

Debate

Internationalizing German Communication Studies: Learning From the World. A Conversation Between Carola Richter, Anna Litvinenko, Subekti Priyadharma and Hanan Badr¹

Abstract: The following debate was set up as a roundtable during the conference “Internationalizing German Communication Studies: Learning from the World” in Erfurt, Germany, in March 2024. It features three scholars originally from Russia, Indonesia and Egypt, who have been socialized both in their native and the German communication studies community and thus can refer to both “worlds” in terms of a critical analysis, but also regarding academic best practices for a deep internationalization in communication studies. The debate aims to share their (subjective) experiences and to gather ideas of what could be improved and what should be continued regarding a cosmopolitization of study programs, university structures, and research foci in German communication studies institutes.

Keywords: communication studies programs, epistemology, knowledge production, Russia, Indonesia, Egypt, Global South, academic cooperation, academic freedom

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Subekti Priyadharma is a lecturer at the University of Padjadjaran (Unpad) in Indonesia since 2009. He got his BA from the same university, but then he came to Erfurt, Germany, for his master's degree and later on also for his PhD. After spending one year as a DAAD-guest lecturer in Erfurt, he has now returned to Unpad. His research interests include ICT4D, communication for social change, rural digitalization and community networks as well as counterpublic sphere.

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Carola Richter:

Anna Litvinenko, when you think of German Communication Studies, especially against the background of your experiences in Russia, what do you think is missing or could be improved regarding cosmopolitization or internationalization? And what do you think is already well-established in Germany?

Anna Litvinenko:

Let me first explain the recent situation in Russian academia before I make three points of what surprised me about German academia or what I found different compared to my socialization at St. Petersburg State University. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russian academia became practically isolated from Western scholarship. It is a quite unique case, but it vividly shows how geopolitics influence internationalization. For instance, all the resources and efforts that Russia invested for many years in engaging with the West or in motivating researchers to attend Western conferences are now redirected to partnerships with the Global South. This strongly resembles patterns from the Cold War era, where we also had these competing streams of internationalization. Currently, Russian academia invests in expanding its networks in China, India, Pakistan, and also in South American and African countries. This redirection was forced both from inside Russia due to the geopolitical situation but also from outside. Due to their affiliations with Russian institutions, Russian scholars were mostly cut off from their Western networks. For example, ECREA – the European Communication Research and Education Association – prohibited them from participating in their previous annual conference. Are such boycotts of scholars that have been part of the international scientific dialogue for years an effective way to address the political problems? For this, I have often heard references to the boycotting of South Africa during apartheid, where sanctions eventually worked. In case of Russia, we see that it does not seem to be working, as they have just reoriented themselves towards other world regions. We see how the bridges that were built over the past decades have been burned very quickly, from both sides. I wish academia could create safe spaces to still communicate with Russian scholars who share universal scientific values, to continue a dialogue even under these conditions. In general, it is a big question for us how deep internationalization can and should actually look like today in the light of the current major conflicts in the world.

But now to your question: I have been living in Germany for nine years now. When coming to German academia from outside, I noticed some aspects that seemed unusual.

First of all, for me it was unusual to notice these quite distinct disciplinary borders between communication and media studies. For me, it is something particularly German that communication studies are very much linked to social sciences while media studies are linked to cultural studies, and there is an invisible wall between them. The representatives of these two different disciplinary strands just don't talk to each other and often they don't even know what the others are doing. I think this

hampers international cooperation because it influences which partners you seek out or accept as relevant. For instance, when I was working in St. Petersburg, we had a very strong linguistic department with its own impressive international network. It helped us delve deeper into language and text analysis and understand the context of text production. In Germany, this is not valued as much, and a rather political border is erected towards another discipline. So, the networks of possible international partners also differ compared to Russia.

The second aspect relates to the diversity of theoretical approaches, in the sense that there are different ones at work. In Germany, public sphere theory, particularly Habermas, is according to my observation, the most influential theoretical approach. Interestingly, in all former Soviet countries, there is very strong focus on the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, while in Germany, it is not as prominent, despite being of German origin. Additionally, in Russia, the curriculum commonly includes a range of comparative approaches. For instance, when we learned about rhetoric, we did not only focus on the Greeks, as one might in Germany. Instead, the curriculum included comparisons and approaches from Arab countries or China. I think it is mind-opening to understand how an argument is built in different cultures and how the aim of an argument can be different. I consider this a part of cosmopolitanism. I think opening up curricula to more comparative perspectives between cultures and different approaches would be beneficial for German communication studies.

