MAINSTREAMING DECOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES IN MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

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Over the past two decades, there have been many calls and efforts to decolonize and de-westernize research in media and communication (Aouragh & Chakravartty 2016; Couldry & Mejias 2019; Ricaurte 2019). While these efforts have generated highly valuable academic centers, community-driven projects, and South-to-South networks (e.g., CARGC, FemLab, Tierra Comun), the field is still dominated by (implicit) universalist perspectives. Often the Anglo-American world is taken as the primary or only frame of reference in research on topics ranging from disinformation and platform governance to AI and new creator economies. Consequently, there is continuous friction between the main conceptual frameworks in the field and the experiences, interests, and concerns from the Global Majority world (Arora 2024; Lehuede 2024; Poell et al. 2024). Similar observations have been made regarding digital advocacy work, in which top-down, techno-legal solutions from the Global North tend to dominate, leaving little room for Global Majority innovations and priorities (Ong et al 2024).

In the light of these concerns, this panel invites critical conversation about diverse initiatives of mainstreaming decolonial perspectives in media and communication. We are concerned that decolonization remains a specialization, rather than a force that transforms the field as a whole. Such a transformation is not just important for researchers and civil society advocates in the Global Majority, but for stakeholders around the globe. Universalism shuts out research and initiatives from most parts of the world in developing knowledge frames and proposing policy solutions. But, simultaneously, it prevents Global North researchers from understanding the specificity of media and communication in the US, Europe, and Australia. In other words, multiplying frames of reference and developing more bottom-up, locally-situated approaches also means critically reflecting on the *particularity* of Global North institutions and practices.

In discussing how to mainstream, and–crucially–how *not* to apply decolonial perspectives in media and communication, we are confronted with a number of complex questions. First, while we advocate for more bottom-up, situated approaches, we also recognize the need to critically attend to the global dominance of major US-based tech companies (Couldry & Mejias 2019; Madianou 2024). How can we critically examine these highly unequal global power relations without reverting to a universalist and techno-solutionist mindsets that only reifies the centrality of US tech corporations and regulatory agencies?

Second, from our perspective, it is vital that any efforts to mainstream decolonial approaches in our discipline should resist homogenization, bureaucratization, and tokenism in processes of movement-building. How do we develop more critical and granular analytics of what are better or worse methodologies of mainstreaming decolonial perspectives? What are the risks of using decoloniality as a "metaphor"? What are the differences between decolonial and anti-colonial approaches?

Finally, the elephant in the room in any discussion of decoloniality is the inequality of resources and unjust practices of knowledge production in the discipline and higher education at large. To transform the field and multiply our frames of reference, we need global networks and institutions that "walk the talk" and promote just, equitable, and sustainable ways of working and collaborating. How do we share or redistribute resources in global collaborative projects? How can our discipline's governance bodies and associations guard against tokenism and knowledge extractivism? What are examples of centers and networks in global tech studies that have successfully navigated situations of political conflict and instability, and what survival strategies can we learn from them? These are highly urgent questions today as global studies initiatives in the Global North are under attack from far-right conservative groups and governments, just as decolonization discourses have been hijacked by anti-democratic ethno-nationalists in the Global Majority (Chakravartty & Roy 2023).

Drawing from five parallel research initiatives that aim to develop decolonial perspectives in media and communication, this panel will address these questions and involve the audience in a conversation about best practices:

1. "Local Specificity & Global Power Relations" addresses the conceptual, methodological, and political challenges that confront us when we try to multiply our frames of reference in media and communication research, while, simultaneously, attending to the global relations of power and dependency that define the contemporary digital media ecosystem.

2. "Decolonial Tech Policy: Engaging an Oxymoron?" reflects on South-to-South network-building as a method of "mainstreaming" decolonial perspectives in tech policy and digital advocacy spaces.

3. "Decaf Intersectionality, Soft Decolonialism and the Pact of Whiteness" addresses the whitewashing and the dilution of the ideas of intersectionality and of decolonisation, stressing the race and gender power dynamics in play when reflecting upon media, communications and culture, from global South perspectives.

