Epistemologies of Division in Arab Media Scholarship

Noha Mellor[1]
University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

Abstract: This article discusses epistemologies of division in Arab media scholarship as a topical case study, given the role of media as a convergence of ideology, values, politics, and market mechanisms. It specifically addresses these questions: How does the colonial structure of academia seek to alienate Global Majority communities from one another? What is the intimate impact of this structure on the lives of academics under these epistemologies of division? And to what extent do non-Western media scholars reinforce this alienated image through internalized Orientalism? Methodologically, the article is based on an autoethnographic approach where I reflect on my professional trajectory as an Arab "diasporic academic" who spent nearly thirty years in Europe before moving back to the Middle East. Theoretically, the article draws on Orientalism as an ideology to shed light on how Western higher education institutions (HEIs) reinforce their superiority, creating an epistemic exclusion of Arab scholars. This problem is exacerbated by the neoliberal policies that tend to place HEIs on a global hierarchy, and by Arab scholars' acceptance of this exclusion, which is termed internalized or self-orientalism.
Keywords: Neoliberalism, Orientalism, self-orientalism, transnational academics, autoethnography, epistemic exclusion

The debate about the dominance of Western scholars in Media Studies, whether in Journalism, Communication, or Cultural Studies, has been extensively debated (e.g., Chakravartty et al., 2018; Dutta & Pal, 2020; Shome, 2019). This domination is particularly evident among scholars from a few Western countries, including the UK and USA, which are also the primary destinations for Arab media and communication students who learn Anglo-American communication models as the norm. The term "West" here refers to the former imperial powers and their Euro- and North America-centric theories, practices, and mindsets (Yalkin & Özbilgin, 2022, p. 192). In the Arab region, media and communication studies lack collaboration on a regional and international level, with Arab scholars grappling with poor visibility and lack of funding, which diminishes their ability to contribute to global media scholarship. This creates a division of academia into successful and unsuccessful countries, known as the "Matthew Effect" (Demeter, 2019, p. 38), and makes the current debate on inclusion empty rhetoric with no tangible outcomes (Bhopal et al., 2015). Furthermore, there is a hierarchy that favors Western institutions and intellectuals over those in the Arab region, granting them authority over scholarly publishing.

This article contributes to the debate about ways to decolonize Arab Media scholarship as a topical case study, given the role of media as a convergence of ideology, values, politics, and market mechanisms. It specifically addresses these questions: How does the structure of academia

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[1] Corresponding author; Professor in Communication at the College of Communication, University of Sharjah, University City Road, P.O. Box 27272, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, E-mail: nmellor@sharjah.ac.ae

seek to alienate Global Majority communities from one another? What is the intimate impact of this structure on the lives of academics under these epistemologies of division? And to what extent do Arab media scholars reinforce this alienated image through internalized Orientalism? The answers, as I discuss below, are the result of several interlinking factors, including the prioritization of Western epistemologies and methodologies, the structural bias in academia, leading to Arab scholas' diminished opportunities and underrepresentation in scholarly publications, coupled with Arab scholars' tendency to devalue their intellectual heritage, thereby contributing to the cycle of epistemological dominance and dependency.

This reflective article aims to advance the dialogue surrounding the decolonization of academia and explore ways to transform the academy by strengthening ties with our broader communities. It highlights the challenges Arab scholars face in Western academia, emphasizing visibility issues and the dominance of Western epistemologies. It also addresses self-orientalism among Arab scholars, calling for decolonizing communication and media studies by integrating Indigenous knowledge, using autoethnography to amplify marginalized voices, and reforming citation practices to acknowledge diverse contributions to knowledge production. Additionally, it calls for a broader discussion on the roles of higher education institutions in global society, challenging paradigms that favor Western hegemony.

