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SPECIAL ISSUE #CommunicationSoWhite
#CommunicationSoWhite: Race and Power in the Academy and Beyond

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#COMMUNICATIONSOWHITE: RACE AND POWER IN THE ACADEMY AND BEYOND

The debates and critiques of #CommunicationSoWhite have arisen as responses to troubling academic and political contexts, which are complexly intertwined. We are in the midst of widespread expansion and ascendance of white supremacy globally, as disturbingly evident in the trajectories, rhetoric, and actions of Donald Trump in the United States, the United Kingdom's Boris Johnson, and the Golden Dawn in Greece, alongside the growing power of right-wing and authoritarian regimes more generally: China under Xi, India under Modi, Brazil under Bolsonaro, and others. At this moment of such cultural and political crises, a critical mass of scholars, recognizing the centrality of media and communication in facilitating these shifts, is increasingly speaking back, intervening in, and reshaping our field. #CommunicationSoWhite is an intervention that calls into focus the complicity of the academy in perpetuating existing racial and intersecting hierarchies. By drawing attention to race, inequality, and exclusion, we highlight the importance of engaging questions on power, identity, and politics in communication and media studies. Tensions and, in some cases, conflicts arising from our field's persistent inequities are urgent signs that our professional organizations, institutions, and the entire discipline must undertake transformative changes.

One key moment: the experiences of multiple scholars of color who faced racism and white supremacist threats in May 2018 at the International Communication Association conference in Prague raised questions about how to combat racial terror, threats, and US/Eurocentrism encountered within our discipline. Later that month, a social media discussion that included Al

Martin, Eve Ng, Anamik Saha, and Khadijah White reflected further on these issues. In the wake of Chakravartty, Kuo, Grubbs, & McIlwain's (2018) "#CommunicationSoWhite" article, Saha, White, Ng, and Martin decided to organize a program for the 2019 conference that explicitly addressed racial and intersecting hierarchies in communication studies. A longer-range goal was also for ICA's leadership to more actively tackle these issues at the organizational level.

The challenges of bringing the pre-conference to fruition are instructive about the conditions of the field more generally. The organizers contacted the five ICA divisions with the most sessions allocated to them (at least 37; the largest had 61) and the largest budgets available for the 2018 conference.[1] We asked the division chairs and vice-chairs if they would dedicate one of their main conference sessions to the #CommunicationSoWhite theme and whether they could provide any financial support towards the pre-conference, as we saw the topic as highly pertinent to all scholarly areas in communication. Almost every response from the leadership of these divisions was a firm, polite "no" for both requests, frequently accompanied by comments that the division was already addressing issues of inequality or diversity and inclusion through their existing programming.[2] Ultimately, of the five largest divisions, only the Communication and Technology division co-sponsored by providing a session for a #CommunicationSoWhite panel in the main conference, while the Mass Communication division provided financial support of $250. The pre-conference budget therefore came largely from the medium-sized and smaller sections, with the Ethnicity and Race in Communication division and the LGBTQ Studies interest group providing $750 and $600 respectively, which together comprised over half of the total budget.[3]

We present these details not to impugn the motivations of particular ICA divisions, their chairs

and vice-chairs, or ICA's executive leadership, but as an example how hegemonically white

institutions can remain resistant to change. To make a bold analogy, there have been more calls

for reparations to redress the immense levels of exploitation, ongoing systemic marginalization

of people of African descent, and other structural inequalities associated with slavery in the U.S.

context and elsewhere (e.g. Human Rights Watch, 2019; Kunnie, 2018), as well as for

Indigenous peoples stripped of their lands and sovereignty (see Erueti, 2016; United Nations

Human Rights Council, 2019). To put it plainly, then, real resources are needed alongside

goodwill and moral support; systemic disenfranchisement must be tackled with systemic redress,

and one way this could happen within communication and media studies is for the most well-

resourced pockets of our discipline to play larger roles in sharing those resources.

With the support that the organizers did secure, the 2019 ICA #CommunicationSoWhite pre-

conference was held in Washington D.C. on May 24; it was accompanied by two

#CommunicationSoWhite-themed sessions in the main conference, one organized by Ng and co-

sponsored by the CAT division, and the other an ICA-wide sponsored session put forward by

Paula Chakravartty and Charlton McIlwain.[4] These events were intended to spur conversations

that continue in multiple spaces, and White, Saha, and Ng moved forward as editors of this

Communication, Culture, and Critique "#CommunicationSoWhite" special issue with this goal

in mind. We wanted the contributions here to reflect the scope of topics discussed during the pre-

conference and main conference, and for them to be available to a wider audience. Although

journal length considerations constrained how many articles could be included, there are five full

papers, an interview essay, and five Forum essays, with the contributors being collectively drawn from both the pre-conference and the main conference #CommunicationSoWhite sessions.

