacando o papel das associações acadêmicas e das redes globais de pesquisa na promoção do intercâmbio intelectual entre diferentes regiões e tradições. Com base em experiências ligadas a organizações como a International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), a International Communication Association (ICA) e a Associação Latino-Americana de Pesquisadores da Comunicação (ALAIC), o texto analisa como iniciativas colaborativas ampliaram a produção de conhecimento para além dos centros acadêmicos ocidentais tradicionais. Particular atenção é dedicada a projetos globais como o *Worlds of Journalism Study* e o *Journalistic Role Performance*, que buscam produzir uma compreensão comparativa das culturas jornalísticas em escala mundial. O artigo também discute os desafios enfrentados por pesquisadores do Sul Global, incluindo restrições políticas, participação desigual em projetos internacionais e a persistente predominância de referenciais normativos ocidentais na avaliação acadêmica. Argumenta-se que a cooperação futura deve não apenas ampliar a participação internacional, mas também incentivar epistemologias e critérios de avaliação alternativos que reconheçam

as conquistas e a agência dos jornalistas que atuam em diferentes contextos políticos e culturais.

Palavras-chave:

Cooperação científica; estudos de jornalismo; Sul Global; associações acadêmicas; liberdade de imprensa; pesquisa comparativa

1. Introduction

Co-operation between organizations, academic or otherwise, has never been more important. So much can be learned about scholarly traditions, theories, and practices beyond one's own familiar world, facilitated by organizations such as ALAIC. My contribution will focus on two aspects, research organization and research projects which pursue co-operation, and the outcomes this co-operation could or should embrace.

1.1 Co-operation between and within organizations

My area of expertise is media and journalism. When taking part in a panel organised by ALAIC for the 2022 IAMCR conference, which unfortunately could only take place online due to COVID, I used the history of IAMCR's Journalism and Research section as an example for co-operation, especially the ever more prominent role of scholars from Latin America, Africa and Asia. Since 2000, my tenure as section head (2004 – 2008) was the only time an academic from the Global North held that position. Coming from Australia, at least I could claim coming from the southern hemisphere.

Being placed at an Australian university, and what is more at a West Australian university, meant that Singapore was closer than Sydney. In the 1990s, having many students from Singapore and Hong Kong, and also running courses in Singapore, opened my eyes to a world beyond Western assumptions about media and journalism. I learned how important it was to know more about a country's political system, its media ownership, and media laws. At the same time, I joined IAMCR which always had an inclusive approach and was very open to what soon was known as the BRICS states (Nordenstreng and Thussu, 2015). At IAMCR, I became aware how few publications were dedicated to what I call, 'Countries with Limited Media Freedom'.

The move came from within the Journalism and Research section to publish such a book (Josephi, 2010). The book would not have been complete, had not all BRICS countries been included that were deemed 'not free' or 'partly free'. Brazil belonged to the latter group,

and Claudia Lago, now professor at São Paulo University, stepped up to write the chapter (Lago & Romanici, 2010) and later became chair of IAMCR's Journalism and Research section. She was succeeded by other female chairs of the section, first from Pakistan, and now the People's Republic of China.

In July 2027, Claudia Lago will demonstrate the close link between IAMCR, ALAIC, and Latin America by hosting the IAMCR conference at the University of Sao Paolo. This is a most expressive way to show commitment to the exchange of ideas.

These realizations of exchange prove that associations can achieve connectivity which then in turn fosters knowledge about regions of the world that had long remained in an academic shadow. One problem, which admittedly has not been overcome, is the dominant use of the English language and English-speaking journals with their inherent adherence to Western normative approaches and epistemological conventions. It is a problem I wish to come back to.

In the journalistic field, IAMCR is not the only association having built a connection to the Spanish and Portuguese speaking world. The International Association for Literary Journalism (IALJS) also has strong links to Latin America, in particular to Brazil. Through it, I have learned a lot about *Jornalismo literário* and its relationship to *crônicas*. A book I have co-edited about literary journalism and war and conflict in the Asia-Pacific (Josephi & Bak, forthcoming) contrasts, among other topics, Vietnam War reportages from Brazil (Martinez, forthcoming), Japan and Australia, enriching our understanding not only of varying writing styles but also the political background of each writers' approach to the conflict in Indochina.