Methodologically, I rely on autoethnography as a research method, drawing on my personal experiences, thereby breaching the traditional separation of researcher and subject. Such a method connects personal experiences to cultural, political, and social contexts while involving self-reflection and introspection. It emerged in the 1980s with a call advocating personal narrative and subjectivity in research, and it continued in the 1990s and 2000s across various disciplines, particularly due to the increased representation of women and minorities in academia, which shifted the gaze toward identity politics (Ellis & Adams, 2014). As a qualitative method, autoethnography dismisses the possibility of universal truth while countering colonialist practices. Thus, autoethnography views personal experiences as a means of gaining knowledge and understanding of cultural experiences and insight into social structures (Ellis & Adams, 2014). It is also a way of describing and critiquing cultural beliefs and practices while striving for social justice (Adams et al., 2015). In this sense, it is an emancipatory discourse allowing individual authors to represent themselves and express their truth without being colonized by others or treated as second-class citizens (Richards, 2008). After all, we hardly choose our research topics accidentally, as our personal motives often drive our research (Richards, 2008). As a research method, autoethnography combines elements of autobiography and ethnography, allowing the researcher to explore the subjective and cultural dimensions of their own life in relation to larger social, cultural, and political contexts. This reflexivity arises from our strategic position, necessitating awareness of our roles as researchers and our stance toward academic conventions (Said, 1978/2003). Regarding validity, auto-ethnographers rely on readers to assess generalizability and provide validation by comparing their experiences with those of the authors.

My approach stems from my position as a native Egyptian who lived and worked for nearly three decades in Europe, specifically in Denmark and the UK. The autoethnography approach helps me legitimize my personal experience as a critical data source, providing an in-depth perspective that is difficult to achieve through other qualitative methods without compromising the privacy or integrity of individuals or organizations. This approach can, therefore, provide critical insights into systemic issues that can enrich academic discourse around inclusivity within scholarly research. However, I acknowledge my own bias in shaping the interpretation of my

experiences as a diasporan academic, and to mitigate this bias, I draw on social theories to further the debate about researchers like me and our unique position in the field of media studies.

The following sections demonstrate this critical self-reflection through references to several personal experiences that I use as evidence to support my argument and to emphasize the cultural context in which these experiences unfold. In the first part of this article, I contextualize the current state of academia within the debate of neoliberalism, arguing that the neoliberal structure of the higher education institutions (HEIs) has made it difficult for Western institutions to relinquish their superior positions in the field, leaving Arab educational institutions dependent on Western institutions to gain recognition and status. The second part of the article discusses the tools of epistemic exclusion in Western HEIs while highlighting how Arab HEIs may be perpetuating the same exclusion cycle by internalizing Orientalism. Theoretically, this article draws on Said's work on Orientalism as a starting point to explore other related concepts, such as "Orientalism in reverse" and "internalized Orientalism."

Theoretical Grounding: The Different Forms of Orientalism

Edward Said's (1978/2003) *Orientalism* helped shed light on how Western scholars have created a distorted and oversimplified image of the East to reinforce their own superiority and justify their colonialist activities. Orientalism, he argues, is a way of thinking that has political implications and is used to create knowledge about the East for imperialistic purposes. Said criticizes the power imbalances inherent in Orientalist discourse and its impact on colonized societies, as this Orientalist discourse relies on binary oppositions, perpetuating stereotypes and oversimplifying complex cultural realities.

The Orientalism debate remains relevant today as scholars continue to grapple with issues of representation, power, and the decolonization of knowledge. For instance, it is argued that Orientalism is a framework that reinforces the Global North's dominance over the Global South and perpetuates the colonial status quo in postcolonial countries through its representatives (Alahmed, 2020), which means that the power dynamics between previous colonizers and colonized persist in academia (Yalkin & Özbilgin, 2022). However, it is important to note that Arab scholars and administrators can also advance Orientalism through internalized Orientalism and reverse Orientalism.

