

Special Section: Essays on Nationalism, Conflict and Media

How to Communicate Cosmopolitanism? Reclaiming Global Change and Diversity in Times of Right-Wing Backlashes

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of political backlashes, the essay poses the question of why progressive global visions of cosmopolitan realities have not wielded discursive power and even seem to have lost their cultural appeal. The discussion conceptualizes cosmopolitanism from a communication analysis and scrutinizes the fragility of cosmopolitan communication in everyday life experiences and the mediating discourses of mass media. The arguments reflect several communicative challenges of connecting existing cosmopolitan symbolic resources at a grassroots level based primarily on theoretical considerations. Additional preliminary empirical insights derived from a qualitative interview study aiming to understand the communication patterns of lived cosmopolitan experiences will further inform the discussion about challenges of translating these experiences to wider publics. The essay will end with implications for the responsibility of the mass media to help ensure that cosmopolitan realities are taken for granted.

Keywords: cosmopolitanism, global change, lifeworld communication, discourse and dialogue

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The euphoric visions of globalization and increasing cosmopolitanism, which have emerged from the hyperglobalist sentiment in the pre- and early post-millennial scholarship, appear to have been ultimately disproved. Opportunities for physical and technical connectivity worldwide remain unprecedented. A globally integrated world society, however, recedes into the dim distance as ideals of mutual toleration and equal recognition within and across national borders erode. Populist appeals have succeeded in various societies, materializing in voting outcomes supporting racist, nationalist and anti-global politics, in media's discursive shifts towards populist agendas (e.g., Hafez & Grüne, in press), as well as in an overall decline of democracy (Freedom House, 2025) and fundamental liberties such as press freedom (Reporters without Borders, 2025).

This political backsliding raises questions about the capacity for cultural resilience: Why do modern societies struggle in defending liberal democracy? Why is it that racist populism succeeds in driving public debates whereas anti-racist and cosmopolitan ideas have not yet progressed toward a robust cultural public consensus?

However, just as the "cosmopolitan vision" (Beck, 2006) has not taken up full residence in reality, the "age of globalization" is not actually dead (Rosenberg, 2005) either. Even nationalist actors do profit from their global networks albeit promoting isolationist thinking. What seems to have been lost in academic and public discourses is the cultural appeal of globalization as a progressive vision.

It is a challenging question as to why racist populism, and not cosmopolitanism, seems to wield discursive power, even though it promotes anti-democratic ideas based on exclusion of culturally constructed others from a principle of common equality and humanity. Cosmopolitanism, on the contrary, highlights the self-reflexive recognition of others and therefore offers a better suited cultural underpinning of liberal order within and across nation states. In that sense, it can even be considered an "insulating layer" against disintegrative nationalism.

This essay argues that we should focus more closely on the communicative mechanisms through which global change is processed to better understand why cosmopolitan ideals do not gain traction in public debate. Globalization as a vision lacks significant impact as it has never been fully translated into social practice, which is also due to weak cosmopolitan communication systems (see Waisbord, 2026, this issue). Today's fragility of cosmopolitanism can therefore be treated as a problem of communication. This would lead us to reflect upon the challenges of mediating cosmopolitan experience in everyday life. The discussion will focus on the challenges to mutual understanding posed by heterogeneous and scattered global experiences, and on the difficulties in making symbolic resources of lived grassroots cosmopolitan reality accessible to others. It will first approach the topic in a mainly theoretical way, but also draw on preliminary observations from an ongoing empirical study of cosmopolitan communicative experiences in the context of modern urban migration in multicultural metropolises of global significance, in this case in the cities of Doha

and Hong Kong. Given the complex interdependence of lifeworldly communication and mass-mediated discursive environments, the discussion will finally examine the role of media discourses in supporting or hindering the communicative empowerment of cosmopolitanism. Since cosmopolitan communication is not the sole responsibility of individuals, journalism should reflect on its role in the context of populist attacks. The shortcomings of liberal democracies in fundamentally resisting racist populist dynamics, so the underlying argument goes, also stem from the difficulties of conveying cosmopolitan lived experiences – which are, in fact, common to many – in a way that resonates with society at large.

