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Data Journalism beyond Majority World Countries: Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

This commentary reflects on the state of research on data journalism and discusses future directions for this line of work. Drawing on theory in international development and postcolonial studies, we discuss three critical pitfalls that we encourage future scholarship in this area to avoid. These include using a linear model of progress, in which journalists in Majority World nations struggle to 'catch up' to their Minority World counterparts because of the 'obstacles' they face; reproducing a simplistic split between the 'West and the Rest', thus missing the complex interaction of structures operating at different levels; and failing to examine journalistic agency due to an overemphasis on the technical structuring of the 'tools' used in data journalism. We also encourage scholars to engage in more comparative work rather than single case studies; increase dialogic communication between scholarship produced in, or about, different parts of the world; and incorporate more diverse methodologies with the aim of building theory. More broadly, we advocate for greater critical reflection upon—if not the challenging of—our dominant modes of thought in order to build more nuanced frameworks for explaining the complex causes, and potentially mixed effects, of data journalism around the world.

KEYWORDS

Data; data journalism; Global South; Majority World; non-Western; postcolonial

Data journalism, as a distinct practice, is still emerging in many non-Western contexts. While there are some promising initiatives to help journalists make good use of data, serious difficulties remain. These include journalists' difficulties in accessing training on examining and utilizing data in reporting, or the absence of training which is sensitive to the contexts in which they work. In authoritarian and corrupt systems, providing access to information to citizens, including journalists, may be regarded as putting the government and other officials in jeopardy. So, journalists may be given very limited access to structured data and unstructured documents and may have little recourse to legal frameworks to press for greater access (Bebawi 2015), making them subject to government regulation and control (Sakr 2007, 18).

However, if critics based in elite academic institutions and/or in Western countries wish to contribute to decolonizing the academy (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu

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2018), they need to be careful how they think (and write) about the 'obstacles' faced by journalists in order to avoid three common pitfalls. First, scholars need to refrain from unwittingly implying the existence of any kind of linear 'progress' in which Europe and the USA are positioned as being more 'advanced' or 'developed' than other parts of the world (Escobar 1995). As Nyamnjoh put it, there is no "One-Best-Way of being and doing to which Africans must aspire and be converted in the name of modernity and civilization" (Nyamnjoh 2005, 3)—an observation that extends to Majority World countries in Africa, Asia, South and Central America, and the Caribbean.[1]

Second, it is important that scholars eager to de-center the West (Curran and Park 2000; Volkmer 2002; Waisbord 2019) avoid constructing a simplistic binary split between two homogenized categories, the 'West and the Rest' (Wang 2010)—let alone linking this binary model with an absolute 'digital divide' (Curran, Fenton, and Freedman 2012). Finally, researchers should be careful to avoid technocentric approaches, which position new communications technologies as driving certain kinds of change within journalism, without proper regard for the agency of local journalists (Mare 2014) and the complex contexts within which they work (Gynnild 2014).

An attention to the contexts of data journalism in Majority World countries involves engaging with multiple norms, practices, and structures, including local and national cultures, histories, and ideologies, as well as political and economic factors (Anderson 2018; Oliveira and Angeluci 2019; Waisbord 2015). But the practice of data journalism in such countries is also powerfully shaped by the outward flow of ideas, practices and structures from America and Europe. In order to engage in data journalism, journalists working in Majority World contexts may be expected (or even obliged) to respond to American and European ideas, as these often are embedded within funded initiatives (Baack 2018; Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill 2018). Even when journalists are not expected to do so explicitly, American and European norms may underpin much of their work, since they implicitly inform the design of many of the communications platforms and software used in data-driven forms of journalism (Petre 2018; Zamith, Belair-Gagnon, and Lewis 2019).

To argue thus is to stress that communications technologies are never politically or culturally neutral. Rather, they have been designed to work in some ways (and not others) by engineers, most of whom are employed by a handful of Western companies, which dominate the global platform and software market (Orlikowski 2000; Saleh 2010). These engineers will therefore have had purposes and stakeholders in mind which may be very different from those of data journalists using their products in African, Arab, Asian, and Latin American countries. But although the structuring of digital 'tools' may constrain what local journalists are able to do, it is important not to become overly deterministic as data journalists in Majority World countries can (and do) exercise their own agency, even if this agency is limited. They may therefore use the features of software, platforms, and training programs selectively, as well as using them in ways that were not originally anticipated or intended by Western designers (Orlikowski 2000).