The world's largest communication association, the International Communication Association (ICA), after years of being mainly U.S. and European focussed, is reaching out to other continents, with Silvio Waisbord (Argentina) and Ingrid Bachmann (Chile) being past president or president-elect. Associations like IAMCR, ICA or IALJS, however, could not exist were they not helped by national or regional associations, such as ALAIC, which hold major regional conferences to further their ideas about communication, and how it underpins sovereignty and peace.

2. Global research projects

Not only associations but also research projects in the last two decades have attempted world-wide reach. Claudia Mellado (Pontificia Universidad Catolica de Valparaiso) set up the Journalistic Role Performance around the globe project, following the earlier Worlds of Journalism Study, initiated by Thomas Hanitzsch (Ludwig-Maximilian-Universität, Munich).

Both projects are attempts in global inclusivity, although this proves difficult to achieve in some places. Worlds of Journalism Study's wave 1 was a pilot study, only encompassing 13 countries. In wave 2 (2012 – 2016) it was 67 countries, and in wave 3 (2021 – 2025) the number climbed to 75 countries. Latin America is very well represented, with almost every country on the South American continent and Mexico and several of the Central American nations included (Hanitzsch et al., 2025). While the Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS) undertakes surveys of journalists to assess the state of journalism world-wide (WJS, 2025), the Journalistic Role Performance (JRP) project focusses on the journalistic output to analyse “the state of journalistic cultures in the news media across the world” (JPR, 2026a). Established in 2013, JPR's first wave (2013 – 2018) examined 18 and its second wave (2019 – 2024) 37 countries. In each study, Latin America featured strongly and provided a basis for many publications (for WJS to name only a few: Hughes et al., 2016; Hughes et al., 2017; Oller, 2017; Amado & Waisbord, 2018; Arroyave, 2023; Harlow et al., 2026).

These results speak of the closeness of research understanding in Latin American and Western universities. Both projects, the Worlds of Journalism Study and the Journalistic Role Performance project, evidently had no difficulty in finding researchers who could see value in the endeavours, not only in the overall project but also as in delivering national benefit and personal benefit for the researchers. With their links to European universities, notably in Spain and Portugal, Latin America is highly attuned to Western academic research culture. This is an important aspect for co-operation between associations and a very good base for collaborations.

When turning to the outcomes of co-operations, it has to be said that the ease that exists between Latin American and Western academic researchers cannot be found all around the globe. It is not only a matter of mutual recognition. A major reason is the dependence of research and researchers on the political situation of their country and the structure of their institutions. Both, the Worlds of Journalism Study and the Journalistic Role Performance project, provide examples for this. The Journalistic Role Performance project's graphs showing the network of participating countries for each wave illustrate this clearly (JPR, 2026b). At JPR, in each wave, much of Latin America, Western Europe, the United States and Canada took part, but few nations in Asia and Africa. The same goes for the Worlds of Journalism Study, indicating that distinct factors are at play making co-operation and collaboration difficult.

3. Challenges of researching the Global South and the dominance of Western norms

Being part of the Worlds of Journalism Study advisory board since the study's inception and having been principal investigator for Bhutan in the second wave and co-principal investigator for Uzbekistan in the third wave, I will use my work for the WJS project, especially as investigator for the Central Asian country of Uzbekistan, as the basis for my argument. In 2015, Freedom House ranked Uzbekistan second last in its list of 199 countries (Freedom House, 2015). Only North Korea scored worse. In Uzbekistan, which until 1991 was a Soviet republic, its new president after independence continued the same authoritarian rule as had existed in Soviet times (Adams, 2010). Strictly government-controlled state media was the only media available apart from Russian media which, with Russian as lingua franca throughout Central Asia, continues to be a dominant source of information. After the death in office of the first president in 2016, his successor opened up the economy and also media to some degree, such as allowing foreign media into the country and establishing a university for journalism and mass communication. The increasing availability of news on social media, new online publications, and blogs on platforms such as Telegram offered further avenues information (Joseph et al., forthcoming). All the same, Uzbekistan is still classified as a closed autocracy (V-Dem, 2026, p. 44), and state media still takes up two-thirds of Uzbekistan's media market. Many journalists have never worked under any other conditions than those of a strictly controlled environment. Unlike journalists in Russia, they never went through a period of *glasnost* which would have prompted or allowed a critical attitude towards the government. We found it difficult to survey Uzbek journalists in state media when many of them were not accustomed to speaking freely. They perceived the WJS survey as yet another potential instrument of surveillance and many gave answers in a non-committal way. Despite this, with the help of a nascent private online media, Uzbekistan is no longer listed among Freedom House's 'worst of the worst' (Freedom House, 2026, p. 7).

