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From the Field: Building on Area Studies Expertise – The Arab-European Association for Media and Communication Researchers (AREACORE)

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Abstract: This short article introduces the new Arab-European Association for Media and Communication Researchers (AREACORE) as the manifestation of the necessity to strengthen area expertise in communication studies. The reasons for founding this association fit into the broader framework of de-westernization attempts, while also allowing for dialogue to take place on an equal footing. The authors invite all interested communication researchers to join the network and build up an Arab-European network of communication studies expertise.

Keywords: Arab, European, communication researchers, area studies, de-westernization, dialogue, AREACORE

Area Expertise as an Essential Requirement for Research

Paging through the influential journals in communication studies, the sheer dominance of U.S. and Western European samples in empirical studies is astonishing.

However, there has been little evidence to suggest that the notion of agenda-setting functions in the same way in Indonesia as it does in the U.S. The same goes when questioning whether one can trace the “spiral of silence” when analyzing the communication processes of a tribe in Southern Sudan? To put it generally: Do the concepts and theories we work with only have a limited validity? Looking at the data that are provided to us in mainstream journals, one may agree with Timothy Levine and his colleagues: “We cannot have a viable communication science that applies only to white, upper-middle class, Christian, American young adults between the ages of 18 and 22 who attend major research universities” (Levine et al. 2007, p. 206).

On the one hand, it is evident that there is a lack of global data to validate dominant concepts outside the Euro-American region. However, due to globalization processes and the related cross-cultural influences on societies, the status quo of mainstream research requires us to rethink fields of research such as media reception, journalism, and political communication. Many distinct and groundbreaking insights arise only when specific local phenomena are studied, and at the same time such findings are embedded in a broader concept of globalization.

If, for example, a TV format such as *American Idol* also succeeds in the Arab world, then one can search for explanations not only in the mechanisms of global TV-format trading, but also in the local strategies of adaptation and reception. There are several relevant fields that emphasize the importance of including area expertise in our research toolkit. These include topics like media and migration; the media's role in political transformation; and social and digital media.

Post-colonial approaches have already served to critically review existing research bodies, and have made their inroads into communication studies too (Shome & Hedge 2002, Curran & Park 2000). However, one should go beyond critical reviewing and proceed with suggestions on how to overcome Euro-centrist research approaches.

Area Studies will help to find region-specific explanations for communication processes, while simultaneously allowing for the integration of these findings in cross-cultural research. Expertise-building in area studies can validate, extend or refute existing theoretical concepts and contribute to their expansion beyond the Euro-American region. Reflections on the methods used in various cultural and socio-economic contexts can contribute to a vivid discussion in communication studies. However, the basis for applying and improving on context-sensitive methods lies in the following: Language skills, profound knowledge about the region under examination, and a permanent self-reflection of the researcher's position vis-à-vis his or her research objects.

Since 2011, the Arab-speaking countries have become tremendously interesting for communication scholars worldwide due to the impact social media seemed to have in empowering people in transformation processes (see, for example, the special edition of the *Journal of Communication* 62(2) of 2012). Before this period, only a few Western communication scholars dealt with the region, mostly in the context of comparative or case study-based research.

Still, globally visible research on Arab media and communication is often *research about* the region instead of open-minded *research with* fellow colleagues from the region. In order to produce informed and valid knowledge without imposing specific theories and methods, joint cross-cultural research should be conducted on an equal footing between the researchers.

The Legacy of Colonialism in Research

Bringing together co-operation partners that share the same idea of equal-footed research does not seem to be easy. In the Arab world, colonialism has clearly left its footprints in academia in general, and communication studies in particular. The “intellectual hegemony” of the West is often complained about and dependencies on the West are often criticized (see Ayish 1998, Hammami 2005, UNESCO 2011, Dajani 2013). Few express this position with as much fervor as the Palestinian communications expert Lena Jayyusi. She sees the need for communication science “[to] critically re-historicizing media studies, and reassess the models and dichotomies in use, the language and presumptions of much work, and the disciplinary disconnections that have often prevailed in an area of inquiry which [...] was intended to be interdisciplinary” (Jayyusi 2007, p. 253).