We recognize that this pool for the special issue constitutes a critical limitation, not least because the majority of contributors are based in the U.S. Even though the pre-conference call for papers encouraged "participation by submitters from outside North America and the U.K.," only eight out of the 31 presenters were based outside of these two regions, in Australia, Brazil, Germany, and Kenya. This is unsurprising given that the pre-conference was held on the east coast of the U.S. Yet the location of the pre-conference and main conference is no coincidence, as Ng and Gardner (2020) discuss in this issue: it is integral to the postcolonial inequities of place and race in academia. We have not, in other words, been able to escape the Euro-U.S.-centricity that is one central thread in recent critiques about the field (e.g. see Hegde & Shome, 2002; Shome, 2016; Yue, 2014).

At the same time, in identifying North/South disparities, we also recognize that intersectional hierarchies stratify the global North. Even as we call for more inclusion of scholars of color from around the world, shared resistance, transnational solidarities, and coalition-building are key to navigating and constructing the academy, which reproduces and reifies systems of oppression through our research methods, hiring, and recognition. Within the ivory towers of the global North, faculty of color are increasingly contingent and frequently isolated. For example, in the U.S., Black and Latino professors each make up only about 7% of full-time faculty, but over 13% and 18% of the US population respectively (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018; US Census Bureau, 2019). In the U.K., there was a country-wide total of only 25 Black women

professors in 2019, but more than 10,000 white male professors (Rollock, 2019). Thus, it is

significant that 17 of the 23 pre-conference presenters based in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K.

are scholars of color, as are seven of the eight other presenters and five of the (non-presenter)

session chairs. With white cis-gendered heterosexual men the most over-represented in

communication studies citations (Chakravartty et al., 2018; Mayer, Press, Verhoeven, & Sterne,

2018), making and claiming spaces for people of color and other voices traditionally

marginalized in Western academic spaces, including feminist, queer, and Indigenous scholars, is

also a key goal of #CommunicationSoWhite's critique.

It is worth revisiting what the "white" in "#CommunicationSoWhite" refers to. Chakravartty et

al. (2018) make clear that they approach race not as an inherent attribute of any one individual

and by no means confined to the way the U.S.'s long history of racism is often reduced to Black-

white racial dichotomies, but as a sociopolitical construction that must be understood through

historical and contemporary axes of domination, where "global racial hierarchies … inform a

dynamic, relational conceptualization of race where racial differences are articulated across lines

of skin color, ethnicity, class, and caste" (p. 255). Also looking beyond individual identities,

Gardner (2018) argues that it is not enough for ICA's internationalization efforts to "simply cross

borders to accumulate new members"; instead, it is necessary "to reimagine our normative ways

of doing research" (p. 832), attentive to how subordinate groups tend to be homogenized in ways

that exacerbate their marginalization, as well as "how historical legacies (e.g., of colonialism or

gender bias) produce slippery new practices of marginalization" (p. 833).

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We recognize that the transformative potential of "diversity" efforts has been increasingly

diluted through the cooptation of the term to simplistically refer to the presence of black or

brown individuals—on a faculty, for example—with scant regard for complex intersections of

nation, class, caste, and religion, or without genuine reflexivity or intent for structural change.

Highlighting the problematic Western dominance of communication scholarship should not

sideline important racial and colonial critiques, including those generated by marginalized

scholars in the West about white supremacy as a dominant global ideology. Such contributions in

contexts where people of color occupy a minoritarian status – the U.S. and the UK, for example

– have been foundational to university-based Racial and Ethnic Studies, and have shifted the

lexicons and methods of entire disciplines.

Thus, advocating for greater global South representation and for more diversity of gender,

sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, etc. within the global North is not a zero-sum game; rather, these

endeavors invite crucial coalitional mobilizations advocated by activists and scholars for social

justice (e.g. see Cohen, 1997; Chávez, 2013). A larger history of anti-colonial, pan-African, and

indigenous struggles around the world have drawn attention to the key ways that white

supremacy, racial hierarchies, and colonialism have organized, defined, and continue to devalue

the contributions of marginalized people, regardless of their minoritarian or majoritarian status.

We recognize the lessons learned from Black feminist and third world scholars who push for

solidarity and organizing among subaltern groups across and inside national boundaries.