The last point I would like to mention is diversity in academia. And here I would actually criticize Russian academia despite the diversity from within the region of the former Soviet Union. In my department in St. Petersburg, we all had different backgrounds from within the region, but there was rarely anyone from outside the countries of the former Soviet Union. In Germany, I see greater diversity at the “Mittelbau” level, i.e., among PhD and postdoctoral researchers, with scholars from different parts of the world. They call it a bottleneck effect here: there is a significant diversity at the PhD and postdoctoral level, but not at the professor level.

Carola Richter:

Thank you for your first insights. Regarding the somewhat old-fashioned or dominant approaches that you noticed in German communication studies and also a lack of interdisciplinary thinking, is there something that we could learn from the Russian experience?

Anna Litvinenko:

In Germany, communication studies are rather pre-structured and predictable. You usually know that a particular institute or professor will use a specific theoretical framework. This approach helps to build on an established scientific school, but it might also lack openness. In Russia, it is maybe more chaotic; you might use one theory today and another theory for a different study. This may seem more chaotic, but it also fosters a sense of openness. For instance, when we had a conference in

Russia with scholars from other countries, Russian scholars would think: How can we cooperate with them? How can we learn from this? How can we also use these other theories? In Germany, on the other hand, it is really hard to detach from a certain strand of established research and start something new or explore a different direction. Blurring disciplinary boundaries might help here, for example, by talking more to scholars from media studies.

Carola Richter:

Let us move on to Subekti Priyadharma. Again, the question is: When you think of German communication studies and against the background of your experiences in Indonesia, what do you think is missing here or could be improved regarding internationalization and what do you think is already well established?

Subekti Priyadharma:

I have been going back and forth between the German city of Erfurt and Bandung, my hometown in Indonesia, many times. It started in 2005 when I came to Erfurt for my master, then I went back again to Bandung starting as a lecturer at Padjadjaran University, and then came back again to Germany to do my PhD in 2013. When I talked to my colleagues in Indonesia about Erfurt, the spontaneous reaction was always “Oh Erfurt? Critical theory? What about Horkheimer?” And I was like, “No, you mean Frankfurt. I am talking about Erfurt.” Like Anna said, in Indonesia the critical theory of the Frankfurt School is well-known and also some theories like Habermas’ public sphere theory. But this is all! German universities are not well known in Indonesia. So, in terms of internationalization German communication studies needs to be more proactive, reaching out to prospective international students and other scholars from outside to come to Germany and to engage in cooperations. To change this, we established a concrete cooperation between the universities of Erfurt and Padjadjaran in 2015. This three-year integrated partnership encompassed teaching, research, staff meetings, talks, workshops, and publications. It involved many people from diverse backgrounds. Students from Erfurt went to Indonesia, and in the second year, Indonesian students came to Erfurt. We also met people from NGOs, activists, and also parliament members. We involved undergraduate, postgraduate and even doctoral students. So Indonesian students and scholars started out without knowing what Erfurt is. And it has since become a well-known university. I believe such concrete bi- or even multilateral cooperations between universities are important for internationalization.

One major problem for internationalization is the lack of English-speaking courses, modules and even entire study programs taught in English in Germany. I am not saying that German should be neglected, but to attract international scholars and students, it is important to offer more courses and study programs taught entirely in English. Several undergraduate programs at our university in Indonesia now offer international degrees taught completely in English. These programs are separated from the regular ones which use Bahasa Indonesia as the instructional language. These international undergraduate programs cooperate with at least one foreign

university, requiring students from both universities to spend up to two semesters abroad.

