Towards a multipolar communication international scholarship?

Afonso de Albuquerque[1]
Fluminense Federal University, Brazil

To cite this article: de Albuquerque, A. (2023). Towards a multipolar communication international scholarship? *World of Media. Journal of Russian Media and Journalism Studies*, 1: 5-18. DOI: 10.30547/worldofmedia.1.2023.1

Abstract
There has been mounting evidence in recent years that the world is shifting toward a more multipolar global order. From an economic perspective, for instance, non-Western countries have an increasing share of the world's wealth. Still, the unipolar logic remains dominant in at least one domain: international scholarship. Theoretical and political perspectives that originated in the United States and, secondarily, Western Europe have typically received universal recognition. Why does this happen? This article approaches this problem from four different angles: Where does the academic unipolar order originate from? How does the unipolar order actually work? What institutions and practices support it? What challenges does the academic unipolar order present for scholars working outside the West? What is the concrete political impact of the academic unipolar order?

Keywords
Unipolarity, multipolarity, international scholarship.

There has been mounting evidence in recent years that the world is shifting toward a more multipolar global order. From an economic perspective, for instance, non-Western countries have an increasing share of the world's wealth. If we take GDP for PPP (purchasing power parity), six out of ten do not belong to the Western world: China (the first), India (the third), Japan (the fourth), Russia (the sixth), Indonesia (the seventh), and Brazil (the ninth). Initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative contribute to shifting the center of the economic world from the Euro-American Atlantic axis to Eurasia. The rise of

[1] **Corresponding author:**
Afonso de Albuquerque, Fluminense Federal University, Brazil.
Email: afonsoalbuquerque@id.uff.br

the BRICS group, which includes Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, in the international relations arena appears to be evident, as several countries, including Argentina, Iran, and Algeria, have expressed interest in joining the group. Regional initiatives also gained ground recently. The enormous military superiority that once allowed the United States to claim for itself the role of "police of the world" does not exist anymore.

Still, the unipolar logic remains dominant in at least one domain: international scholarship (Shi-xu, 2014). Theoretical and political perspectives that originated in the United States and, secondarily, Western Europe have typically received universal recognition. Otherwise, the status given to the knowledge produced in other parts of the world is local, according to the best hypothesis (Sugiharto, 2021). For sure, many scholars have made the case for the necessity of de-Westernizing communication research (Curran, & Park, 2000; Waisbord, 2022; Waisbord, & Mellado, 2014). Nonetheless, the concrete impact of these claims is currently quite limited. Why does this happen? This paper aims to provide an answer to this question by addressing the following questions:

1) Where does the academic unipolar order originate from?

2) How does the unipolar order actually work? What institutions and practices support it?

3) What challenges does the academic unipolar order present for scholars working outside the West?

4) What is the concrete (political) impact of the academic unipolar order?

Where does the academic unipolar order originate from?

Let's begin from the start: What are the origins of the academic unipolar order? An easy way to answer it is by putting the blame on the global-scale colonization process led by Western European countries. Imperialism was strongly detrimental to most societies on Earth. From the perspective of our argument, one of its most important characteristics was to delegitimize the knowledge of societies existing outside the West, a process that Boaventura Souza Santos (2018) called Epystemicide. Still, Imperialism was not unipolar in any manner. The Partition of Africa by Western European countries, which began in the 1880s, was by no means motivated by a common project shared by these countries. On the contrary, it was primarily the result of their rivalry. They competed for African resources, such as land, minerals, and a very cheap workforce, in order to reinforce their own economic and political interests. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, social sciences were very diverse, although exclusionary regarding most of the world. France, the United Kingdom, and Germany developed their own traditions of thought, that were very different from each other in their theoretical and methodological approaches.

The roots of the unipolar academic order are much more recent. Here, we will look at how this has affected communication studies in particular. In this field in particular, the origins of unipolarity precede by decades the rise of the 'new global order' organized around the United States. Recent literature has underlined the role that certain agents have performed in 'weaponizing' the social media as a means of disinformation, propaganda, and harassment of political adversaries. Communication studies have been a weaponized discipline since their inception in the 1940s. Not to mention that communication was born in America and has remained so for decades (Glander, 2000; Simpson, 1996).