As we see it, #CommunicationSoWhite is expansive enough a keyword to address these issues in

myriad ways. Indebted to critical race studies and other scholarship attentive to power, including

cultural studies and feminist and queer theory, its critique of communication studies links it to

earlier work that exposed the academy as steeped in inequalities (e.g. Acker, Wagner, &

Mayuzumi, 2008; Wiegman, 1997). As a clarion call for recognizing the inextricable relationship

of the scholarly and the political, #CommunicationSoWhite also ties to a broad swath of work

that demands examining not just content – whether theory or data – but practices. Indeed,

academic practices in research, hiring, evaluating, training, citing, and celebrating provide

crucial contexts from which theory and data emerge.

In Chakravartty et al. (2018), the focus was on citational practices and the structural inequalities

of journal publication, and this thread is continued by de Albuquerque, de Oliveira, dos Santos,

and de Albuquerque (2020), who discuss how the journals included in Clarivate's Journal of

Citation Reports Communications list and the composition of their editorial boards skew

significantly to Western and especially U.S. institutions, findings that the authors situate within

broader conditions of "academic capitalism" and postcolonial global asymmetries. Examining a

different body of scholarly publications, Manning (2020) discusses how commonly used

interpersonal communication textbooks center whiteness as the norm even as they include select

examples of racial and ethnic "diversity." There are also critiques of other practices and spaces

of communication scholarship. Reviewing the factors informing ICA's determination of

conference venues, Ng and Gardner (2020) argue that ICA's membership must consider the

postcolonial privileges of place when the annual conference is more accessible to those in the

global North, and be open to changes that would make holding the conference elsewhere viable.

McAllister, Jiwani, and Hirji (2020) examine Canadian communication studies through a review

of university department faculty composition and contributors to Canadian communication

journals, uncovering a dominant whiteness tied to the nation's basis as a settler colony, despite

contemporary discourses of multicultural diversity. And taking a global lens, Chakravartty

(2020) argues that the turn to ultra-nationalism in many nation-states is tied to increased

repression of "minoritized academics" and scholars addressing "the interests of marginalized,

and often racialized, populations," underscoring the urgency of addressing racism within the

intertwining of contested knowledge production and politics.

The articles also present strategies for reframing or pushing back against dominant modes of

scholarship. Discussing Twitter data showing that user engagement around the

#CommunicationSoWhite hashtag in 2019 was dominated by people of color, Murthy (2020)

calls for white scholars to be more actively engaged in addressing racial inequities, not just

online but in practices such as mentoring students of color. Phillips and Verhoeven (2020) draw

on Australian Indigenous perspectives to propose an approach of "relationality," different from

much communication scholarship, that takes account of place and "lifeworld data" in designing

and interpreting research. Sobande and Osei (2020) identify how Black women's media and

aesthetic practices have historically been marginalized, and argue for centering Black women's

"agency, joy and resistance" in media studies rather than their oppression and trauma. Examining

three digital syllabi addressing white supremacy and racial injustice in the U.S., Clark (2020)

discusses how these comprise critical communication praxis and provide examples of how to

conduct critical public pedagogy.

Also significant to contemporary strategies of resistance and transformation is recognizing key

historical developments in the field. In White's (2020) interview essay interrogating knowledge

production in the academy, senior Black communication scholars Herman Gray and Oscar

Gandy reflect on a variety of processes affecting the construction of center and margins,

including those that "anoint" and allocate prestige as well as practices such as community

building amongst minority scholars that challenge dominant academic power. And, in an article

excavating the "ethno-racial encounters" of early Western communication theory, Mukherjee

(2020) traces the genealogy of Frankfurt School scholarship to highlight "how questions of race

and ethno-racial difference are embedded among the formative influences on the discipline," at

the same time providing an extensive number of citations highlighting communication research

by scholars of color. In such ways, we acknowledge important legacies without acquiescing to

them the power to define the future of the field.

In closing, we want to acknowledge that we, the co-editors of this issue, speak from positions of

relative privilege, as scholars employed in full-time tenure-track or tenured positions in the U.S.

(Ng and White) and the U.K. (Saha). Still, this has not completely shielded us from threats to

labor conditions or even to the existence of our academic units, and we work with colleagues

with contingent appointments under even greater pressures from the corporatization of the

university.[5] Indeed, the precarity of academic employment intersects with hierarchies of race,

ethnicity, nation, religion, gender, sexuality, class, etc. As Chakravartty et al. (2018) mentioned

(citing the work of other scholars), contingent labor in academia "has been disproportionately

shouldered by women and people of color" (p. 257). On this note, we would therefore underscore

the point that the goal cannot simply be increasing the number of diverse scholars in academic

units, but rather, substantially transforming these spaces so that they do not subject racialized

bodies to greater forms of discipline than their white counterparts (Ahmed, 2012; Puwar, 2004).