Another important difference between Indonesia and Germany is how communication studies is operationalized into study programs. In Indonesia, we are more practice oriented. In Germany, you have more of a general vision of studying communication and media, more like science. But we have a more practical approach, for example with foci on broadcasting, journalism, PR and communication management as study options in undergraduate, but also in postgraduate and even in doctoral programs. Our programs resemble the more structured programs in the US system where students have to take courses before they write their papers. In Germany, you have more freedom, more space for research. In terms of cooperation, I think the German communication and media programs should be more creative and diverse in offering courses tailored to the needs of international students who want to study a semester abroad. A glimpse into the practical world of journalism or the media industry would be valuable, allowing students to compare theoretical knowledge with its practical application.

What I would like to emphasize beyond these structural aspects regarding internationalization relates to Germans' homogenizing worldviews embodied in terminology. I strongly oppose the use of these generic denominations, for example, Southeast Asia or Europe or Global North and Global South. Indonesia does not represent Southeast Asia. We don't need to refer to the Arab world, if we want to talk about Jordan. Or Africa, if we mean only Egypt. Asia comprises so many countries with different political dynamics and different media systems as well. In Southeast Asia alone, we have an absolute monarchy in Brunei, two constitutional monarchies in Thailand and Malaysia, socialist republics in Vietnam and Laos, and military dominated-governments in Myanmar and Cambodia. We have with Singapore an economically well-developed and advanced country but with restricted media freedom, and on the contrary, a poor country with a relatively free media in Timor-Leste, and also very vibrant political dynamics in Indonesia and the Philippines, not to mention the ethnic and religious diversity. So, if you mention Asia make sure that you know what you are talking about. And covering everything as Global South might prevent us from seeing the diversity. I mean when we talk about the Global South, for example, we don't mean Australia and New Zealand! Or Singapore? Or China, or Brazil, do they belong to the Global South or the Global North? I think fewer generic denominations would help to understand differences and diversity better and would thus help if you want to reach out to the world.

Carola Richter:

I find this aspect very interesting when you said that we need to be less generic when we refer to internationalization. When we want to internationalize, we need to know more about the specific context of a certain society or media system. Do you think from the viewpoint of Indonesia, when they look at Europe or, to remain generic, when they look at the West, is there a way that we could learn on how to

differentiate? How do Indonesian scholars look at Europe and the West? Is it done in a very generic way, too, or do they explicitly distinguish between different media landscapes or certain features?

Subekti Priyadharma:

Unfortunately, we also tend to reproduce this generic distinction between East and West and North and South. And I think we need to deconstruct these terminologies more often. This also relates to the application of theories and epistemologies more generally. So, when we use Western theories such as public sphere or any other Western theory in the Indonesian context, it is really difficult because the social and political context is different. I think we need to have more courage in developing our own theories that are more applicable to our own context to avoid “one of society’s classic mistakes” as Gupta and Heath (2020) put it, i.e., reproducing universal values that are biased towards Western standards. In this sense, doing research with local collaborators is important because they can give you a different perspective in looking at a phenomenon which will make social theories context-sensible.

Carola Richter:

Let’s move on then to our third speaker for this roundtable, Hanan Badr. And again, the question to you is when you think of German communication studies and against your background and experience in Egypt, what do you think is missing or could be improved or what is also well established?

Hanan Badr:

Like Anna Litvinenko, upon my arrival to Germany for my PhD in 2007, I was surprised by the division between humanities-oriented and social sciences-oriented approaches within German-language communication studies. It took me several years to understand that it rigidly exists and why and how this division had evolved historically within the community, unlike other international communities like the British media and communication studies for example. I actually needed to find my academic “tribe” with whom I could speak a common language in terms of epistemic approach, theories and methods. For me I found it in the international and intercultural communication studies, spearheaded by the universities in Erfurt, Berlin and Dortmund.

As a discipline, the communication studies community is relatively international, widely recognized in terms of publications and presence in international associations outside German-speaking countries. But I realized that there is a hierarchy of epistemologies. For the German communication scholars, the US counts most and is highly looked upon. The Anglo-American model is THE model to follow, and then maybe they look at Scandinavian countries. But other alternative ways of knowledge and knowledge production do not have the same weight or influence within mainstream communication studies in German-speaking countries.

German communication studies are structurally not as open or permeable to outsiders or migrants, due to language barriers and intellectual socialization. This contrasts with academia in the UK or the US where migrant scholars have a chance to stay and even get tenure. There are invisible boundaries that one can feel as an outsider, particularly as a person of color or with a migration background.