This is one example of the challenges researchers encounter in their work. Other examples are countries, where it is the state who wants to control the narrative and who puts hurdles into the path of publication. The V-Dem Institute's *Democracy Report* for 2026 reminds us that in 2025 three-quarters of the world's population live in autocracies and only seven percent in liberal democracies (V-Dem, 2026, p. 5). In its graph on the state of liberal democracies in 2025 (p. 7), South America, except for Venezuela and several other countries deemed to be in the democratic grey zone, still provides a more favourable picture than Central America and, for that matter, a much better picture than East Asia, the Gulf region, South-east Asia and most of Africa. All these countries are part of the Global South.

Comparing V-Dem Institute's map on the state of liberal democracies with the map of countries the Worlds of Journalism Study and the Journalistic Role Performance project cover, confirms and underlines the fact that the political profile of a country is a dominant factor in its ability to join the global research community. This has led to the Global South being for a long time underrepresented for a long time in scholarly research. Now, thanks to the endeavours of academics who come from countries in the Global South but work at universities in the Global North, the knowledge gap of, for example, African countries and the MENA region is slowly closing.

But one troubling trend can be observed. While there are many calls for the Global South to speak up, the entrenched scholarly traditions, at least for journalism, have been firmly set by the Global North. Journalism's normative ideals (Christians et al., 2009), such as being the Fourth Estate and a pillar of democracy, can only be realised in liberal democracies. What is more, the ideal of journalistic autonomy is challenged by journalism's eroding funding model and inroads are made on journalistic authority by bloggers, influencers, and many voices on social media. Yet this has done little to change journalism's normative ideals or weakened the influence of key indices, such as adopted by Freedom House (Freedom House, 2026) or Reporters Without Borders (RSF, 2026). The V-Dem report or The Economist Intelligence Unit's *Democracy Index* (Economist, 2026) are similarly measured against the expectations of liberal democracies.

I am fully aware that I, too, use Freedom House's or V-Dem's criteria as yardsticks – simply because there are no others. The Global South has as yet not offered different benchmarks. This has consequences. For one, it condemns the work of many journalists in the Global South to be measured against something that is simply unattainable for them, given the conditions under which they work. It also hinders scholars, whether from the Global North or the Global South, from showing what journalists in authoritarian countries *are doing*, rather than pointing out what they are *not doing* compared to the Western normative ideals of journalism. The obstacle here is not necessarily the scholars themselves but the review process in high-ranking journals. These journals and their reviewers tend to be in the Global North, with many reviewers entrenched in norms which have hardly changed in the seventy years since Siebert, Peterson and Schramm published *The Four Theories of the Press* (1956). The old binary of liberal and authoritarian has not fully faded away.

When writing an article about Uzbek journalists, our attempts of showing appreciation of the progress that has been made since being ranked the second worst country in the world for media freedom (Freedom House, 2015) were somewhat stifled when being told to embed

the entire article in the framework of media freedom. While it made sense to continue with the criteria initially introduced, it also pushed the article into focussing on the existing deficits in media freedom rather than highlighting how Uzbek journalists navigate constraints and make strategic decisions as a sign of their expanding agency and resilience. As yet, journalism scholarship's unbroken bind to Western normative ideals, further reinforced by accepted sets of evaluation criteria, entrenches a view that will colour much of the academic writing about countries of the Global South, Latin America included. Hopefully, co-operation and collaboration between the various regions of the world can recommend ways of assessment that emphasize journalistic achievements as much as they point to shortcomings.

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