Global Media Journal
Journal for International and Transcultural Communication
German Edition

BerlinUP Journals

Book Review

# Changing Geopolitics of Global Communication

**Daya Kishan Thussu (2024). *Changing Geopolitics of Global Communication*. Routledge.**

274 pages.
ISBN: 978-113-828-079-3 (Hardback),
ISBN: 978-113-828-080-9 (Paperback),
ISBN: 978-131-527-169-9 (eBook)

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**To cite this article:** Hafez, Kai (2024). Book review of Daya Kishan Thussu (2024): Changing Geopolitics of Global Communication. *Global Media Journal – German Edition*, *14*(2), DOI: https://doi.org/10.60678/gmj-de.v14i2.322

The combination of "geopolitics" and "global communication" in the title of this book is promising. The author, Daya Kishan Thussu, is not the first to write on the topic. Others, such as Karl W. Deutsch or Howard Frederick, have approached it from a theoretical angle, while more recently, Herman Wasserman has emphasized the Global South. However, given the rapidly changing power dynamics in the world and Thussu's stature as an eminent scholar and president of IAMCR, the second largest organization for communication researchers, this book deserves ample attention as it has potential to shape the debate on international political communication.

The book delivers a stout critique of Western neo-colonial global policies and media imperialism as tools of Western dominance. Especially the digital space, Thussu argues, has been "colonized and commodified" (p. 19) by Western conglomerates. As in his previous books on "de-Westernization" and "Chindia", the book describes how mainly China and Russia, along with India to a lesser extent, have created their own communication infrastructures and media to counterbalance Western influence, particularly within the BRICS framework. As much as the author must be applauded for the clear language he uses to describe Western hypocrisy in strategic communication—rooted in a long history spanning from fascist geopolitics to the US-led "war on terror" and the use of flawed cultural binaries such as "East" and "West"—his own political analysis lacks nuance. While Thussu's critique of Western double standards is fair and legitimate and for anybody out to see in the current Gaza war, he also tends to trivialize China's and Russia's domestic and geopolitical transgressions, and the current authoritarian backsliding of India under Narendra Modi is not even mentioned.

Thussu dismisses China's authoritarian measures in Hong Kong as a mere "Western discourse" (p. 3), describing the crushing of Hong Kong student protests in 2019 as "regular confrontations" rather than state-controlled "police atrocities" (p. 2). Similarly, Russia's imperial war against Ukraine, while considered by the author to be illegal, is deemed to be provoked by "Russophobia" in the West and Ukraine's own domestic failures (pp. 14–15). While the Western academic discourse is blamed for its assessment of Russia's news channel RT as a home to conspiracy theories, Thussu considers RT to be a "robust—though unsubtle—counter-narrative on global affairs" (p. 21). However, such treatment overlooks the fact that RT has for a decade openly and with consistent disinformation promoted right-wing extremist parties in the European Union that seek to dismantle European multicultural societies and – as in the case of Germany's AfD Party—openly advocate 'remigration'—the forced return not only of illegal migrants but also of naturalized citizens of foreign descent.

Concepts like 'human rights' or 'democracy' are widely absent from Thussu's work or, at best, they are implicitly dismissed as Western propaganda and as mere liberal ideological tools to prevent the rise of new global powers in Asia. The central issue with the present work is not that it is completely incorrect, but that its analysis represents a selective form of postcolonialism that tends to compare failures of the

Global North with achievements of the Global South. The net result is a rather confusing view of geopolitics that applies erroneous categories rather than debating functional equivalences. In contrast, scholars like Herman Wasserman seek to lay bare the "paradoxes" that also exist in elitist policies of emerging BRICS countries. Unfortunately, yesterday's Eurocentric geopolitics of the West is increasingly mirrored in today's ethnocentric policies of rising states in the Global South.