4. "The Generative Power of Experience-in-Context" discusses insights from a grounded exploration of the lives of women engaged in informal labour, to feed back into [decolonial] theorizing about concepts like precarity, flexibility, networks, and identity.
5. "Decolonizing Fact-checking Through the Use of Nonprofessional Mediators" investigates the role of decolonized fact-checking interventions as potential tools to combat "fake news" in two politically unstable countries: Mali and Ethiopia.

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LOCAL SPECIFICITY & GLOBAL POWER RELATIONS

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This project aims to multiply the frames of reference in research on technological change and the contemporary cultural industries. This field of research continues to be thoroughly dominated by scholarship from the US, Europe, and more recently China. This is especially problematic as leading digital platforms and GenAI models in the cultural industries are primarily developed and operated by large tech companies from the US and China. Consequently, it is essential to expand research beyond these regions, as the affordances and business models of new technologies often clash with the socio-economic concerns, cultural practices, and political priorities of the majority world, which, simultaneously, remains grossly underrepresented in current scholarship. This paper addresses the conceptual, methodological, and political challenges that confront us when challenging these mutually reinforcing mechanisms.

Local specificity

As pointed out in the panel rationale, Western universalism continues to dominate the field of media and communication. This universalism is often left implicit: observations, conceptual interventions, and perspectives based on research in the Anglo-American world and Europe are not recognized as *specific* but presented as generally applicable. Vice versa, majority-world researchers are consistently asked to reflect on the specificity of the institutions and practices they study. To move beyond Western universalism, the same demands need to be made on scholars from the West. In the words of Chakrabarty (2009), we need to "provincialize" Europe and the US. The last couple of years, some progress has already been made in this regard as China has become more central to media and communication research (Steinberg et al., 2025; Ye et al. 2025;

Zhang, 2021). This has certainly helped to open conceptual debates. Yet, this shift, evidently, also coincides with the economic and political rise of China.

In this project, we aim to broaden the conceptual conversation beyond current political-economic and techno-commercial power centers by examining how cultural producers and tech startups in Brazil, Chile, Nigeria, India, and Japan have adopted platforms and GenAI tools–from YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram to ChatGPT, Midjourney, DALL-E, and Gemini,––as well as developed their own technologies, governance frameworks, and creative methodologies. While these countries are characterized by vibrant cultural industries, large populations, and rapid uptake of digital platforms and GenAI, these are rarely considered as sites for theory building. Aiming to contribute to an epistemic shift, we develop: 1) a situated institutional analysis of the media ecosystems, political economies, and regulatory frameworks in the five countries, and 2) conduct in-depth fieldwork—semi-structured interviews and co-walkthrough sessions with cultural workers—to understand how the uptake of new technologies is reshaping the perception and practices of cultural work.

In this panel, we will report on this work-in-progress. Our exploratory research suggests that the increasingly central role of platforms and GenAI in cultural production especially generates urgent questions and issues pertaining to:

1. the *precarity* of cultural labor. Crucially, this issue is not only understood and experienced differently in each of the five examined countries, but our observations also significantly differ from dominant Western interpretations of precarity. We challenge the notion of standard work, as in full-time permanent employment, against which platform-dependent and GenAI-augmented cultural work is often theorized as being "precarious" (Huws et al. 2018). Building on other majority-world research, we rethink precarity as highly situated and articulated in the complex interplay between workers' experiences, media ecosystems, and wider political economies (Alacovska et al., 2021; Bidav 2025; Caminhas 2025; Mehta 2023).

2. *creativity* as central to cultural production. Understanding *creativity* not as an exclusive human cognitive trait but as a networked and materially embedded form of agency, we trace the different configurations in which creative processes are enacted (Celis Bueno et al. 2024). Our research points towards a reorganization of creative processes as platforms and GenAI become centrally integrated. In the Japanese manga and anime industry, we can, for example, see a new division of labor emerging as AI tools are increasingly used to generate backgrounds and colour characters' clothes, while comic artists remain creative executives (Ho et al. 2024). Again, highlighting the importance of developing more reference points, we observe key variation across the five countries, as well as differences with how the relationship between new technologies and creativity has so far been theorized from a Western perspective (Poell et al. 2021).