So, after all those years, I became a little disillusioned with academia and with what we can do as people working from within the academic institutions. I hope others are still hopeful, but there are limits to what we – as individuals – can do and achieve within larger higher education frameworks. My disillusionment comes from the double positionality, having one leg in Egypt and the Arab world, one leg in Germany and Europe. This is important to mention because when comparing academic communities, it is not about finding one better or worse. They all have their limitations, and we have to work within the various manifestations differently.

When I entered the German academic system coming from Cairo University for the first time, the limited hierarchy within the academic institution and the relative academic freedom positively surprised me. I could choose my own topics of research without having a monthly seminar in which senior professors would dictate topics over my head. For a young PhD student, this was an eye-opening and a liberating moment. But after so many years I have discovered that academic freedoms have their limits everywhere in the world. The red lines are different in each society. Personally, I think that the real test for freedom is if you cannot say what you want to say! Or in other words, what would be the consequences of free academic research? Would it result in a career suicide? Amid the current polarized political climate, we witness academics and students in Germany penalized for practicing their right of free speech and academic freedom on certain issues as we see in pro-Palestinian solidarity movements, even by Jewish scholars like Nancy Fraser. Currently, it is a very bitter moment of *déjà vu* because it reminds me of why I left Egypt: I could not publish research on topics that mattered to me while keeping my academic integrity.

Another dimension is the structural level, German universities have a rather half-hearted commitment and mixed approach to internationalization. It is considered good when we want to attract foreign students because they give universities the legitimacy to exist and they help the institutions allocate money from the ministries. But then, when it comes to the “deep internationalization”, when it starts to challenge the foundations of the system, then you would see the limits. In this context, the commercialization and neoliberalization of academia is a serious issue, even beyond the German academic system. In Germany, the neoliberal and competitive structures often contribute to a mainstreaming or narrowing of the research agenda to connect to the employment market or when a niche topic becomes too expensive. The neoliberal framework results in narrowing spaces and silencing or marginalizing counterhegemonic voices, because policymakers do not want to fund those topics, maybe because the topic is not considered relevant to solve acute policy problems, for example. While it seems legitimate for policymakers to follow their

national agendas and justify spending taxpayers' money, we need to be cautious not to reproduce the very issues we critique as communication scholars. I mean sensationalism, conflict orientation or other news values that cater to the market: as scholars we should not cater to the same commercial agenda. However, we often do and make our research fit to certain dominating paradigms. In my fields of expertise, for example Arab media and migration, there is a dominance of the securitization paradigm. When is the Arab region for German communication studies relevant? During the Arab Spring, or when it comes to explaining terrorism or preventing migration! So, the region becomes relevant when perceived as a threat, and to produce knowledge that serves the policymakers and the securitization paradigm. So, if you want to survive in such a system, you would need either to cater to it or go and live with little funding and do your individual alternative research agenda and that's it. This connects to the question: how does it feel to work from the margins of a field for your entire career? You are the counterhegemonic voice, and you know that, and you would never be part of the mainstream club. The question is how to find the balance? That's been an ongoing question for someone with my background.

Another unresolved dimension is knowledge production, for example the question of importing theories that emerged and were developed elsewhere and that now are used to explain phenomena that have different histories, different political realities, different ontologies, like Subekti mentioned before. I think we need to apply a reformist approach that tests and pushes the boundaries. For example, we prepare now for an ICA pre-conference on the state and future of Arab communication studies. This means working with an epistemological approach that tries to theorize from within the region. Another example is a book that I co-edited with Sarah Ganter on "Media Governance: A cosmopolitan critique" that critically assesses how the concept 'media governance' is understood and applied in non-Western concepts. In a chapter written by Judith Pies about media accountability in the Arab world, she asks how a concept developed in liberal democracies, based on self-regulation and responsibility, can be applied in authoritarian contexts where self-regulation is limited. So, a reformist approach should problematize and ask challenging questions also in order to cause epistemic discomfort. This is what internationalization is about! Incorporating epistemic views that are different from a Western-centric normative yardstick, as Last Moyo puts it in his book "Decolonizing Media Studies". And this is how knowledge production advances. Otherwise, we would be reproducing the same for the next hundred years.