Yet even the most innovative journalistic practices cannot counter other 'macro' problems. These include the way in which the commitment of American and European tech giants to particular models of ownership, property rights and trade (Saleh 2010). So, it is often impossible to separate the evolution of data journalism in

Majority World countries from the spread of these multinationals —and related norms—into the 'emerging markets' of the Majority World (Jin 2015; Saleh 2010). In addition, few Majority World countries have extensive data protection laws (United Nations 2019) and some, like China, are actively engaged in developing hybrid commercial/state platforms, which use data-driven practices to track and record their citizens' interests, views and purchases (Creemers 2017; Liang et al. 2018; MacKinnon 2011). Journalists who analyze data collected in these circumstances may therefore become complicit in 'data colonialism' (Couldry and Mejias 2019), even if they intend to use their reporting for progressive ends.

Data journalism practiced within African, Arab, Asian, and Latin American countries is therefore likely to have particular kinds of hybrid, relational, dynamic qualities. These qualities or characteristics are shaped by the interaction of journalists' own agency with multiple intersecting local, national, regional and international structures. Many of these structures are not only foundational to the practice of data journalism, they are also profoundly problematic. To argue thus is not to imply that data journalism in the US and Europe is unproblematic—far from it. Rather, our purpose here is to move away from the 'obstacle' paradigm we originally started out with, which conceptualizes journalists working in Majority World countries as attempting to overcome various external impediments or hindrances to engage successfully in data journalism. Instead, we want to emphasize that particular kinds of difficulties, constraints, and complications are intrinsic to—and inseparable from—the engagement journalists in Majority World countries in data journalism.

In so arguing, we build upon a longstanding vein of post-colonial theory, including Appadurai's work (Appadurai 1996) on the unequally structured global flows of ideas, products, and practices, and Kraidy's work (Kraidy 2005) on critical transculturalism. We are also strongly influenced by the challenge to essentialism posed by scholars like Fourie (2008) and Tomaselli (2003), as well as Waisbord's more recent call (2015) to reassess the relationship between 'Area Studies' and 'Journalism Studies'—attending in more detail to "the-regional-in-the-global" (31). More broadly, we build upon comparative scholarship which shows that journalistic practice is not universalized—but nor should it be regarded as balkanized within individual countries or localities. Hanitzsch (2007), for example, contends that although there is "an all-encompassing consensus among journalists toward a common understanding and cultural identity of journalism," varying "professional ideologies" exist in different journalism cultures (368): a proposition which was supported by the Worlds of Journalism project and supported by others through the notion of 'cultures of journalism' (Zelizer 2005).

The studies in this collection help us better understand how journalists working in Majority World countries understand, experience, and cope with the complex negotiations involved in enacting data journalism. The work of Cheruiyot, Baack, and Ferrer-Conill (2019) is particularly innovative as it moves away from using the nation-state as the unit of comparative analysis (Deuze 2002) and instead examines the interactions between transnational European and African civic-tech organizations. Here, Cheruiyot and colleagues argue that the members of those organizations professed to share similar understandings of their role in relation to data journalism and transnational advocacy but found that these 'global' objectives still needed to be translated into local contexts.

In short, they examine the negotiation and, to some extent, the mutual shaping of journalistic notions and practices as they are applied to fit local histories and needs.

We also find incidences of more traditional approaches that draw on the 'obstacles' paradigm. For instance, Lewis and Al Nashmi (2019) found that a lack of reliable public data and social/political expectations, as well as numeral and technological illiteracy and resistance to new methods and approaches, served as key barriers to the development of data journalism in North Africa and the Middle East. Palomo, Teruel, and Blanco-Castilla's (2019) examination of *La Nacion* in Argentina highlighted a successful example of audience participation in data journalistic work, wherein a civically oriented local news culture and an emphasis on participatory practices promoted engagement with the audience at various stages of news production. In so doing, they overcame some of the obstacles to participation often discussed by scholars in Majority World countries (see Singer et al. 2011). Both studies contribute valuable and important empirical insights into journalistic work as practiced in understudied contexts.

Finally, the articles by Anderson and Borges-Rey (2019) and Porlezza and Splendore (2019) aptly demonstrate that 'the West' cannot be homogenized either, and that it should perhaps not be pointed to as an ideal (see also Escobar 1995). Anderson and Borges-Rey (2019) describe data journalism as a maturing practice in the United Kingdom that shares an audience-first, storytelling-driven constructed identity even as it seemingly paradoxically pushes producer-oriented gatekeeping journalism traditions through the interface design of its products. Meanwhile, Porlezza and Splendore (2019) illuminate the many challenges that keep data journalism as "a relatively minor phenomenon in Italy" (16). They explain how the (limited) forms of data journalism existing in Italy are shaped by the country's economic and political contexts, including its media system, and the educational paths afforded to journalistic practitioners. This helps problematize the notion of a more "advanced" West that should serve as a standard for cross-cultural comparisons.