Globalization and the Cosmopolitan Communication System: Conceptual Remarks on Discursive and Dialogic Cosmopolitanism in Everyday Life

Global change needs to be culturally digested and processed by all social actors, including social systems (e.g., politics or mass media) and lifeworldly actors such as individuals and small groups (Hafez & Grüne, 2022). However, the question of how and in which kinds of settings people communicate globally at the microlevel of their everyday life is still an underestimated aspect in globalization research (Holton, 2009, p. 118) and one which will be highlighted in what follows.

Individual and small-group global communication is highly complex and ambivalent. From a theoretical point of view, the differentiation between discursive and dialogic modes of communication in everyday life is consequential for the analysis. On the one hand, many people usually do not interact across borders directly on an everyday basis and in a systematic manner. Resources to interpret global realities are thus not drawn entirely from individual experiences and exchange, but from observation and local epistemic structures that circulate in public and media discourses. On the other hand, the dialogic character of interpersonal and group communication offers excellent conditions for cosmopolitan communication since building global community and knowledge requires direct exchange between people (Hafez & Grüne, 2022, chapters 7 and 8).

Adapting Jürgen Habermas' (1981) dual conception of systems and lifeworld, we may imagine cosmopolitan communication as communicative action that is specifically oriented towards the mutual processing of global diversity. Dialogic cosmopolitan communication ideally transforms the symbolic reference systems of all communicating actors in a way that normalizes the shared understanding of living in a global reality, including the taken-for-granted mutual recognition of global others.

Considering that modernity has provided means of physical and symbolic mobilities, global “others” will remain co-present contemporaries in today's reality. Managing diversity and equality is therefore simply inevitable for any constructive social transformation as Stuart Hall has noted (2002). The idea of mutual recognition

(Forst, 2021; Hafez, 2014, pp. 119-123) provides a conceptual perspective for the cultural underpinning of global change. From a communication science perspective, recognition manifests itself in the reciprocity of dialogic communication in everyday life.

This conceptualization prioritizes the collective realization of cosmopolitanism through communicative action over the more common focus on the individual reflexive cosmopolitan consciousness and “being” cosmopolitan based on attitudes, worldviews or the “willingness to engage with the Other” (Hannerz, 1996, p. 103). This also helps to link the notion of the “dialogic condition” of cosmopolitanism (Delanty, 2009, p. 253) to a communication analysis. Cosmopolitanism would thus be understood as a communicative system that comprises everyday communicative realizations of indirect and direct global contacts including discursive cosmopolitan interpretations and, in particular, dialogic cosmopolitan encounters. Following this preliminary outline, we can now scrutinize the structural and communicative conditions and the dialogic and discursive quality that account for the fragility of cosmopolitan communication.

Fragile Cosmopolitan Communication in Everyday Lifeworlds: Missing Contacts, Heterogeneous Experiences and Weak Discursive Resources

The first argument about the fragility of cosmopolitanism can be made in reference to the structural and communicative gaps in global encounters that help us understand the “cultural lag” (Ogburn, 1922) of global transformation in everyday lifeworlds. The unfinished and uneven character of global change results in a communicative problem concerning the symbolic connectivity of heterogeneous experiences.

Lived realities often only partly and selectively extend local and national realms. Structural possibilities of individual cross-border mobility are still unevenly distributed both within societies as well as worldwide. Tourism data, for example, show highly asymmetric leisure mobilities. Migration follows common roots of proximity and accounts for only 3.7 per cent of the worldwide population (United Nations, 2024; UN Tourism, n.d.). And we have only begun to understand the largely untapped potential of individual online connectivity. In general, empirical tendencies indicate that globalization in the everyday lifeworld may be developing in a more sporadic manner than in other sectors of society. Of course, people are not susceptible to racist beliefs just because of rare global experience. In turn, if we consider the relevance of reciprocal exchanges for mutual co-orientation in this world, the lack of symbolic resources gained from direct experiences may keep people at least vulnerable to subtle racist appeals because of their dependency on local discourse structures, which are often characterized by selective and domestic framings of the world and which are currently under pressure from populist forces.