The most compelling part of the book is its historic account of many aspects of the global communication order, ranging from the colonial telegraph and propaganda during World War II to the renaissance of state-funded foreign broadcasting (VOA, RFE/RL etc.) after 9/11. Thussu analyses a gradual shift from a state-centric model to market-driven digital industries, highlighting how large U.S. conglomerates have heavily invested in undersea cable networks and other digital infrastructure. The author occasionally conflates the infrastructural power of the West with its cultural power, for instance, when he criticizes the role of the Internet regulation body ICANN (pp. 56-57). He overlooks the fact that the body enabled multilingual web domains and thus spurred the spread of non-Latin languages like Chinese, Arabic or Hindu online. Furthermore, market-driven Western digitalization has also never prevented the upsurge of media giants or large cultural industries in Asia. Western concepts of digital globalization have, in fact, enabled regional and counter-hegemonic effects. Sweeping concepts like "the imperial West" are therefore empty analytical containers that need more precise theoretical definitions.

The same is true for Thussu's assessment of Western education. He includes virtually all leading Western think tanks and universities into his concept of Western educational "soft power," which he argues still dominate the world. While it is certainly very true that Western education has its biases—one could even speak of structural educational racism as is frequently debated under the heading of 'Orientalism'—Western academic institutions clearly also provide the type of critical thinking and knowledge that Thussu himself consistently refers to and relies on. Notably, all his sources and references are in English and overwhelmingly published in the West. In contrast, the blossoming field of Chinese, Indian, and other non-Western think tanks is only briefly mentioned in the book and hardly debated in depth. The fact that China, India, and Russia have been extensively shopping on Western educational markets by sending large numbers of students to the West, is largely ignored. Moreover, we learn little to nothing about the large soft power industries in these countries that are currently set up to counter Western cultural influences. While Thussu occasionally criticizes that the effects of Chinese global communication will be limited until the Xi Jinping government permits greater diversity of debates, he certainly underrates the internal complexity and external attraction of Western academia when conflating it too closely with Western geopolitics.

The same analytical bias is also visible in other parts of the book. The author explains the impact of social media on political resurrections like the Arab Spring. While it is reasonable to agree that the effect of "hashtag-politics" has been largely overrated

by many observers, including within Western academia (since weak tie-politics is inherently not sustainable and traditional opposition structures are still needed), Thussu's suggestion that the West orchestrated movements like those in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and in the Arab Spring (2010/11) is a complete misinterpretation of the strength of indigenous popular movements. Having witnessed the grassroots energy firsthand on Tahrir Square, I can attest to this. If analysts may often exaggerate the impact of electronic media on politics, it is Thussu who tends to overestimate the effects of Western politics on such media and on political movements.

In the chapter on war communication, the author recaps the familiar narrative of Western propaganda during the Iraq wars and similar conflicts. If anything, the events leading to the Iraq war in 2003 demonstrated that Western democracies bear authoritarian traits in their international policies. However, the subsequent debate in Western academia evidenced its potential for self-reflexivity. A significant omission in this book, however, is the discussion about likely nationalist media excesses in China and India, particularly on sensitive issues such as Taiwan or Kashmir. While the author suggests that the Ukrainian war narrative—in particular the image of President Zelensky—is a product of Western propaganda, we hear almost nothing about Russia's digital disinformation industries. Instead, the author critiques what he describes as the "demonization of [Russian and other] hacking operations" (p. 140) in Western media and academic discourse. Here, as in other parts of the book, a more balanced assessment acknowledging propagandist tendencies of *all* modern states—be they Western/Northern or Eastern/Southern, authoritarian or democratic—would have made the argument stronger.

In summary, this book, based on industrious reading, offers much valuable information and insights on issues related to geopolitics and global communication. However, it also requires a very careful and critical reading due to its consistent anti-Western bias. Thussu's final "contours of a new global information order" (pp. 167 ff.) are a conceptual non-starter. While Thussu's plea for the de-colonization of Western knowledge is both valid and legitimate, it is accompanied by a rather uncritical admiration for the ascendancy of BRICS. It is high time to evaluate the existing expectations on the increased role and influence of global communication *in* and *by* the Global South using theoretical concepts of 'interdependence' or more practical policy recommendations like the famous MacBride-report (UNESCO). In this new era of multipolarity, it is the plight of international communication scholars to go beyond 'de-Westernization'. To avoid the escalation of new Cold Wars, the world is in need for new cosmopolitan and truly global approaches to revive the older ideal of a 'free and balanced flow of information'.