A cogent but under-theorized concept is Orientalism in reverse, which reproduces the Orientalists' essentialist dichotomy with inverted values, where the Orient, or here the Arab mind, is regarded as superior to the West (Achcar, 2008). This concept consists of several assertions, such as that the West and the Islamic Orient are fundamentally opposed; religion and culture play a crucial role in Islamic history; the belief that the only way to achieve a renaissance is through Islam; and movements aimed at returning to Islam are progressive reactions to Western cultural domination (Achcar, 2008). For instance, according to the Egyptian philosopher Fouad Zakaria (2017), some Arab scholars tend to apply different standards when evaluating Western and Islamic civilizations in that they tend to describe the West as they see it, but when it comes to the Muslim world, they describe an idealized version that does not accurately represent its actual reality. Even some Arab scholars residing in the West may depict an idyllic image of the East, which is no less far-fetched than the one portrayed by Orientalists, which reinforces rather than challenges the idea of Arab exceptionalism (Zakaria, 1987). Another example is the call by some media scholars (e.g., Ayish & Sadig, 1997; Khudarova et al., 2024) to reconceptualize alternative media theories from Islamic standpoints, which, thus far, has not yielded new theoretical frameworks. Moreover, such

an approach was critiqued for remaining with the essentialist division of West versus non-West (Ranji, 2021), not to mention the difficulty in articulating such an Islamic perspective because of the diversity of the legal systems in Muslim-majority states, which is a combination of religious and civil codes without unified guidelines (An-Na'im, 2003). Additionally, Arab scholars may use the Western approach to study Arab and Islamic cultures as they may arguably feel alienated from their own culture or that their local institutions dictate that they publish in Western/American journals, leading them to reproduce Western epistemic hegemony (Hanafi & Arvanitis, 2016), indicating a form of internalized Orientalism, which I discuss in more detail below.

Tracing the Orientalist discourse in higher education offers insight into the perpetuation of biases, both in the Global South and the North. I posit that this discourse has been exacerbated by the rise of neoliberalism in the field of higher education, which is evident not only in the global hierarchy, such as the global ranking of universities, but also in the neglect of local knowledge due to the epistemic exclusion of Arab scholars. This exclusion is perpetuated by internalized Orientalism, which further amplifies power imbalances. Each of these factors is examined in the following sections.

The Neoliberal Academy

I grew up in Egypt, a country that witnessed a rallying of intellectuals behind a socialist vision, especially during the 1950s and 1960s. Post-independence, the Egyptian state pledged affordable housing, education, health services, and employment for university graduates. However, since the 1970s, Egypt has shifted to an Open-Door policy, resulting in the privatization of education and a decline in public education quality (Brown, 2015), and the mushrooming of foreign-language schools and campuses afforded only by the upper classes, especially with the annihilation of the middle class in Egypt (El Baba & Khawaja, 2023). Such neoliberal policies have marketized education, resulting in a decline in quality and equality in the public education system in Egypt (Sobhy, 2023). Also, the increase of foreign campuses in Egypt and the whole region has resulted in the dominance of foreign curricula, with Arab instructors encouraging their students to use Western references, thereby repeating hypotheses and assumptions made by foreign researchers rather than challenging them (Siltaoja et al., 2019). The result is that Egyptian higher education has been devalued due to an oversaturation of degrees and a lack of job opportunities, leading many young people to aspire to leave the country. Generally, Arab students and researchers prefer Europe and North America as their destinations (El-Ouahi et al., 2021). However, while academic mobility across borders can create a unique type of academic diaspora, which should be valued by both the home and host countries, this mobility may still perpetuate and strengthen academic inequalities (Ha, 2023).