3. the *governance* of technology. Current research has already demonstrated that there is significant variation in how platforms are governed in the US, Europe, and China (Gillespie 2018; Steinberg et al. 2025; Zhao 2019). Building on this scholarship, we analyze and theorize different regimes of governance beyond these dominant regulatory actors. The research in the five countries reveals a range of regulatory and policy responses, from active promotion of new technologies to a lack of interventions. Each mode of governance of artificial intelligence highlights national priorities and impacts everyday usage of GenAI tools in cultural production.

Our situated research allows us to develop a richer conceptual vocabulary to do justice to the different realities in which contemporary cultural industries are transformed but also continue to be structured by long-term institutional relations and practices.

Global power relations

Developing situated research and multiplying our frames of reference will, however, only solve part of the puzzle. We also need to critically consider how the power relations that structure the integration of emerging technology in cultural production often stretch across national boundaries. There is still a strong tendency in media and communication research to treat nation states as natural containers of social processes. This does not hold for the cultural industries. Methodological nationalism obfuscates internal differences within supposedly homogeneous spaces, as well as the many techno-commercial and socio-cultural connections and power relations that cross national boundaries.

In this project, we observe in the five countries how creators and media companies that adopt platforms and GenAI models, and the tech and data intermediaries that assist in this process, are overwhelmingly located in a few urban regions. These actors are often economically, infrastructurally, and culturally more tightly connected to media and tech companies in other parts of the world than to the rural populations within their own countries. Central to these transnational connections are the American and Chinese tech companies which operate the leading platforms and GenAI models. Also important are advertisers and sponsors which set priorities in terms of target audiences and markets. And finally, we observe how national states are trying, to different degrees, to govern these complex economic, infrastructural, and socio-cultural relations that constantly flow across their boundaries.

This project maps these configurations and analyzes underpinning power relations and dependencies that shape how issues of precarity, creativity, and governance play out. We discuss how values, interests, and rationalities embedded in the affordances and business models of leading platforms and AI models generate opportunities and challenges for media companies and cultural workers in the five regions. In turn, we will reflect on how the tech strategies of media companies shape working conditions of cultural workers. And we will discuss how digital state policies and regulations serve specific interests and concerns. Finally, drawing on this analysis, we consider how

notions of precarity, creativity, and governance in the study of cultural production and technological change need to be reconceptualized.

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DECOLONIAL TECH POLICY: ENGAGING WITH AN OXYMORON?

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This paper reports on the uneven reception of an ongoing South-to-South Knowledge Exchange project that originally aimed to be grounded in decolonial frameworks in the technology and democracy policy space. Founded in 2022 with the objective of bridging academics and practitioners working on counter-disinformation and election monitoring projects in Brazil and the Philippines, this learning space has engaged with 90 tech policy experts and academics around the world. Among many participants from the Global South, our workshops have been experienced as a "safe space" where we identified extractive modes of international collaboration while organizing around shared advocacies. Among allies and "reform champions," including those in funding agencies in the United States and Europe, our policy initiatives have helped redirect donor funding toward supporting regional collaboratives and grassroots organizations historically excluded from so-called "whole-of-society" coalitions. Practically speaking, our research helped develop alternative "metrics of success" for tech interventions, deemphasizing the scalability of interventions in favor of sustainable and locally led collaborative spaces.

Was the South-to-South Project a successful case of mainstreaming decolonial approaches in media and communication studies? This paper argues that it was not. But rather than reading this as a failure, we suggest that the very premise—decolonial tech policy in media and democracy—is an oxymoron. Decolonization, after all, is not a metaphor for reform. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) argue, social justice initiatives may share similarities, but decolonization is not a synonym for social justice and liberation. It is "necessarily unsettling" (p. 7) and involves "repatriating land sovereign Native tribes and nations, abolition of slavery in its contemporary forms, and the dismantling of the imperial metropole" (p. 31). While our project did many good things, it did not unsettle the existing conditions and continued operating in places where colonial land relations endured.