The origins of communication studies relate to the lessons that U.S. officials learned from World War I, especially the importance of mass propaganda as a military resource. Communication studies attempted to discover ways to use emerging electronic mass communication means as social control resources (Simpson, 1996). In other words, as a means for propaganda – although U.S. scholars very rarely use this term for describing their own country; rather, they employ it for describing adversary countries. At that time, the main funding for communication research came from the military, intelligence services, the State Department, and private founding agencies such as the Rockefeller Foundation. These origins had a deep impact on the features that communication assumed as a discipline. It developed a more practical than theoretical bias, focused more on a psychological than a sociological approach to communication, relied mainly on empiricist/behaviorist methodologies.

From a political standpoint, communication studies became an extension of the interests of the political elite in the United States. The book *Four Theories of the Press*, once considered the classical work in comparative political communication, provides a powerful illustration about how this happened. It was written by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm and first published in 1956, at the height of the Cold War. The work proposes a four-term classification of the manner in which the media relates to politics around the world. Two of them refer to abstract principles: liberalism and authoritarianism. The other two refer to the two global superpowers existing at that time: social responsibility model (the United States) and the Soviet Communist model (the Soviet Union).

Four Theories of the Press became a best-seller and influenced academics around the world. Yet, the trajectory of the authors of the book and their institutional ties are still more important than the book itself. The case of Wilbur

Schramm is remarkable in this regard. In 1950, the Armed Forces sent him to Korea – during the war – to interview anticommunist refugees and analyze the United States' psychological operations in the war. His studies were later published in Public Opinion Quarterly and in a popular leaflet called *The Reds Take a City*. His work proved essential for legitimizing communication research knowledge that originated as psychological warfare techniques developed for the United States armed forces. During the following two decades, he helped to build an institutional network that established the academic pattern for the field. Different from other academic areas, the center of this system was not occupied by prestigious universities, but by a network organized around Michigan State University (Glander, 2000). This network gained enormous influence in the global arena. For instance, it has been hegemonic in the International Communication Association (ICA) and on editorial boards of the most influential communication journals (Demeter, 2020).

During the Cold War era, the United States attempted to promote their own model of the free press as being universal, but this effort did not work. In most parts of the world, the print media was closely associated with political parties, and broadcasting was in the hands of public or state-owned outlets. At that time, the U.S. model of media was more of an exception than the general rule. It was only in the 1990s that communication began to become a truly international discipline. This happened in the wake of the neoliberal globalization process led by the United States in association with international financing institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. In this context, U.S. theories and institutions finally acquired global status. The 1990s witnessed the rise of U.S. based global media, such as CNN and MTV, and fostered the rise of U.S. centered international scholarship.

How does the unipolar order actually work?

The global academic order that emerged in the last decades of the past century is based on three core principles: 1) academic ranking systems, 2) networking, and 3) funding.

Rankings are important pillars of the global neoliberal order. Their importance stems from the neoliberal notion that market competition should provide a normative model for all spheres of social life. The prime subject of the rankings is economic performance. Rankings measure freedom of the press, corruption, and the quality of democracy, among many other phenomena. They are essential pieces in the dynamics of the distribution of resources and prestige across the world. Typically, rankings are carried out by privately owned companies or non-governmental organizations, and the criteria they follow are not transparent. Rankings are essentially black boxes. This puts a lot of power in the hands of the ranking agents.

Academic rankings categorize various subjects based on a variety of criteria. They measure the prestige and productivity of universities, departments, academic journals, and individual scholars. Val Burris (2004) once referred to the U.S. sociology faculty rankings as an academic caste system. The positions of the departments have remained remarkably stable across time and have little to do with academic productivity. Instead, he found that the main criterion for classification refers to where the professors of a given department are hiring from. The top five departments exchange professors with each other. The twenty following departments hire from the top five and exchange employees with each other, and so on. Fourcade, Ollion, and Algan (2015) found a similar logic working in the field of economy.

Academic journal rankings have a particularly big impact on global scholarship dynamics. They accomplish this by creating artificial scarcity in an environment characterized by an enormous supply of information. Let us explain this briefly. The rise of digital media in the 1990s was initially saluted as having the potential to democratize communications, and this applies also to scholarship. Once online, journals could be read by anyone with internet access. Yet, the academic journals' ranking logic opposes this democratizing potential as it selects a very limited number of journals as being worth publishing in.

Consider the case of communication studies. The most prestigious ranking of their journals in the world is Clarivate's Journal of Citation Reports (JCR). The index classifies the journals according to their impact factor. The manner in which Clarivate calculates this impactor factor is not transparent, but this is not the main problem. The real problem is that JCR covers only a very small proportion of communication journals existing in the world. By doing this, JCR renders invisible (or at least less visible) the huge majority of these journals, simply because they are not evaluated. The citations that count for measuring the impact factor belong only to 'prestigious journals', too. These journals are by no means representative of the diversity of world scholarship. Almost all are published in English and belong to a handful of commercial publishers that work on the basis of a paywall system.