Drawing on my personal experience, I see myself as a diaspora academic. I received my education in Denmark, but I moved later to the UK; in total, I spent nearly thirty years in Europe, belonging to the group of transnational academics, defined as those who have completed their terminal degrees overseas and end up working abroad rather than returning home (Lei & Guo, 2020). I have witnessed firsthand the changing conversation about neoliberalism in European higher education. For instance, while the Danish state fully funds higher education, the country's educational policies have recently shifted focus from equality to prioritizing economic benefits and competitiveness. This shift has been justified by the growing impact of a globally competitive knowledge economy, which necessitates reforming educational policies to consider the supply of educated labor to support economic growth (Vingaard Johansen et al., 2017). In the UK, successive

governments, beginning in the late 1990s, pushed for imposing tuition fees on higher education. In 2010, the UK's Browne Review recommended a new funding model for higher education, including full-fee tuition for undergraduate students and access to loans. These recommendations were later implemented in the Higher Education Research Act (HERA) of 2017, allowing for-profit companies to grant degrees, use the university title, and charge unregulated fees in the UK (Mayer & Eccles, 2019). Generally, this shift is based on perceiving students as customers who take out loans to pay for their education, bringing higher education under the influence of finance and the market society (Martini & Robertson, 2022).

Despite the prevailing neoliberal logic in the two countries, both, in my experience, draw on a different rationale regarding the role and function of HE in society and whether it is a public good (Denmark) or a commodity (UK). For instance, the difference can be seen in the perception of large student populations: In Denmark, where education costs are primarily state-funded, a burgeoning student population may be viewed as a challenge, whereas in England, a substantial student population is essential for generating the necessary revenue to sustain the educational infrastructure (Brooks, 2019).

In the UK, and despite the global recession of 2007-2009, neoliberalism continues to be the prevailing political philosophy, with significant implications for the future of higher education (Radice, 2015), pushing for designing educational systems that cater to the global economy and cultural diversity (Tsegay, 2019). For instance, the UK is the second most popular destination for Arab students, following the USA (Universities UK International, 2021), and there has also been a steady increase in transnational education (TNE), which is either delivered with or awarded by UK institutions in collaboration with numerous Arab universities. However, this increasing internationalization has not necessarily resulted in new, more inclusive curricula. During my career in the UK, for instance, whenever I suggested moving away from the overly Euro-centric communication theories, I was reminded that international students come to the UK specifically for a "British education" and that the history of communication is exclusively tied to the West, particularly the USA, although this overreliance on Western theories comes at the expense of local and hybridized scholarship (Waisbord, 2019).

In summary, the traditional values of scholarship have been eroded in Western academia, with corporate values placing greater emphasis on numerical excellence, reducing the importance of Enlightenment values (Rolfe, 2012). Higher education has, therefore, become an arena to compete, and many Arab universities have rushed to implement transnational joint programs as part of their collaboration with their Western counterparts in this global setting. Arab universities, like their counterparts in other non-Western countries, modify their curriculum to mold them after American (and British) curricula to gain additional points with accreditors and ranking authorities. The objective is to compete to become world-class, a notion that is often used without proper scrutiny and can be conflated with Western ideals, and as such, it functions as both an ideology and a fantasy shaping our identities while perpetuating neocolonial relationships (Siltaoja et al., 2019). Thus, the neo-liberalization of the higher education field across the world has allowed domination by those with enough symbolic and financial capital (Bourdieu, 1988), with impact determined by foreign institutional recognition and accreditations (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). This has also intensified the epistemic exclusion due to placing academic institutions on an invisible hierarchy where those in the Global North occupy the top.

Epistemic Exclusion

Despite the increase in cross-border mobility, challenging the identity and belonging of transmigrants such as Arab academics who received their higher education abroad, it is hard to share the optimistic view that [Western] universities have become transnational platforms for knowledge diaspora work where diasporic academics are becoming key *academic intermediaries* in globalizing knowledge networks (Larner, 2015). This is mainly due to the bias in valuing Arab scholarship, for instance, in media studies, by framing it as a branch of Area Studies. Media and communication research from East Asia and the Middle East, for instance, is often classified as Area Studies, while research from the Anglo-American sphere is viewed as relevant to the whole field (Ranji, 2021), although the convergence of media studies and area studies ought to be emphasized due to their shared experiences, practices, and cultures (Jin, 2021). In my experience as an academic in the UK, I was framed as a "specialist in Area/Arab studies," although I was not affiliated with Middle Eastern departments but with media and communication departments; I was also consistently assigned Arab postgraduate students to supervise rather than white students. For me, discovering a specialization appeared somewhat incomprehensible since, as I see it, I have an advantage over my Western counterparts in my knowledge of Arab cultures, especially with the increasing volume of writing about Arab media during the past two decades.