To reiterate, the political forces around the globe being marshalled against subordinated groups

and the surge of rightwing populism, especially as they manifest as xenophobic, Islamophobic,

white supremacist discourse (e.g. see Titley, 2019; Valluvan, 2019), crucially comprise the

contexts critiqued by #CommunicationSoWhite. Yet there have also been recent reasons for

optimism, including new arenas of engagement that directly address pertinent issues. For

example, one digital space that emerged after the pre-conference is the Communication Scholars

for Transformation Facebook page,[6] initially established in response to the National

Communication Association's Distinguished Scholars controversy. An editorial written by

Martin Medhurst, editor of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, against NCA's recent policy initiatives to

increase the diversity of its designated "Distinguished Scholars,"[7] drew immediate criticism.

This series of events has been helpfully summarized by others[8] and deliberated more extensively

in a special "Merit, Whiteness, and Privilege" issue of *Departures in Critical Qualitative*

Research (Rodriguez, Dutta, & Desnoyers-Colas, 2019), so here we simply note that their

occurrence demonstrates how entrenched opposition to structural change can be from those who

have traditionally benefitted from the status quo; yet the rapid mobilization of critiques,

including a protest letter of response and multiple official statements of support for these

critiques from NCA divisions and others, also show the strength and depth amongst

communication scholars committed to addressing systemic inequalities of the field.[9] In

themselves, bursts of heightened attention to egregious incidents are insufficient; it is therefore

also significant that, in the second half of 2019, new task forces with similar mandates were

established within ICA (the Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access Task Force), NCA (the

Diversifying Knowledge Task Force), and the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (the Anti-

Racism Task Force). It remains to be seen what these efforts produce in terms of significant

transformation; certainly, the barometer seems to have shifted in the right direction for now, but

the lessons of history and our current conditions demonstrate that nothing can be taken for

granted. With an array of #CommunicationSoWhite analyses from predominantly scholars of

color, this special issue will hopefully spur further conversation and action on addressing race,

racism, white supremacy, and other persistent structures of inequality in our field, and their

manifestations in the world more broadly.

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[1] ICA Executive Committee guidelines limit the sharing of budget information to ICA members. The 2018-2019 budget is available to logged in members at

https://www.icahdq.org/page/Reports

[2] Other reasons given included: the division did not offer sponsorship of pre-conferences besides those they organized themselves, the division received such a high number of submissions that setting aside one session for #CommunicationSoWhite was not feasible, the division did not feel comfortable "singling out" a topic (#CommunicationSoWhite) with a special call, and the division only allocated a session to a specific topic if it was explicitly requested by its members. One of the organizers did in fact belong to two of the five largest divisions that were asked for support.

[3] Additional sponsorship was provided by the Feminist Scholarship, Global Communication and Social Change, and Popular Communication divisions and the Activism, Communication and

Social Justice interest group. Also, Prof. Caetlin Benson-Allott in the Film and Media Studies

Program, Georgetown University, helped organizers secure university-member rates for room

and catering facilities at Georgetown, where the pre-conference was held.

[4] The CAT panel was entitled "#CommunicationSoWhite Interventions in Communication and

Technology Studies." The roundtable, "#Communicationsowhite: The University as Sanctuary,"

was awarded by the ICA conference planner and headquarters office, and favorably scheduled in

terms of both time slot and space.

[5] At Eve Ng's institution, Ohio University, administration budget-saving proposals include

increasing faculty teaching loads across the board without increasing salaries and cutting a

significant proportion of contingent faculty. Anamik Saha recently participated in a strike by

British university workers over, amongst other things, the ethnic and gender pay-gap that exists

in U.K. higher education.

[6] Originally a secret group called "Open Letter on Diversity in the Communication Discipline," it

was made public on June 17, 2019 and its name changed to the current one.

[7] It was intended for publication in that journal but later withdrawn after much public criticism.

[8] For example, see http://2019commsowhitecontroversy.simplesite.com;

http://bernadettemariecalafellphd.com/.

[9] A similar, though smaller scale, response followed an incident that occurred during the

Organizational Communication top paper session at the 2019 NCA meeting, in which panelists

walked out in response to the moderator's perceived negative response to the race and

marginalization as depicted in the papers. The moderator, a past chair of the division, resigned

after criticism of the panel was publicly shared and discussed among communication scholars

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