It follows that impact factor rankings do not reflect qualitative differences existing between journals but, otherwise, create them. Prestige is in large measure a self-fulfilled prophecy working on a circular schema. Prestigious scholars want to publish in prestigious journals, and by publishing in them, they make these journals prestigious. Even more important, prestigious journals make prestigious scholars. A well-known effect of this logic is the ‘Matthew Effect’. In short, scholars tend to cite well-cited scholars. Impact factor ranking systems help to assure that scholars working in the United States and other Western societies will be well-cited scholars.

This brings us to the second principle, which is *networking*. The relations between prestigious institutions and scholars – as defined by the ranking system – create the center of the global academic system. This happens through different means. One example is international organizations. The presidency of the ICA has been for a long time in the hands of scholars affiliated with or with educational ties to Michigan State University. ICA is very U.S. centered, too, with respect to national affiliations. In a 2016 article, Wiedemann and Meyen (2016) found that 86 of the 112 distinguished ICA members were from the U.S. Germany comes in a distant second place, with four distinguished members.

The editorial boards of academic journals are another core institution in the logic of the network. Several works have described in detail the asymmetries existing between countries and institutions in their representation in JCR-evaluated journals in Communication. Almost 58% of the editorial board members worked in institutions in the United States. Roughly three-quarters of them are in the five anglophone countries (plus the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand). Approximately 90% live in the Western World. China, India, Eastern and Central Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean each respond, with one percent of the total. Still, the asymmetries are even more remarkable when we look at the universities’ share of the editorial board membership. The University of Texas and the University of Wisconsin had 92 members each. Latin American and the Caribbean had 50, and China and India taken together had 42. Only five countries (besides the United States) have more members on the list than this: United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Germany, and the Netherlands. From the 20 universities with more editorial board members, only one is not located in the United States (Albuquerque; Oliveira; Santos Jr., & Albuquerque, 2020).

The practical result is that it concentrates enormous power in setting the scholarly agenda in the hands of a few institutions. Let me present a concrete example: The University of Texas has nearly twice as many editorial board members as all of Latin America and the Caribbean combined. The University of Texas also has a Center for Latin American Studies. Concretely, this means that scholars belonging to this university have disproportional power in setting the scholarly agenda about Latin America. In consequence, scholars from Latin

America may feel compelled to study at the University of Texas to have access to 'world class' knowledge about their own region.

To understand how this power works, we must consider the third element: *funding*. Western-centered global networks cannot work without financial resources. But who provides these resources? What are the motivations behind academic funding? The answers to these questions are too complex to be satisfactorily answered in this paper. Many different types of agents donate funds for academic research for many different reasons. Still, there is an aspect that should be highlighted here: research funding often goes hand in hand with interests in promoting certain agendas and worldviews. A very illustrative example refers to the rise of the behaviorist tradition in political science in the United States. This tradition did not exist until the 1950s, but within a decade it became hegemonic in the country. What happened during this interval? The Ford Foundation invested massive resources to ensure that scholars committed to this worldview were hired by the most prestigious U.S. universities (Seybold, 1980). Another example refers to the role played by the *National Endowment for Democracy* (NED) in promoting the U.S. political view. It was created during the time when Ronald Reagan was ahead of the U.S. presidency, in 1983. One of these initiatives NED promoted was the creation of the *Journal of Democracy*, a scholarly journal that is ranked by Clarivate (Christensen, 2017). In its manifesto, the *Journal of Democracy* presents its main purpose as being 'to unify what is becoming a worldwide democratic movement' (Diamond & Plattner, 1990: 3).

Taken together, these three core principles sustain a dynamic that contrasts a few academic centers with a vast periphery. This happens for different reasons and through variegated means. One is boosting the 'gravitational' power of the central institutions. As the rules of the game provide these institutions with more visibility, scholars from around the world feel tempted to move there to pursue an 'international career'. From the perspective of these scholars' native countries, this movement results in a 'brain drain', which reinforces even more of these inequalities. Another consequence is the so-called 'Mathew Effect': scholars who have more citations tend to be even more cited. Therefore, by defining what journals are 'world class' and controlling them through institution-based networks, the scholars from the countries in the center practically assure their hegemony vis-à-vis the rest of the world.

What challenges this order present for scholars working outside the West?