One last point that puzzles me regarding the permeability of structures in German universities. I come from Cairo University where we have an automated tenure upon graduation. It's heaven! You enter the institution when you are 20 years old, provided you have top grades, and you know you are going to retire in the same place. You just need to accumulate publications and degrees, and every five years you grow in rank. Thus, the uncertainty of the German system was very new to me. In particular for women and with family duties it is not easy to master such a system. This is structurally very different from a country like Egypt or even in Iran, where around

70% of the academic faculty are female. In addition to the uncertainty, the German system also causes a system imbalance in representation. We know that at the level of tenured professors, it is not as diverse as at the base of the demographic pyramid in the German society. Here, I agree with Anna that at the top of the academic pyramid in German communication studies, we know that the chairs hold their positions for 20 or 30 years. The ones who set the agenda are not the younger PhD students who are hired for a limited amount of years and leave. So, it depends on the professors' goodwill, their academic cosmopolitan openness as gatekeepers to contribute to an internationalization of the German communication studies.

Carola Richter:

You raised many points that are very important but let me ask you again about this last point. You mentioned the neoliberal competitive approach when it comes to career development in Germany in contrast to Egypt, where you could remain at the same university until retirement. The argument in Germany is always that this competitive pressure enhances the quality of research, because it motivates researchers to put in more effort to publish and conduct more research. What do you think about these arguments?

Hanan Badr:

It is a very tough question. I understand both sides of the argumentation: competition for quality research but also stability to enhance productivity and creativity. To be fair, there is criticism of the Egyptian setting of automated tenure in public universities as it gives individuals job security, but sometimes when it gets too safe, people also become stagnant or cease making efforts. I think a balance between both approaches would be good. There should be a mix between a carte blanche 30-year-long contract without accountability and short-term one-year contracts for early career scholars.

Anna Litvinenko:

Indeed, what astonishes me is that in Germany, if you are not a full professor but still want to work under a university contract, you are always considered to be in some "qualification phase". That is quite confusing: Why do you need, if you have a PhD, to be qualified to something more? And to what exactly?

Carola Richter:

In my view, the relation of these precarious positions and a lack of internationalization can also be connected to Hanan's argument about marginalizing voices. In precarious positions, probably you don't dare to go for topics and issues and perspectives that are not fitting well into the mainstream. So, you probably avoid topics that are critical, need context and some kind of power to be pushed through.

Hanan Badr:

Absolutely! But even in a position of power there are vulnerabilities: you have more to lose. I think it is also a myth that only people in precarious positions cannot speak

and people with unlimited contracts can. Intersectionality helps to break that across categories of race, ethnic origin, gender, class etc. It seems that unlimited contracts are not that unlimited after all. We have witnessed termination of contracts in several German-speaking countries in the past months. It makes me question what academic freedom is about and what structural and cultural aspects are needed to protect them.

Carola Richter:

The three of you are somehow role models for academic mobility between geographical and epistemic spheres that are not very often linked and you may build bridges between research cultures and therewith establish a kind of a cosmopolitan nucleus. At the same time, and referring to the power imbalances in the global academic system, you could also symbolize a brain drain of your communities. What are your thoughts on these ambivalent readings of international mobility?

Anna Litvinenko:

In a normal situation when you can go back and forth between home and host country freely, you can definitely give back to your home community. I was regularly invited to give talks back in St. Petersburg, and I was really engaged in that. Right now, the current situation has created a unique situation of burned bridges, as I described previously. Scholars who leave Russia now lack proper ways to stay connected to Russian society, becoming part of a growing community of academia in exile. I observe that this community, however, is developing a new understanding of their mission, part of which includes advancing independent research on Russia and exploring possible solutions for the future democratization of Russian society.

Hanan Badr:

Indeed, there are systematic push factors in some countries of origin that create a loss of academics in certain regions, especially in the Global South. This is what some autocratic Arab regimes actually want. They want to drive the well-educated urban middle class away because if they stay, they are going to make the regimes' life uncomfortable as they constitute a critical mass for change. Some of the brain drain is maybe wanted by the system even though – or maybe because – it erodes and kills future potentials and talents inside the Global South. Where to strike the balance? Should those scholars bang their heads against the wall in a system that will make them sterile and stagnant or should they go and try to have a decent academic life where they can thrive and make a difference? It is a very difficult and ambivalent topic and I totally see the point of both sides. My position is to allow the personal free choice: let each one decide, as each decision has its price.