Paradoxically, although criticized, Western approaches are often simply applied unchallenged in Arab communication research – at least with regard to midrange theories and quantitative methods. This might be in order to qualify for journals and conferences in the mainstream international research community. Ayish (1998, p. 34) notes disappointedly: “Although a voluminous amount of communication research has been generated in the Arab world in the past two decades, one notes that the majority of those works has been either descriptive, historical, or empirically-oriented, seeking to test a range of generally American communication theories and hypotheses in Arab settings.” Given the current tendency to establish American and European offshore universities, particularly in the rich Gulf States, this paradox may continue to live on.

However, there are also homegrown reasons for the lack of independent Arab communication studies. According to the Arab Knowledge Report (UNDP 2009, p. 202), the social sciences are “the poor cousin” of the Arab research landscape, which are hardly paid attention to and given little promotion. Research is often considered by governments as something that should be “useful” with the aim to help build and develop the nation. Journalism education has indeed been considered an instrument of social development by the authorities. However, as opposed to technical disciplines and natural sciences, media and communication studies may tread on the sensitive toes of authoritarian rulers. Accordingly, media and communication research was more strictly controlled, and research activities had been monitored or needed approval. Media use and audience research in particular, as well as political communication research were – and sometimes still are – considered sensitive fields, because the results could undermine the legitimacy of political incumbents and state media (see Ayish 1998, p. 35).

Despite the common Arabic language, several authors are critical of the fact that hardly any relevant South-South cooperation in research in the social sciences and humanities exist (Schlumberger 2010, p. 8). Already in the 1970s, Al-Sawi and Kandil had complained about the lack of co-operation between Arab countries as a key barrier to the development of journalism and communication studies – and it

has changed little to this day. According to Dajani (2013) the problem is “this lack of cooperative Arab effort [...] due to political divisiveness among Arab officials and institutions, shortage of educational strategic planning, scarcity of material and human resources allocated to educational planning, unqualified leadership of Arab educational institutions, or a combination of all these”. To date, there is no institutionalized professional association for Arab communication scholars beyond the national levels, nor is there a common Arab communication journal. Abd El Rahman (1991) describes a “problem of terminology” among Arab scholars, who are respectively influenced by either Anglo-American or French communication studies, depending on their colonial ties. In 1976, a committee had been formed in the Arab Centre for Mass Communication Studies to standardize the Arabization of scientific terms of foreign languages. For Hammami (2005, p. 16), the inability to comprehensively implement this task has resulted in the lack of a truly Arab “scientific community”.

AREACORE as a Platform for Dialogue and Joint Research

Of course, there have already been valuable attempts to promote Arab communication studies expertise, and to build platforms for academic exchange on equal footing. Joint research has been initiated by the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) and the Arab-US Association for Communication Educators (AUSACE). The newly-founded Arab-European Association for Media and Communication Researchers (AREACORE) was established out of this need, and aims to further the efforts made so far.

The goal of AREACORE is to strengthen research and expand horizons among Arab and European scholars in the field of communication. In particular, it aims to facilitate communication research across Arab countries, and between Arab and European scholars.

AREACORE was established because a number of academics and researchers in the field of media and communication from both Arab and European countries had a common desire to see further development in this field. It was founded in July 2013 at the Freie Universität Berlin following a workshop attended by both Arab and German communication scholars. Currently, its institutional partners include Cairo University in Egypt, Université La Manouba in Tunisia, Qatar University, Sana'a University in Yemen, Birzeit University in Palestine, Bayan College in Oman, and the American University in Beirut, Lebanon.

AREACORE aims to be a platform for dialogue and interaction through organizing conferences, seminars, trainings and workshops. The association also conducts studies and joint research, and sees to the dissemination and exchange of information.

AREACORE will be the window through which researchers view the issues and topics of interest to media and communication studies. They can express their ideas and opinions in an interactive framework that reflects all views, in order to create an Arab-European dialogue which boosts the prospects for academic and scientific cooperation. It will also provide the opportunity for academics and researchers to present their work and share experiences and information.

Media and communication studies have both a direct connection and mutual effects on other disciplines that are strongly linked to societies and people. Therefore, AREACORE invites all researchers and specialists working in these related fields to join the association.

Website & Membership form: www.areacore.org

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/AREACORE/>

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