Disinformation in the Global South

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For several years, especially since the Trump campaign in the 2016 US presidential election, disinformation research has been a relevant and growing field of media and communication studies. In Europe, the 2014 Ukraine crisis with the apparent Russian attempts to influence Western publics and the Brexit campaign 2016 provided evidence that strategically disseminated disinformation is a major problem in contemporary public discourse. The COVID-19 pandemic with its overwhelming environment of conspiracy theories and health-related disinformation highlighted the global character of the phenomenon.

However, research is still very much rooted in Western countries and contexts. This is first of all a problem at a very basic epistemological level, because what we perceive as the supposed global state of research on this (and most other) topics is very narrow, representing just a very small part of the world's population and countries by mainly focusing on research in the Global North. To truly test hypotheses on social behavior and communication processes, research needs to be global in its true sense. Second, as Guy Berger, UNESCO's Director for Strategies and Policies in the Field of Information and Communication points out in a substantial foreword to the book, the Global South provides particular psychological, social and political contexts that call for their own theoretical models and thus can contribute to expanding existing explanations of the emergence, processing and effects of disinformation. Examples cited by Berger are the very different media landscapes and concepts of journalism, which are linked to concepts of trust and media credibility that may be very different from those in the Global North. As a consequence, trust-building and other approaches to fighting disinformation cannot simply be transferred from the West and certainly need to be adapted to the national contexts of the Global South.

The editors follow this perspective in the structure of their book, by first laying the groundwork with four essays in a first section on "Histories, Theories, and Methods", followed by a longer section on cases of disinformation titled "Cultures of Disinformation", which consists of six chapters, and three concluding chapters on "Responses: Southern Perspectives". While some of the authors take a more general approach, the reader can gain deeper insights into broader regions such as the Arab world or Southeast Asia as well as the countries of Congo, Chile, India, the Philippines, China, Singapore, Turkey, South Africa, and Kenya.

Starting with a look at the case of the Philippines, Edson C. Tandoc Jr. frames his article in the first section of the book through a common stereotype about the Global South: "Can online falsehood spread fast when internet is slow?" Highlighting the extreme importance of social media to the population (supported and cemented by the "Facebook Free" service), he describes the political propaganda industry, fueled by all political parties, that has taken advantage of this environment. Asian cultural values, such as mandatory respect for elders, are the context that makes countermeasures a particular challenge.

Looking more broadly on the Arab world, Saba Bebawi highlights the role of journalism in the disinformation ecosystem. She may surprise some readers by showing that, unlike in the Global North, mis- and disinformation have a much longer tradition in many regions of the Global South, and have not just recently emerged on the internet and social media but have long been part of news reporting. In addition to some structural conditions, such as stronger state influence on the media, Bebawi links the tendency of Arab journalists to be more flexible with the truth to the more emotional and affective tradition of Arab literature and writing, which is linked to an oral culture in the region.

In India, as Sangeet Kumar shows in the third chapter of this section, it is the struggle for the power to define India's history that is a major driving force behind the emergence of fictional historiography. By working on the colonial past as a frame for the country's postcolonial future, the disinforming interpretations of past events by self-defined historians strongly affect the current political discourse in India.

The section concludes with a systematic analysis of the state of comparative communication research in the field of disinformation with a special focus on Global North and Global South perspectives by the volume's editors Dani Madrid-Morales and Herman Wasserman. They emphasize the scientific and methodological challenges to strengthen empirical research in the Global South in the field of disinformation: On the one hand, more large-scale research designs and thorough data collection would be needed, while on the other hand, simply transferring Western theoretical and methodological concepts that fail to cover the characteristics of societies in the Global South needs to be avoided.

The middle section of the book brings together six chapters that provide deeper and often fascinating insights into the political, social and cultural contexts of different countries. Katrien Pype and Sébastien Maluta Makaya characterize the urban citizenry of Kinshasa as highly accustomed to various types of mis- and disinformation, resulting in a broad set of individual strategies for navigating the uncertain information environment. In their contribution as well as in the chapter by Ingrid Bachmann, Daniela Grassau and Claudia Labarca on disinformation in the context of the 2019 protests in Chile, the much longer history of disinformation in the Global South becomes evident. In Chile, disinformation is a legacy of the Pinochet dictatorship, resulting in low media trust and an "information disorder crisis" in the country. The seventh chapter follows a different logic by focusing on WhatsApp as an environment for misinformation. Ozan Kuru, Scott W. Campbell, Joseph B. Bayer, Lemi Baruh and Richard Ling report findings from a comparative study in Singapore, Turkey and the US that highlight the importance of trust in group members on WhatsApp for the flow of misinformation.

China is of particular importance as an interesting case in an authoritarian national context. Kecheng Fang analyzes the strategy of Chinese propaganda and state media that claim authority over the concepts of fact-checking and debunking, making it "a

weapon in the war of information". Jose Mari Hall Lanuza and Cleve V. Arguelles broaden the perspective with another comparative study on Southeast Asian countries. They use Hallin & Mancini's framework to analyze the different media system characteristics of eleven countries in the region that play a role in the dissemination of disinformation. As a concluding chapter in this section, Jairo Lugo-Ocando and Alessandro Martinisi contribute a very well-designed chapter on the fundamental aspect of fighting disinformation using facts and statistics. They provide a rich account of the history of this approach going back to the era of Enlightenment. Emerging from a Western, positivist culture, the authors argue, the strategy of confronting rumors, myths and lies with cold numbers and scientific facts reaches its limits when being confronted with Global South cultures.

In the third and final section, the perspective shifts to the question of responses to the particular form of disinformation in the Global South. Anya Schiffrin and Peter Cunliffe-Jones go through the whole range of existing approaches from teaching media literacy to tech company liability and legal measures and discuss how particular "Southern" approaches in each of these areas should be designed to be effective. As a contrast in both scope and detail, Melissa Tully in her empirical contribution zooms in on responses to disinformation in Kenya, with an emphasis on citizen agency. Her focus groups provide a vivid sense of how citizens see themselves as experienced in and responsible for dealing with disinformation. This perspective is finally complemented by a media-focused analysis by Nabeelah Shabbir, Julie Posetti and Felix M. Simon, who analyze three different news outlets in India, South Africa and the Philippines that are dedicated to fighting disinformation. Their contribution is a good conclusion to the final section of the book, concluding that a networked approach that engages civil society and audiences can be a powerful answer to disinformation, particularly in the Global South.

All in all, the book is a very valuable contribution both to the field of mis- and disinformation studies and to communication research in the Global South. It provides many new insights that have the potential to guide further research in both fields – because research on disinformation in the Global South can also provide relevant conclusions for the Global North and for general theories of disinformation.