Anna Litvinenko:

On the other hand, when you are going abroad and go for internationalization, you tend to publish only in English. I have not written in Russian for years. Even when I was invited to give a talk in Russian, I would think, “Oh, how do all these terms translate into Russian?” I think many scholars who publish in English face this

challenge. To a certain extent, that means that we are actually sitting in a kind of a tower - not giving back to the societies where we are coming from and not really contributing to the development of scientific discourse in our languages. People who do not read English cannot really know what we are publishing or read a book about our research. That concerns German academia as well. So that is the other side of internationalization, which poses the question, how do we actually successfully give back to the society?

Subekti Priyadharma:

I can only second Anna. On one side, publishing in English is important so you can reach an international audience, enhance the visibility of Indonesia globally, and hopefully your voice can challenge the imbalances of knowledge production between Western scholars and the rest. But on the other side, what you produce must be known and understood also by the Indonesian audience whose mother tongue is not English. I have a good experience publishing with the DAAD Indonesia Magazine, NADI, which publishes bilingually, German and Indonesian language side-by-side (Priyadharma, 2021). I think it would be a nice idea to publish a scientific communication journal in two or more languages, including English and the respective local language tailored to the article's audience.

Hanan Badr:

There is one question that has been haunting me since living in exile or outside my "fish pond". Can I still, after so many years out of Egypt, be working about phenomena in the region or not? Do I still have legitimacy and credibility of voice? Of course, the distance gives you privilege of seeing things more clearly from afar. Some colleagues, when entrenched in the daily realities, cannot see patterns as clearly due to the proximity. But it is still a question about positionality that I communicate transparently whenever I publish, because it is not the same vantage point as from within.

Carola Richter:

Are there some final points you would like to make? For example, what could we learn from your communities and how do you think a fruitful exchange of ideas could look like?

Subekti Priyadharma:

Here in Erfurt and during my guest lectureship, I teach a course on development communication. And almost all of my students are German students who are not familiar with development studies. Development-related subjects don't really connect to the German audience, let alone the German students because they are stereotypically related only to poor nations. Only a few German universities have study programs related to development issues. This also shows how non-international German communication studies currently are. And, of course, the students cannot give examples about Indonesia. But then I tell them: Look, can you reflect on your own cities where you come from, Erfurt or Berlin or so? Do you have different communities in your own cities? Maybe there are communities that you know less, so

what kind of differences can you observe? This creates a kind of a conceptual meeting point between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Therewith you can find perhaps connections to other places in the world that are so far neglected in your own worldviews. Then we can learn from Sudan or from Indonesia, countries that are generally considered peripheral or meaningless to most Western societies. This meeting point concept can turn meaningless objects into meaningful subjects because the concepts can then be applied in many contexts.

Hanan Badr:

Adding to that, I think we often overlook how the Arab region or the Global South could learn more from each other. As Egyptians we could learn more from the Sudanese for example, we could learn more from other marginalized Arab academics in other places. So, the South-South dialogue should definitely be promoted more. And we should not look exclusively at European actors and Western donors all the time.

I definitely believe in the value of international exchange. And I think mobility programs are good, such as the Erasmus exchange program. It shows how people can learn from each other, it creates bonds, it creates mutual experiences and collective memories. But it also needs a more honest critical evaluation of power relations. I notice sometimes when Arab scholars or students come to Germany or other Western countries, they say, “Oh, we’re gonna learn, we’re gonna learn!” I remind them: “But you can also teach!”. And this internalized orientalism is a problem, the feeling of being inferior to Western knowledge. It is cognitive, it is psychological, it is trained, it is socialized. I think this is a postcolonial baggage that is still around and needs to be unlearned.

Subekti Priyadharma:

My last advice comes from football. I like playing football, but I am more of a conservative player in the defence and waiting for the ball to come. I think, as international players, we can also wait for the German scholars or students to come. So, I would advise German communication studies to do more self-promotion. I think that is one of the strategies to get the word out about yourself and to show also that you are ready to play with others.

Suggested readings

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