Instead, we find inspiration in STS scholars such as Kim TallBear (2014) and Max Liboiron (2021), whose works insist on relationality—on "standing with" and recognizing the multiplicity of obligations and positionalities shared among diverse groups. Following their lead, we frame the interventions and practices built within the South-to-South Project not as attempts at decolonization but as part of anti-colonial methods. The distinction is not just theoretical. It is a call to resist the urge to integrate decolonial approaches into the very systems that necessitate their existence. It demands precision and a commitment to naming the specific actors, methods, and complicities that might hide behind good intentions of solidarity-building.

Methodologically, we draw on interviews and focus groups with over 90 participants from 13 countries between June 2022 and November 2024. The South-to-South Project formally concluded with the release of a policy report aimed at funders and civil society practitioners (Ong et al., 2024). But we continued to invest in these values and discussion spaces through the Global Technology for Social Justice Lab (GloTech) in our university. Drawing on these collaborations, this paper retells critical conversations of how to "mainstream" decolonial perspectives in the tech policy space, as well as *how not to*.

Policymakers' receptions of "decolonization"

In contrast with the humanitarian and development sectors that have mainstreamed "decolonizing aid" back in 2016 as the theme of the World Humanitarian Summit, the tech policy space appears to have made no comparable effort. Within liberal tech and democracy policy circles attended by many nonprofit organizations and academic experts, "decolonization" is still received as a strange and foreign term. One reason, as a philanthropic leader we interviewed pointed out, is that tech and media democracy programs are historically "more politicized" than humanitarianism and development. Global North governments' foreign policy and militarization agendas typically graft onto tech policy programs promoted in "partner countries" as part of US "soft power."

The resistance to decolonization in tech policy circles is not just a matter of failing to catch up. We also take it as an indication of a deeper unwillingness to challenge the structural conditions that have shaped the field of tech and democracy. "Decolonization" as a term was continually received as "confusing" or "alienating." For instance, when presenting our methodologies and findings from our South-to-South project comparing Brazil and Philippines counter-disinformation coalitions, our policy adviser "allies" advised us to replace "decolonization" in favor of more neutral terms "localization" or "locally led."

On the one hand, "helpful advice" from allies "from within the system" helped translate our critical research such that it yielded tangible results: drawing from our program recommendations, donors reported adjusting their program priorities to address country challenges. On the other hand, we were not able to push any discussion forward about transforming the global governance structures and monitoring and evaluation protocols, which reify existing power hierarchies.

In other words, the resistance to decolonization was not just some passive act; it was an active investment in preserving the existing order while offering minimal modifications under the guise of reform.

Why decolonial tech policy is an oxymoron

We argue that there are three factors that make decolonial tech policy an oxymoron. First is the structural alignment of tech policy programs with the US foreign policy agenda (Baykurt, 2022). Historically, funding for initiatives in the Global South has been backchanneled through U.S.-backed programs to reinforce the global leadership of the

U.S. and the economic dominance of Silicon Valley companies. This arrangement was designed to maintain the dependencies of civil society programs in the Global South rather than foster real autonomy and resistance.

The second roadblock pertains to the limited capacities of Global South civil society organizations. Without the infrastructure to sustain locally grounded initiatives, they remain dependent on external funding structures from the Global North that shape their priorities in ways they cannot fully control. We convened a meeting in April 2024 with Global South tech policy researchers to discuss alternative funding streams. Our discussion, however, revealed that while we could all point to the failures of the current system, none of us could offer a viable replacement. Our conversation ended not with a clear strategy but with a recognition of how deeply our resources have been deprived of sustainable support, and we were not able to rebuild alternatives without compromises.

The third roadblock is Big Tech corporations' persistent influence and lobbying power that whitewash the kinds of interventions we see in this space. Big Tech's "philanthrocapitalism" demonstrates how the tools they promote—pitched as innovations for Global South newsrooms—are rarely sustainable (de Lima Santos, 2024).