The third question that arises here is: What challenges for scholars working outside the West result from this academic unipolar order? Here, we will mention only a few problems, referring to: 1) scholars' access to the international 'prestigious' literature in communication research; 2) scholars' opportunities to make their own perspectives visible in the international arena; 3) the international division of academic labor, which attributes them with minor roles in comparison to their Western colleagues; 4) the manner in which this situation pressures these scholars to move to Western institutions in order to obtain international visibility.

Access to the literature published in the 'prestigious' journals presents a first major problem for most scholars working from outside the West. This happens because most of these journals are published by commercial publishers, and readers must pay to have access to their articles, which is not cheap. A single article costs a few dozen dollars. To be sure, not all readers must pay for it. Rich universities usually have financial agreements with the major publishers, allowing their faculty and students to access this content for free. This results in a major distortion: scholars who have fewer financial resources are those who must pay for access to the 'prestigious' articles.

This system provides the publishers with the best of two worlds. On the one hand, it relies on the non-paid work of scholars. They work for free, both as authors and as reviewers of articles written by other scholars. They are supposed to do so as a part of their professional commitment to the common good. Working for free is a practice that takes its meaning from the idea that science is a vocation. On the other hand, from the perspective of the commercial publishers, it is strictly business. An excellent business, to be sure, as a handful of commercial publishers dominate almost entirely the market of the 'prestigious' scholarly publishing. The twisted nature of this model is illustrated by the fact that sometimes scholars who worked as article reviewers do not have access to them after their publication.

A second problem refers to the difficulty that scholars outside the West experience in publishing in the 'prestigious' journals. This is a well-documented problem. In 2005, Edmund Lauf (2005) demonstrated that the publishing in journals ranked in the Journal of Citation Reports was dominated by Western anglophone countries, and the United States in particular, as scholars based in the US had 66,2%, those based in the UK had 13,2%, Canada had 3,4%, Australia had 3,2%, and New Zealand had 0,6%. Taken together, these five countries contributed to 86,6% of the articles published in these journals. Interesting enough, Lauf, a German scholar himself, is not primarily worried about the misrepresentation of the societies located outside the West. All non-anglophone countries fall into the same category. In 2018, Marton Demeter

(2000) found that patterns remained considerably stable if we consider the Global North/Global South divide. In both cases, the Global North had 94% of the contribution in these journals. Still, there were changes inside the Global North group, as the United States lost space to the benefit of Western European and 'advanced' Asian countries.

This does not happen because the intellectual production is necessarily better than that from other parts of the world, but for institutional reasons. We have already described the asymmetries existing with respect to the editorial membership, both with respect to the representation of countries and universities. Apart from this, other data demonstrate an institutional bias towards the West: 1) all of the publishers represented in Clarivate's sample are from Western countries; 2) 96% of the editors in charge of these journals are from Western universities; and 3) 80% of the reviews in these journals were written by Western scholars (Demeter, 2020).

Additional factors hamper the access of scholars working outside the West. One of the most important among them is the use of English as a lingua franca (Suzina, 2021). This requirement is particularly challenging in very text-based disciplines such as communication (in contrast to mathematics, physics, or biology). Language is, after all, a cultural device. Thus, international communication scholarship approaches its subject from the anglophone cultural perspective. To make things worse, reviewers often require the authors of manuscripts to master 'native English'. Academic norms, which originated in the West – are taken for granted in the international scholar circuit – also provide a barrier for scholars from other parts of the world.

The same goes for the research methods. A recent example refers to the recent debate on open science, published in the *Journal of Communication*, following the publication of the article *Agenda for Open Science in Communication*, authored by Tobias Dienlin and his colleagues (2021). In this case, open science had to do with a policy of transparency regarding the research data. In the following issue of the same journal, non-Western scholars argued that this was Western-centric, for two main reasons. First, it ignored the non-Western tradition of open science, which has to do with access to science. Second, this conception raises the standards for an article being considered fit to publish and may become an additional resource for misrepresenting non-Western scholarship (Oliveira et al., 2021).

The last problem refers to relevance. Studies about countries located outside the West are much more likely to have their relevance questioned by reviewers in international ‘prestigious’ journals. One anecdotal example: a colleague submitted a manuscript to a ‘prestigious’ journal, and it was rejected in the desk review phase under the argument that another article on Brazil had been published recently. Needless to say, this journal publishes articles on the United States in every single number.