However, if we take temporal mobilities and transformations in local urban settings into account, indirect experiences of the global in everyday life – ranging from globally circulating goods to mediated images of distant realities in news and fiction, and co-present symbolic resources of culturally diverse neighbourhoods – appear to be much more complex and common. From this angle, it is not necessarily just the lack of global exchange that makes cosmopolitan communication fragile, but whether and how the various existing but often scattered and unconnected symbolic resources, which emerge from the diverse spectrum of everyday global experiences, can be made socially comprehensible and accessible, so that they become a normalized part of everyday social communication rather than a constantly contested or merely latent reference.

One essential problem is that global experiences are structurally but not symbolically equivalent. Heterogenous settings do not automatically inspire shared symbolic reference systems. For example, the labour migration of Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong seems to have only little in common with forced migration of Syrian war refugees in Europe; neither is the tourist trip to Paris by a retired Japanese couple easily comparable to a gap year travel of a German student to Australia. Multiple asymmetries of class, gender or cultural socialization obscure shared worlds of global experience.

Moreover, existing global contact zones do not automatically translate into full sets of cosmopolitan communication. People still avoid interactive communication (e.g. segregation), stay in their own local interpretative bubbles or even reassure themselves of stereotypical perceptions of incompatibility when they engage with others in super-diverse settings.

The same holds true for discursive engagements with global symbolic flows, the predominant interest in global communication research. Cosmopolitan implications remain largely unpredictable and fragile. It has long been demonstrated that consumption of global pop culture, for example, often reflect patterns of cultural proximity and differences between local interpretive communities (e.g., Liebes & Katz, 1994). These can also result in readings not prompting any cosmopolitan self-reflection at all; nor do they necessarily stimulate real dialogue between groups of global audiences. Similar scepticism can be found related to “consumerist” cosmopolitanism (e.g., Jenkins, 2006, Skrbis & Woodward, 2007). Indirect audience engagement may create thin global expertise (for example, fans of K-Pop start to learn more about South Korea, the preference for Japanese dishes stimulates further interest in the country, or international political podcasts inform audiences’ global knowledge). It can also lead to the reinforcement of cultural stereotypes and prejudices and subconsciously hinder society’s acceptance of cosmopolitan change.

Non-Articulated Cosmopolitan Realities: Minority Cosmopolitanism and Symbolic Ambivalence

The second argument extends the discussion from the challenges resulting from heterogeneous individual global experiences and unresolved paths of cosmopolitan interpretations to the challenges occurring in dialogic settings. The central question is how shared symbolic frameworks can be established in everyday interaction. As explained earlier, this is not simply a matter of intercultural communication, which tends to focus more on reciprocal adaptation, but one of mutual construction based on recognition.

We now focus on potential cosmopolitan communicative encounters in everyday life, which are stimulated by embodied diversity. Critical cosmopolitan scholarship has already acknowledged cosmopolitan traces across a wider spectrum of social actors. “Vernacular”, “ordinary” or “rooted” cosmopolitanism (Lamont & Aksartova, 2002; Werbner, 2006, 2008) highlights the anti-racist resources of migrants, refugees, workers or even elites in the Global South, who have not been considered cosmopolitans by elitist conceptions. Whereas “cosmocrats” (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 2000, pp. 225-245) and “frequent travellers” (Calhoun, 2002) often have the resources to stay within seemingly diverse but really quite homogeneous transnational milieus, migrant and diasporic groups usually have no option but to actively globalize local settings and contribute to what has also been labelled “corner-shop cosmopolitanism” (Wessendorf, 2014). Lifeworldly encounters in the workplace, the neighbourhood, the supermarket or leisure activities can become relevant settings in which people negotiate and synchronize their different and sometimes hybrid global perspectives.