Despite these many contributions, this collection of articles also exemplifies some of our broader concerns about the state of the literature. Data journalism still tends to be examined either atheoretically, or in an exploratory fashion—such empirical studies rarely go so far as to build new theory. In the articles discussed here, we see applications of notions like metajournalistic discourse and contextualism. While these notions help set up the rationale for a study, they are rarely used to advance a predictive or explanatory framework that would help to make broader sense of findings, or to explicate the mechanisms underlying observations. Additionally, more nuanced critical attention to the social and political effects of data journalism within Majority World contexts would help advance our understanding of the mutual shaping of those enabling and constraining forces. To position the development of data journalism as a self-evident good risks succumbing to a naïve style of thinking that fails to properly interrogate the intersection of deep local, national and global inequalities.

There is, therefore, a great amount of work which needs to be done. Above all, we urge encourage scholars to challenge the prevailing situation in which Majority World countries tend to be 'mined' for case studies, which are then kept isolated in glass cases—like so many rare and interesting curios—rather than being used to unsettle and reshape core theories in the subject area (Mabweazara 2015; Mutsvairo and Wright

2018; Waisbord 2015, 2019). How might we change this situation? We suggest three ways forward. First, the repeated use of single-nation case studies makes it difficult to build generalizable theory through comparative work, especially when methodological choices—even when using the same method—vary. More comparative work on data journalism, especially broadly-based comparisons, is sorely needed. However, we recognize that undertaking such a study is more time-consuming than undertaking single case studies, which could potentially exclude scholars from less resource-rich institutions. Accordingly, we encourage the development of major, collaborative grant proposals and scholarly networks in the spirit of the Worlds of Journalism project to provide the resources needed to engage in mutually beneficial research in this area.

Second, we urgently need to find ways to improve dialogic communication between scholarship produced in, or about, different parts of the world. Palomo and colleagues (2019) note that "studies that relate media production and data journalism in Latin America are mainly in the Spanish language" (p. 4)—an observation which extends to other regions and languages. Moreover, even in these most recent studies of data-driven journalism in Majority World countries, we see few citations of non-English work, or of studies published in journals like *African Journalism Studies*, *Journal of Arab and Muslim Media Research*, and *Palabra Clave*. It would behoove the journalism studies literature if we more often read outside our 'comfort zone' and consciously pursue work from—as well as working with—scholars working in (and on) regions outside our own. But reading more widely is clearly not enough. If we are to open our eyes to "a world filled with different ideas … [and] different epistemologies" (Waisbord 2019, 95) we also need to expose and challenge narrow, unjust approaches to what and whose knowledge 'counts' within communications curricula, faculty, editorial boards, conference calls and so on (Rao 2019; Usher 2019; Waisbord 2019).

Third, there is a need for more methodologically diverse studies examining data-driven news work beyond the Majority World. Those examinations, as evidenced by the studies in this collection, have relied primarily on qualitative methods—and on interviews in particular—to help describe how actors think about their engagement with data journalism. Going forward, it would be beneficial to triangulate methods, as two of the studies in this collection did, to either multiple pair qualitative methods or combine them with quantitative methods that assist in systematic hypothesis-testing and measure phenomena like the manifest attributes of content and networks and the ways in which data journalistic content is received and interacted with by audiences. Indeed, such methods could be applied to further examine entities like transparent intermediaries—or those actors and actants, typically operating outside of traditional journalism, that shape journalistic activities and products by creating the technologies and distributional apparatuses used by journalists—and peripheral actors more broadly, which should yield important insights into the enabling and constraining forces around the world (Belair-Gagnon and Holton 2018).

In short, data journalism is still an emerging field of study, and as noted in this commentary, it is an area that needs further conceptualizing and theorizing. What this journal issue provides is a step in this direction by illustrating that data journalism has not developed in a uniform fashion in either Majority or Minority World countries. Specifically, these studies begin to point to some of the ways in which the logics and

practices derived from the USA and Europe help shape—though by no means determine—those in Majority World countries. Yet at the same time, this special issue provides evidence that those dominant logics and practices are imperfect, and should not be regarded as an ideal against which local practices should be measured. In short, we are reminded of the importance of avoiding the use of overly simplistic binary models when studying, conceptualizing, and theorizing the practice of data journalism around the world—and to push ourselves to critically reflect on our dominant modes of thought. This issue makes a positive step in this direction, and sets the pace for many studies to come.

Note

1. This term was coined by Shahidul Alam (2007) and is increasingly used to replace the terms 'developing world', 'third world' or the 'Global South' which are inaccurate and/or which are considered to be derogatory by many in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East.

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