What Does an Anti-Colonial Agenda Look Like?

Rather than insisting on a decolonial approach in tech policy circles, we propose an alternative set of interventions framed as "anti-colonial." We insist on calling out how U.S. and European funders use the values of liberal democracy as a convenient frame to distribute funds. We also reject the simplistic binaries that so often define Global Majority actors as heroes or villains, or victims and oppressors. These frames erase the complexity of domestic histories, the authoritarian tendencies that exist alongside real struggles for autonomy and sovereignty, and the contradictions that do not fit neatly into Western funding priorities.

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DECAF INTERSECTIONALITY, SOFT DECOLONIALISM AND THE PACT OF WHITENESS

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More than 20 years ago, the philosopher Slavoj Žižek wrote a piece about a kind of resistance, which, although experienced as apparently dangerous, is harmless, innocuous, because it is stripped of its potentially harmful main substance: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol, virtual sex, etc. This metaphor is useful to reflect upon uses of two very trendy concepts of the 2020's: the idea of intersectionality and the practices of decolonization today. Žižek (2004) would affirm that one "could enjoy anything, BUT deprived of its substance which makes it dangerous", so that "action and reaction should coincide, the very thing which causes damage should already be the medicine."

Innocuous intersectionality

On this panel, I reflect on "mainstreaming decolonial perspectives in media and communication" as a Black Latina academic cis woman from and based in the global South. From this standpoint, I address the whitewashing and the dilution of the ideas of intersectionality and of decolonization, stressing race and gender power dynamics.

The intersectional paradigm is an important theoretical tool to address interrelated forms of oppression such as the triad *gender*, *race* and *class*, as well as sexuality, gender identity, geographic location, age, ableness, religious affiliation etc. The scholarship of Black feminism brought perspectives and methodologies that are useful in grasping realities that have been kept invisible or marginalized both in feminist theories and in some race studies (Guimarães Corrêa, 2020).

Nevertheless, intersectionality has been appropriated and used in many situations and places to paradoxically depoliticize and to deracialize the debate about inequalities (Bilge, 2020). The concept has its origins in the studies of Black feminists; it was created by Black women intellectuals and activists who reflected upon their experience of combined oppressions of anti-Black racism and misogyny. Its very Black and anti-racist origins are linked to transformative practices. Nevertheless, the "race" axis has gradually been forgotten in so-called "intersectional" analyses, be in white feminism, or in decolonial perspectives.

So, 'intersectionality' has been used as a buzzword to update monocategorial perspectives, but hiding race dynamics, diverting attention from racism. This is a form of epistemicide (Carneiro, 2023), which kidnaps knowledge in two ways: by denying the rationality of the Other and by promoting cultural appropriation, erasing its political origin. Often, this assimilation comes as a neoliberal and diffuse multiculturalism, based on a broad, innocuous and vague idea of diversity: "an experience of Other deprived of its Otherness: a belief which does not hurt anyone and does not fully commit even ourselves." (Žižek, 2004). As Crenshaw (2011, cited by Bilge, 2020) observes, the efforts

to repackage intersectionality for universal consumption require a remarginalization of Black women.

"Intersectional", as an adjective, ends up substituting or even erasing the terms "Black" or "race". I argue, then, that Black feminism and, especially, its anti-racist core, is that dangerous substance in intersectionality, due to its role in the dynamics of power, especially within academia and other spaces of privilege.

- But why and how is Black feminism a dangerous substance?
- Why are racialized women dangerous to institutions and places of power and knowledge?
- And what is the danger for racialized women to be in places of visibility?

(De)colonialism and whiteness in the global South

It is not productive to reflect upon intersectionality and decolonization without addressing the concept of whiteness, usually invisible, transparent, seen as universal. In this convenient silence lives the narcissistic pact of whiteness, a concept created by Cida Bento (2022). She defines whiteness as 'a place of racial, economic, and political privilege", whiteness 'as preservation of racial hierarchies, as a pact among equals'. Bento found in her research that all the organizations, with different political leanings, had similarities in structure and *modus operandi* when it came to race and gender relations. Race is relational, so, even if light-skinned South Americans, descendants of Europeans, are not considered white in the global North, they are the "local white" (Hall, 1996) in the South.