Building on the preceding theoretical discussion, this section presents preliminary research findings from a qualitative interview study¹ with cosmopolitan actors who live in multicultural urban settings in Doha and Hongkong. They share the experience of crossing cultural and national borders for purposes of work and education, and reveal communicative problems of mutual connection, which open up additional avenues to understand fragile cosmopolitanism.

What can be read from the interviewees’ reflections are encountered difficulties in communicating cosmopolitan experiences and hybrid identity conceptions beyond the closest private relationships. Individual complex global perspectives tend to be shared and processed primarily within close relationships but rather take a back seat as a relevant reference in other social group contexts. More concretely, the task of presenting connectable accounts of a felt “in-between-ness” in everyday small talk could cause uncertainties and struggles. This was evident from the fact that such

¹ The results represent an interim status of an ongoing research project on cosmopolitan communication conducted by the author. The empirical basis referred to here are 17 semi-structured interviews, in which interviewees reflect their communicative experiences. They all have encountered several layers of cultural hybridity, cross-border mobility and global diversity and are located in multicultural settings of Hong Kong and Doha. Comprehensive results will be published at a later date.

explanations were described as complicated, or in statements such as, “it’s not like you can ever really share your experience.” When reflecting on their individual communication behaviour, it became apparent that cosmopolitans reinforce common-sense narratives of belonging. It seems that the translatability of one’s own minority experience is limited in light of powerful symbolic systems of generalized non-cosmopolitan majorities. Even in dialogic encounters simple national and cultural categories of origin are used to describe complex hybrid realities. Interestingly, our interviewees’ lived experience and self-reflexive capacity to recognize global Otherness and hybrid diversity still fails to find equivalent linguistic and symbolic expression. Dialogic cosmopolitanism insofar seems to be limited by a lack of adequate vocabulary (e.g., words, images, analogies). This is hardly surprising, given that even in academic debates it is difficult to specify and describe the global hybrid complexity of lived experiences or the sometimes disruptive role of floating cultural origins – terminologies of hybrid and transcultural rearticulations of social order offer abstract theoretical categories that usually cannot do justice to the complex realities across the globe, are highly associative, and not suitable for everyday small talk. Therefore, even cosmopolitan actors make use of commonly accepted categories of, for example, culturalist homogenized group descriptions or national demarcations, and have a hard time escaping existing signifying practices. Thus, the sheer “communicability” of cosmopolitanism is complicated: whilst nationalist, racist and culturalist terminology can be easily updated, a common language still needs to be found for everyday cosmopolitan realities. There are simply no symbols and flags for cosmopolitanism or hybridity, but only for each and every nationalism, and – as we will discuss later – no translators for these new languages of lived cosmopolitanism. Therefore, existing global knowledge and experience get somehow stuck in a non-articulated reality.

These observations have further implications. First, the lived global realities remained rather exiled and lonely experiences. A strong orientation towards close-tie relationships and fragmented social interaction in local multicultural environments make it a small lifeworld phenomenon with the possible result of a symbolic detachment from broader local publics. This orientation towards small social worlds allows individuals to avoid symbolic ambiguities in everyday interaction but it also cements the minority status of cosmopolitan communication in broader social realities.

Secondly, some of the interviews pointed to a modest awareness of one’s own global symbolic resources. When communicative experiences were reported in which others reproduced culturalist stereotypes and symbolic orders in small talk, one’s agency in communication was often unacknowledged. Passive, indifferent and avoiding communication strategies in negotiating these symbolic references were reported. Hence, cosmopolitan communication potential can be also limited by non-interventionist cosmopolitan agency. Although we can only briefly outline some of these preliminary selective analytical observations, it appears that global transformations in everyday lifeworlds are slowed down when cosmopolitans do “not enter

into the world as change agents” (Husband, 2009, p. 443) but remain communicative minorities.