The irony is that even when I chose to stick to Area/Arab Studies as my specialization, I often faced criticism when critiquing previous work by Western scholars. Likewise, post-2011, I felt that my and other Arab scholars' research tended to be viewed as politically biased toward or against Arab governments. Even when Arab scholars collect data from their homelands, the interpretation of this data is often subjected to the hierarchy of theories, with Western theories being superior (Yalkin & Özbilgin, 2022). On the other hand, Western scholarship on the Arab region may be based solely on Western-biased theories, leading partially to inadequate explanations.

Moreover, ethnic minority scholars like myself may experience the burden of meeting certain racial expectations, leaving us feeling restricted in terms of what topics to write about and what views we can express (Saha & van Lente, 2022b). Some Arab scholars are also used as informants and service providers to Western researchers (Abaza, 2011), yet they often remain uncited despite the significance of their scholarly insights (Hanafi & Arvanitis, 2016). This inevitably leads to marginalizing and excluding local experiences and values (Hanafi & Arvanitis, 2016; Arday et al., 2021).

Although the debate surrounding Orientalism strengthened the call for multiculturalism and equity, it did not replace Orientalist discourse, which still serves the interests of powerful nations and elites. For instance, liberal-minded circles still use mild forms of this discourse, such as "free world" or "international community" (Sa'di, 2021, p. 2507), while disguising imperialist quests such as the Iraq war framed as bringing democracy to the broader region. In higher education, and in response to global social justice movements like Black Lives Matter, numerous universities in North America and Europe have announced their commitment to diversity and equality. For instance, these universities may require new entrants, whether students or faculty, to submit Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) statements to be considered for a place in these universities. However, calls for diversity and inclusivity in academia have been criticized for being superficial, as they may portray scholars from the Global South as undeserving beneficiaries of unearned opportunities. Additionally, they may conceal the process of epistemic exclusion that happens when the quality of research conducted by scholars from the Global South is devalued,

their achievements are minimized, their scholarship is limited, or dismissed as unimportant (Settles et al., 2021). Within this context, it is challenging not to perceive the recent push for diversity in Western academia as an effort to deflect accusations of racism while solidifying White privilege by imposing an expectation for non-white academics to align their research with the perspectives of their white counterparts (Saha & van Lente, 2022a). Furthermore, race can be turned into a form of capital that contributes to profiling Western HE institutions as being diverse by reducing underrepresented academics to a statistical issue while reinforcing the marginalized status of people of color (Saha & van Lente, 2022b) and maintaining the status quo of the hierarchy of universities in the West and East. Some institutions may also use EDI to enhance their metrics and value in the HE market, in what is coined *racial capitalism* (e.g., Rodgers & Liera, 2023), without clarifying how to measure the benefits of hiring ethnic minority academics.

Thus, despite the numerous calls to diversify the curricula and integrate non-white scholars into the mainstream academy, the hierarchy of knowledge production persists, especially regarding knowledge about the Arab region. For instance, analyzing the academic debate about the Arab uprisings, AlMaghlouth et al. (2015) show a hierarchy between three levels of knowledge production, indicating the different levels of influence of those who shape the debate about the uprisings. The hierarchy reveals a significant contrast between academics from the United States, who usually have a high citation factor and influence think tanks and media debates, and scholars of Arab origin (who write in English), who are far less cited despite their intellectual authority. Also, scholars who only write in Arabic are often overlooked in academic discussions. This raises the question of why Western scholars, particularly those from the US and the UK, tend to ignore studies in Arabic, which is essential for comprehending the region. This epistemic hierarchy does not solely affect scholars in the Arab region compared to those in the West, but, as I argue here, it also systematically excludes Arab scholars based in Western countries. Consequently, and despite the repeated calls to decolonize curricula, there is no agreement on the meaning of this decolonization exercise, including in Area Studies, where Western knowledge is often valued over local knowledge, indicating that the racial inequalities present in European HEIs may reflect the inequalities that exist within European societies as a whole (Arday et al., 2021).