The pact of whiteness is a productive theoretical tool to study media, communication, technology and knowledge, as it can be useful to understand the persistent maintenance of privileges of the white population, as well as the exclusions and distorted representations of vulnerable groups in communication products and platforms – not only in Brazil, but also globally (Guimarães Corrêa, 2024).

Modernity/Coloniality

The decolonial perspective proposed by the Modernity/Coloniality group focuses on the Latin American experience, highlighting European and North American hegemony. But it reproduces the thesis of transparency, distancing itself from a decolonial analysis of race. Decoloniality, as seen in Mignolo and Quijano, is not enough to think about the particularities of the racial dynamics, exclusions and privileges in Brazil (Silveira, 2025). On the other hand, Lélia Gonzalez (2008) proposed an Afro-Latin American feminism and the concept of *Amefricanidade* as political and cultural categories, a useful theoretical tool for understanding Latin American societies and their economic, cultural, and geopolitical relations with the global North, in contexts marked by race and racism.

The intersectional and concrete face of colonialism

Thinking intersectionally from the South (Guimarães Corrêa, 2024), questioning extractivism is important not only in terms of data appropriation, but also in relation to the

natural resources required by technologies to produce hardware, mobiles, screens etc. The greedy and irresponsible exploitation of these limited resources has proven to be extremely harmful for the planet–especially in the global South, where mining, for example, has caused loss of human life and major damage to the environment. The dam disasters in Brazil in 2015 and in 2019 are recent cases: the Brumadinho environmental crime happened when a tailings dam at the Córrego do Feijão iron ore mine, in Minas Gerais, Brazil, suffered a catastrophic failure. The dam released a mudflow that advanced through the mine's offices, along with houses, farms, inns, and roads downstream. 270 people, mostly racialized and vulnerable communities, died.

Intersectional issues and technology

Despite appearing neutral–not human and, therefore, not political or ideological–technology-mediated communication reproduces and reinforces exclusions and potential discrimination against racialized people, especially women, as Safiya Noble, Joy Buolamwini, Timnit Gebru, Ruha Benjamin, Nina da Hora, Cida Moura, Fernanda Carrera, among others, have showed us. Having people from different backgrounds and experiences in places of decision in tech, programming, media, communications and theory is urgent and necessary to achieve social justice. To mainstream decolonial perspectives, we must question white cis male privilege in places of knowledge, in industry, media and academia.

Why have Black women been excluded from an important concept they've created?

Racialized women maybe unmask supposed inclusions and exclusions. They probably destabilize meritocratic logic, exposing pacts of whiteness and masculinity. They can highlight privileges and challenge meritocracy. Drawing on their / our experience and scholarship, some Black feminists study "what cannot be known (…), undermining the norms of scholarly authority and mastery upon which the university is based" (Hong, 2008). Maybe that's why we see so few racialized women cited, invited, awarded in academia.

Usually, racialized women do not participate in the pacts of whiteness – sometimes they/we do not even know about them, but their effects are very visible. Neither they/we are racialized women part of some gentlemen's agreements which favour cisgender men and keep them in power. It is important to remember that the white patriarchal pacts and arrangements are colonial. We cannot do decolonial research if we do not acknowledge and question them.

Finally, I would like to add that, if Black feminism is seen as dangerous to institutions, places of power and knowledge such as universities are hostile and dangerous to racialized women. Christian (1994), Hong (2008) and Bilge (2020) have reflected upon a not coincidental list of North American Black women intellectuals who died quite young. Some Black female intellectuals from Brazil left us quite early too. These places can be violent and toxic for racialized women.

As imperialism and colonialism were organized around race, gender and sexual oppression, we must beware of innocuous intersectionality, beware of soft decolonialism. But alliances are not impossible. Instead of removing the dangerous substances, it is necessary to face them – and to learn from them. Because knowledge and change do not happen without some risk.