Implications for Media Discourses: Communicating Cosmopolitanism in the Media

The aforementioned challenges to realizing cosmopolitan communication underline the need for wider mediation of cosmopolitan symbolic resources. Of course, individuals and small groups can do better in bottom-up communicative encounters. There are civil society initiatives all over the world that work for dialogue and recognition (e.g., George, 2026). However, this question also needs to be addressed to the social systems: Where are the mediators in education, politics, or business, who could help in making the range of existing global experiences accessible?

This concluding section highlights the role of mass media. Mass media cannot replace dialogic cosmopolitan communication, but it can improve the local circulation of global interpretive resources. Media’s responsibility to provide symbolic resources for indirect relationships with distant others has already been attested to (Silverstone, 2006). However, the complex interplay of discourses and dialogues to realize cosmopolitan communication needs to be considered. Lived realities, as has been outlined, offer direct dialogical encounters in which mutual recognition of sharing global change can be realized. Mediated discourses, on the other hand, offer interpretative resources for global co-orientation. The democratic responsibility of journalism in liberal democracies includes the integration and representation of all groups of society. Cosmopolitan realities within and across national borders are part of these politically significant publics and require visibility.

However, the circulation of global experiences is still limited. A global public sphere that could help to construct global narratives and that can act as interpretative alternative to national trends has not yet evolved effectively. In foreign news, dynamics of domestication prevail and media images of global others are still shaped by local traditions of stereotyping (Hafez & Grüne, 2022). Research on “mediated cosmopolitanism” has also recurrently highlighted the shortcomings of media representations in fostering audiences’ cosmopolitan readings and self-reflexivity (e.g., Chouliaraki, 2008; Robertson, 2010; Yilmaz et al., 2015). Similar things can be said about the representation of diversity in national media. Academic research has disclosed racist underpinnings, stereotypical depictions and misrepresentations of minority groups (e.g., ter Wal, 2002; Ross, 2019). These observations carry important implications for our understanding of fragile cosmopolitan communication.

First, we can ask whether media discourses represent different experiences of global diversity. Against the backdrop of the loosely connected global experiences in societies, media representations can help to bridge a gap by providing common ground and resources for co-orientation. This would require journalism to identify the lived

cosmopolitan expertise discussed. Consequently, lifeworldism (Grüne, 2024; Hafez, 2024) in reporting is key to this demand. Journalists need to act as “cultural translators” across experiential communities within and across societies and cover people’s lived global experiences.

Second, we can ask whether media discourses frame cosmopolitan communication in a way that manages equality and diversity in a constructive manner. Diversity can be recognized by disclosing the symbolic resources discussed (e.g., tacit knowledge of how to live and work in different countries) and not only by labeling people (e.g., by referring to their cultural/migratory background). Media formats could include representatives who share everyday expert experiences and who are co-oriented towards global issues to help everyone recognize the diversity of existing global knowledge. For example, multilingual talent, naturally experienced togetherness in globalized realities, and the opportunities of global learning in local settings could be highlighted.

Third, we can ask whether media discourses reflect cosmopolitan dialogism. Do media formats initiate cosmopolitan dialogues, for example, by inviting representatives of marginalized cosmopolitanism? Does the media mirror the banal conditions of cosmopolitan experiences at the corner shop? Here, media discourses can help build bridges for those who struggle to express their hybrid existence by making these experiences visible on a more regular level. Circulating symbolic links, so the argument, can strengthen the connectivity for new social conversations.

To reclaim global change and diversity in times of right-wing backlashes, we need to reconsider how cosmopolitan communication is actually realized, both in the everyday encounters of lived realities as well as in the public discourses of the media. Only if we can empower these diverse cosmopolitan realities through communication can they contribute to a cultural self-image of societies that establishes the mutual communicative recognition of globalized diversity as the norm.

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