Finally, the call for the *integration* of non-Western academics and students is not always constructive, as it creates an image of boundaries based on an identitarian community, causing a divide between those who are integrated and those who are not (Schinkel, 2017) not to mention that it does not address structural divisions. For instance, individuals of non-white ethnicity, who constitute the majority of international postgraduate students, still face challenges in pursuing academic careers beyond their PhD degrees or post-doctoral contracts, even if they have published research papers, leading minority academics, to seek career prospects overseas to escape the barriers in European HEIs (Bhopal et al., 2015), which is what I did.

In summary, prioritizing Western knowledge over local knowledge by universities in the Global South reinforces existing epistemological hierarchies and poses a major obstacle to decolonizing education (Heleta, 2016; Willems, 2014). Moreover, even EDI metrics can be exploited to entrench this hierarchy by commodifying scholars and students from the Global South (Rodgers & Liera, 2023). Academia then presents multiple challenges for minority scholars, including tokenism, marginalization, and epistemic exclusion, which involves devaluing the scholarship and legitimacy of these minority scholars (Settles et al., 2021). The social structure within academia creates boundaries of superiority and inferiority despite the reluctance to acknowledge or analyze this racialized hierarchy (Karimi, 2024). This division of labor was accepted as an unwritten rule, and it was difficult to challenge it, whether individually or

collectively. In contrast, Arab scholars may also contribute to devaluing their contribution and heritage through self- or internalized Orientalism, which I discuss below.

Internalized Orientalism

Academics from the Global South are accused of being complicit in the hierarchy of the production of knowledge, whose consequences are overlooked or ignored, leaving the academics with an ethical dilemma because they are too caught up in the allure of the process to see it from a critical perspective (Yalkin & Özbilgin, 2022). This subsequently creates toxic *illusio*, in Bourdieu's terms, which is a situation where academics from the Global South are drawn to the academic system of the Global North, despite the existing hierarchy of knowledge, and this attraction is like a pyramid scheme where only a few people at the top benefit, leaving many participants disappointed. It is often difficult to break away from toxic *illusio* because participants have already accepted the expectations of the game (Yalkin & Özbilgin, 2022). This *illusio* is also experienced by transnational academics, who are often homogenized as perpetual outsiders and members of ethnic minority communities (Kim & Ng, 2019).

This *illusio*, I argue, proves the relevance of Orientalism, as it still prevails through the discourse of self-Orientalism (Feighery, 2012). Scholars, therefore, need to pay equal attention to self-orientalism and consider the issue of Orientalism's localization and the East's own self-image (Xingcheng, 2006). Internalized or self-orientalism is the acceptance of Orientalist stereotypes and biases by individuals or groups within the culture being stereotyped. It occurs when members of the targeted culture adopt and believe in these stereotypes about their own identity, history, or cultural practices. Key features include acceptance of stereotypes, self-orientalization, colonized minds, and reinforcement by media and education. For instance, Alahmed (2020) discusses the concept of internalized orientalism and how it reflects power struggles and relationships in the Arab region, taking Egypt as a case study and the news discourse about the Egyptian revolution in 2011. He argues that there is a form of internalized orientalism in representing the revolution in Egyptian media, which ultimately reproduces neocolonial power by representing the Egyptian people as unable to rule themselves or dehumanizing people and reducing their agency.

Another example of self-orientalism is the promotion system in Arab universities, which usually favors academics who publish in Western/American journals (Hanafi & Arvanitis, 2016). To obtain tenure, junior scholars in the Global South, including the Arab region, must follow specific rules governing promotion, salary increases, and status that prioritize those who publish in Western journals (Chan et al., 2021; Hedge & Shome, 2002), although using international research ranking bibliometrics comes with the risk of a reduced emphasis on research quality, originality, and societal value (Aksnes et al., 2019). Another indication of self-orientalism is the lack of criticism of Western theories or the sole origins of media and cultural studies (Willems, 2014). This can be because almost all media programs in non-western countries rely on canonical Anglo-American theories (Jin, 2021).