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THE GENERATIVE POSSIBILITIES OF EXPERIENCE-IN-CONTEXT

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All movements *against* must necessarily incorporate a movement *for*–and in the case of decolonisation movements, the struggle to resist, or throw off, the heavy layers of (mostly) Western imperialism concomitantly is a fight to (re)claim identity and structure. Media and communication scholars committed to a more equitable, expansive and pluralistic process of knowledge production, access and use argue that we need to not only recognize and draw on context and cultural/social specificities but also build frameworks from the ground up, which are based on logics born of local experiences and histories. Among the challenges this poses is the continuing dependence on dominant vocabularies and what we might call "habits of theory/theorization". Several scholars from the majority world have suggested ways to decenter Western approaches and bring the margins into the mainstream (Mutsvairo & Bukenya, 2023; Moyo, 2020; Celik, 2022), while others have argued for more forcefully bringing culture into the mix (Dutta & Pal, 2020), and more recently, there is an emerging push to develop a standpoint that is consciously non-Western (Banjac, 2024; Girginova et al, 2025; Raman, 2025).

These movements have relevance beyond the academy, as they have the potential to enter worlds of policy and programme implementation, particularly those that involve a flow of funds from multilateral agencies and Global North governments to projects carried out in the majority world. Such projects are inevitably structured and evaluated within majoritarian frameworks even as they aim to contribute towards socio-economic growth/equity and increasingly, at the very least acknowledge epistemological responsibility to the communities involved. For media and communication scholars and practitioners engaged in field-based projects, there is thus an opportunity to involve a wider range of stakeholders in the knowledge production process in a manner that is not just "sensitive" to context but is integrally dependent on it, as it is on the perspectives of those who occupy such contexts. Mohan Dutta's "culture centered approach" with particular reference to social change projects (Dutta, 2015) outlines one such effort to bring marginalized groups into knowledge production pathways.

Project

In this presentation, I draw upon learnings from a funded collaborative project that attempted to understand informal women workers' communicative ecologies, to discuss the practical and conceptual challenges and possibilities inherent in such knowledge building. The project, focusing on people at the margins of the economy and culture–women in informal labour–sought to understand how they made sense of and negotiated phenomena that policy has put into neat categories. Ideas like precarity, collectivisation, network, workplace, time, security, or skill, were turned on their head when seen through the lives of women workers. This forced us to ask: What filters must we discard as we prioritize practices such as deep listening and non-judgmental observation? How do we learn to see the multiple and layered realities and discern

imaginations and aspirations outside learned boundaries of living? How can we develop a situated understanding and formulate bridging vocabularies that can build bridges between different bodies of knowledge without ceding primacy to any one?

Steadfastly insisting on centering experience within context, and looking for resonances rather than transferabilities of meaning, offers some promise. We found, for instance, that women are not as interested in questions of formalisation as they are in a recognition of worker identity. The issue of identity *as workers* is key to their negotiations within the family for space and time to work, but also to recover from work. Understanding the politics of the workplace, a notion that traverses domestic, community, and public spaces, fills out ideas of where regulation needs to be expanded if women are to be supported in their work lives. Further, we found that women's collectives are quilted together through ties formed on difficult commutes, while sharing care duties, and transferring crucial information through whisper networks (Komarraju,2023) that challenge ideas about unionisation and formal collectives yet retaining a feminist character. Such insights feed back into the necessarily imaginative policy formulation exercises that have for too long relied upon dominant worldviews, while also forcing us to build theory using a different set of conceptual blocks.

The effort to contest historically entrenched hegemonies must call on the participation of those who are systematically excluded from the various stages of framing experience, defining meaning, and ultimately, codifying what is accepted as knowledge. In media and communication studies, where the channels of packaging and disseminating are themselves so deeply implicated in preserving these hegemonies, this is a complex task.