Another structural challenge faced by scholars working outside the West refers to the unwritten norms governing international cooperation. Very often, these scholars face intense pressure in their own countries for ‘internationalizing’ the results of their research (as, contrary to what happened in the West, their international status is not taken for granted). Given the existence of structural barriers hampering their participation in international forums, the most viable alternative for these scholars is to attempt to become part of West-centered scholarly networks. This usually happens through participation in multinational comparative projects. Not all participants in these projects have comparable status, however. Western scholars are almost always in charge of developing the theoretical and methodological frameworks for these projects, while non-Western scholars are limited to providing empirical data about their home countries (Alatas, 2003).

An additional manner to acquire international visibility is available for non-Western scholars. They can move themselves to ‘prestigious’ universities located in the Western ‘center’ and develop an international career working for them. From a strictly individual perspective, this move may surely be satisfactory, but from a broad perspective, it only contributes to aggravating the uneven distribution of power and prestige in global scholarship. For the peripheral countries, the consequence of this is a ‘brain drain’, the loss of some of their brightest minds to the benefit of the center. As Alatas (2000) correctly puts it, the current model of academic mobility is one of the key traits of academic imperialism.

What is the concrete (political) impact of the academic unipolar order?

The asymmetries existing in global scholarship have very concrete political consequences. This occurs because the academic international structure concentrates in a few hands the power to define authoritatively what reality is. Here, we will focus on one example, which refers to the regime-type classification usually employed by comparative journalism and political communication studies. Numerous studies employ the same basic regime-type, Stage of Democracy Development (SDD), as the basis for their analysis. In short, this model divides the societies existing in the world into three categories:

1) established democracies; 2) transitional democracies, and 3) authoritarian regimes (Albuquerque, 2022).

This model is built on three major pillars: the Enlightenment, Colonialism, and the Modernization Project. The Enlightenment provides the basic intellectual framework for the model: the belief that societies evolve towards a more civilized state over time and that this evolution follows a single path. Accordingly, it would be possible to classify the existing societies as being comparatively more or less civilized. The Colonialism and Modernization projects provide historical context for the global impact of Enlightenment ideas. Colonialism was the darker side of the Enlightenment, as Mignolo (2011) put it, as it associated 'civilization' with the Christian Western nations, while at the same time labeling 'barbaric' all other societies existing in the world. In this model, the distinction between civilization and barbary was grounded essentially on race.

Otherwise, the modernization project emerges from the ruins of colonialism in the second half of the 20th century, led by the United States. Worried that the new independent countries could be attracted to the orbit of the Soviet Union. The Modernization Project proposed to these countries that they could also modernize if they followed the steps of the United States. In this model, the countries were classified according to their level of modernization (Baber, 2001). The exact same logic is reproduced in the SDD model. In both cases, modernizing is a never-ending process for countries located outside the West. Developing countries have been developing for decades. Something similar happens with the SDD model, as the 'transitional democracies' never evolve to the status of consolidated democracies.

It is important to say that the SDD model is not only a descriptive model. It is also prescriptive. The consolidated democracies (that is, the West) are supposed to lead the other societies to a better order, and this has very concrete consequences (Albuquerque, 2022). Numerous military operations led by the United States since the 1990s have been justified under the excuse of 'promoting democracy' abroad. Examples include the 'humanitarian bombings' in Serbia, and the labels 'Enduring Freedom' and 'Iraqi Freedom' given respectively to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq (Barker, 2008). Additionally, this model has provided an ideological excuse for numerous initiatives aiming to promote 'regime change' in other countries, which rely mostly on soft power rather than military muscles (Robinson, 1996). A variegated set of institutions – the U.S. government, private foundations, social media platforms, and not less important, U.S. universities – have interfered in the internal politics of other countries under the alibi of fighting authoritarianism.

Conclusion

What does this mean? Recent literature in communication is full of calls for de-Westernizing international research. The unspoken premise behind these calls is that the under-representation of views from scholars located outside the West is a side effect of the late development of communication in their societies. This paper offers an alternative view in this respect: the exclusion of non-Western scholars from the international debate is not accidental. It is the logical consequence of a system designed to concentrate the power to define what reality is in the hands of a few. The ability to define what 'reality' is results in a tremendous political power. It establishes the basis of moral hierarchies and provides an excuse for certain countries to meddle in the internal affairs of others.

What can be done to fight this system? The first step is to recognize that it has an institutional basis. Therefore, it is necessary to develop alternative institutional infrastructure to allow alternative views to emerge in the international scenario. Concretely, this means: 1) reinforcing local universities as alternative places for building international scholarly perspectives; 2) reinforcing local journals as vehicles for distributing alternative views in the international scholarship; 3) reinforcing ties between non-Western scholars and institutions, as a means for building alternative academic circuits; 4) BRICS group can provide a basis for such an effort.

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