I am personally frustrated that many Arab universities promote the memorization of such Western assumptions instead of challenging them. As a former external examiner in several local media programs, I objected to curricula centered on Western and American assumptions rather than engaging students in dialogue and debate questioning these assumptions. This approach is a form of internalized Orientalism, where Arab institutions strive to seek accreditation or collaboration with any Western institution while centering their curricula on Western books about our region, thereby ignoring Arab contributions to the ongoing debate. During my career, I also

worked with many Arab students, particularly at the postgraduate level, and I often find them unfamiliar with works by Arab scholars. When I asked such students why we should accept Western theories without questioning them, I did not get an adequate answer other than the need to follow those more "technologically advanced."

I am equally concerned by the tendency among transnational Arab scholars to undervalue their work through frequent citations of Western academics, inadvertently leading to employing Western knowledge as a form of mimicry. I believe that as transnational academics, we are uniquely positioned to blend knowledge from both spheres, unlike the knowledge brokers of US and British think tanks, whose research on the Arab region often perpetuates stereotypes, such as the belief that Arab people lack agency and rationality (Gani, 2022).

For me, and after nearly three decades, I decided to return to the Arab region, hoping to contribute to educating the next generation and raising awareness about this epistemic exclusion, but I still see a significant gap in Arab academia's engagement with self-reflection. While my work critiques Western biases, it also confronts the reluctance of some Arab intellectuals to introspect and acknowledge our cultural and academic shortcomings. Indeed, as the Egyptian philosopher Fouad Zakaria (2017, p. 66) argues,

> We cannot establish our position vis-a-vis the West by simply stating that we are not inferior or different. Our true worth comes from acknowledging our differences and backwardness, which have been imposed on us, rather than being inherent in our composition. It is only by bravely accepting this reality that we can rise above it and prove ourselves capable of achieving great things.

This resistance is, for instance, evident in the Arab academic community's lack of engagement with Critical Race Theory (CRT) and intersectionality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), despite their relevance in understanding the nuanced experiences of racism influenced by race, religion, and gender (Karimi, 2024). CRT's emphasis on storytelling, autoethnography, and counter-narratives as methods to explore and challenge dominant discourses could significantly enrich Arab scholarship, particularly in media and communication studies, a field that lacks focus on social justice and remains underdeveloped in the region. Such an approach would prioritize situated research, redefining the role of the researcher while investigating power relations among researchers themselves.

In summary, Arab academics may inadvertently contribute to the reinforcement of a hierarchy of knowledge by undervaluing their expertise while placing undue emphasis on Western knowledge. This is evident in current media curricula, which heavily rely on Western scholarship or the evaluation of Arab scholars' work, often depending on metrics like the number of publications in Western journals. Furthermore, Arab scholars rarely engage in self-reflection and global discussions, such as those related to CRT, and they hardly utilize self-reflective methods like autoethnography and counter-narratives. The Arab academic community has, therefore, experienced a decline in its capacity to fulfill crucial roles, including articulating evidence-based ideological alternatives and shaping public discourse. This challenge is particularly evident in the Humanities and Social Sciences, where Arab scholars have faced limitations in actively participating in knowledge networks (Shami, 2022).

The Way Forward

Looking ahead, there are a few solutions to address this epistemic exclusion and decolonize communication and media studies, such as those mentioned by Jin (2021), including genuine collaborative work, recognizing historical processes, and developing local paradigms. One notable example is the Global South Mentorship Program for journalism scholars under the auspices of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), although its efficacy is yet to be assessed.