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DECOLONIZING FACT-CHECKING THROUGH THE USE OF NONPROFESSIONAL MEDIATORS

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They are widely seen as leading "the task of assessing whether claims made in written or spoken language are true" (Guo et al 2022:178). Some even consider them as tools "mostly established for combating misinformation, disinformation, or fake news" (Tsang et. al 2022:3). Fact-checkers are emerging as important players in the painstaking fight against the pervasive manipulation of information online, particularly on social media platforms. Intriguingly, fact-checking is already considered "a genuinely transnational movement in journalism" (Graves and Cherubini:614) with current research perceiving it to be having the capacity to expose "fake news" (Juneström 2022). At the same time, the diffusion of "fake news" is making inroads, polarizing communities even in the face of the recurring presence of digital divides, a recent Ghanaian study concluded (Gadjanova et. al 2022). As we know from studies on the United States (e.g. Kraft and Donovan, 2020 p. 194), "fake news" distributed mostly on social media platforms erode democratic social institutions. This constrains political systems and in some cases even distresses healthy democracies (Linvill and Warren 2020). Recent studies have shown that on the African continent, social media platforms not only spread "fake news" but are also helping escalate hatred and extremist ideas (Vermeersch et al, 2020; Madrid Morales et al 2021).

"Fake news"

This presentation reflects on mainstreaming decolonial perspectives through a project that aims to decolonize fact-checking as a potential tool for combating "fake news" in two politically unstable African countries: Mali and Ethiopia. To do so, it calls for the fusion and engagement of nonprofessional citizens as social media mediators and potential tools of fighting falsehoods online. With social media platforms playing an active role in spreading false information online, there is an urgent need to study ways to stem the tide of platform-based "fake news." Our objectives are thus threefold. First, it lays bare the inherent causes behind the proliferation of false information online, offering African theoretical perspectives that are underrepresented in academic research, which is dominated by research findings from the Western hemisphere. Second, it investigates whether the intervention by non-professional players could help reduce the spread of inaccurate and misleading information on social media networks, by assessing the effectiveness and reliability of citizen-based initiatives. This approach decolonizes the dependency on professional fact-checkers and the inherent belief that they stand out as the lone arbiters of truth. Third, it establishes the extent to which reducing the spread of "fake news" fosters peace and democratization in these two countries.

Methods

Data collection takes place using multiple methods, including focus group interviews, storytelling, and digital ethnography. The project addresses a significant problem: online misinformation poses a growing threat to democracy in Africa and beyond. In an ever-globalizing context, political and social challenges faced by politically-stable countries on other continents also affect Europe, including for example, the influx of refugees. Stemming the tide of "fake news" and fostering political stability in Africa is therefore in everyone's interest. The project establishes the drive and motive for the continuous infusion of "fake news" on the African digital space, calling for decolonized mechanisms to form part of the solutions contributing toward understanding the importance of engaging local and context-specific solutions to online falsehoods including the use of alternative actors such as bloggers and citizen journalists. It also assesses whether decolonized citizen-based fact-checking initiatives could become effective tools for potentially defeating "fake news." Besides, it evaluates whether using decolonized mechanisms to help combat misinformation and steer peace and democratization in Ethiopia and Mali.

Citizens at the forefront

The main reason why a decolonial approach is perceived to work stems from the fact that many people living in these two aforementioned countries do not trust state-led fact-checking operations. In other words, they do not trust institutions. Besides, the omnipresence of "fake news" in the fast-paced digital world has prompted governments, policy makers and scholars across the world to seek immediate and long-term solutions to stem this viral tide with several of the proposed mechanisms not always yielding positive results. Fact- checking, which has expanded exponentially all over the globe, has yielded positive effects on factual accuracy (Porter and Wood 2021). This transnational movement in journalism (Moreno-Gil et. al 2022) involves the retroactive correction of misinformation by showing and explaining, in many instances, why and how the information is fake. Its major purpose is to establish the veracity and credibility of information, debunking false content and hoaxes that often go viral on social media. However, in countries like Ethiopia and Mali, we propose that citizens should be on the forefront of this fight against misinformations because of the distrust that exists between authorities and citizens.

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