Moreover, Mohammed (2022) offers other solutions, which include incorporating Indigenous epistemologies and knowledge systems to support knowledge production, using autoethnography to reflect on other researchers' experiences and to prioritize their voices and perspectives, and decolonizing citation practices by acknowledging the collective efforts of knowledge production. Indeed, it is crucial to establish a connection between contemporary Arab culture and society and the fundamental issues of contemporary Arab thought (Sabry, 2010) since one of the challenges faced by Arab social science research is its disconnection from the local context, a problem further compounded by the dominance of neoliberal interests (AlMaghlouth et al., 2015). There is, therefore, an urgent need for Arab scholars, whether based locally or in the diaspora, to foster stronger intra-regional collaborations that challenge neoliberal academic frameworks and contribute to a decolonized and more inclusive academic environment. Only through such rigorous engagement can we hope to redefine research paradigms and reassert the global significance of Arab scholarship (Hanafi & Arvanitis, 2016), initiate decolonial practices in pedagogy and research, and regain research agency that can transform research epistemology and ontology (Nguyen & Chia, 2023). In sum, a genuine effort to decolonize an academic discipline necessitates a concerted commitment to formulating regional theories through local and regional dialogue, free from dependence on the Global North for validation or acceptance (El Kurd, 2023).

Finally, Mayer and Eccles (2019) offer a Manifesto advocating the discontinuation of market-driven competition in higher education, re-emphasizing education's civic purpose of enriching civic societies and individuals and a fundamental shift away from its commodification. However, it is difficult to imagine the feasibility of implementing this manifesto without a serious debate about the role of HEIs in today's world, what excellence or internationalization means, and for what purpose. Within this debate, I believe we should also discuss the underutilization of the invaluable symbolic capital possessed by transnational academics and how to leverage it to bridge the two spheres.

In my view, decolonizing the discipline requires significant changes in Western institutions, such as having an open and honest debate among those hesitant to embrace such changes, regardless of their location. Additionally, it is crucial to address why some Western scholars are reluctant to acknowledge the scholarship of native academics, which may involve ignoring or dismissing their work or rejecting their contributions in academic journals. Such actions often suggest a lack of confidence in the critical abilities of native scholars and their capacity to publish "objective" research about their home region. Academic journals should, therefore, ideally insist that pieces about the Arab region cite local materials to encourage authors to incorporate books and articles published in native languages (Jin, 2021, p. 154) in acknowledgment that local researchers are closer to their national surroundings than Western scholars, whose ethical practices have come under scrutiny (e.g., Sukarieh & Tannock, 2013).

Conclusion

Having presented my critique, it is essential to equally acknowledge the benefits of my experience in studying and working in Europe. This experience has provided me with valuable skills in critical thinking and debate. Based on these skills, I was able to question the invisible ladder of knowledge and why some knowledge is valued while others are undermined, and to see it as imperative for Arab scholars to question their self-orientalism or the so-called *Khawaja*/foreigner complexity (Kubeisy & Freeman, 2020), instead of cultivating local talents.

This self-reflective article is grounded in my personal experiences and observations, and therefore, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this autoethnographic approach. For instance, while my personal reflections provide valuable insights, they are not universally generalizable to all academics or institutions in the Humanities and Social Sciences disciplines. Moreover, the above account of the invisibility of Arab scholars in Western academia may not be representative of other minority scholars in different disciplines, such as STEM subjects (Settles et al., 2021).

Finally, I also acknowledge the critique of Arab HE institutions as lacking, among other factors, adequate research and teaching performance (Forster, 2018). However, as mentioned above, one main challenge is that Western scholars and institutions may never willingly give up their position in the global, neoliberal higher education field, allowing a more equitable distribution of symbolic power in teaching and research across HEIs globally.

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Notes on Contributor

Noha Mellor is a Professor of media and communication at the College of Communication, University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. She has authored or edited several books on Arab media, including *Routledge Handbook on Arab Cinema* (2024), *Arab Digital Journalism* (Routledge, 2022), and *Routledge Handbook on Arab Media* (2021).

ORCID

Noha Mellor, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3709-4808