



Wendy Willems

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Disrupting received histories of media and media studies

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*Too frequently, the call for decolonisation translates into a call for diversity and inclusion. While the latter is important, LSE's **Wendy Willems** argues it is crucial to go a step further and ask how the act of including different vantage points disrupts dominant theoretical*

approaches and concepts, received histories, and canonical texts in the field of media and communication studies.

As Michel-Rolph Trouillot argued, “any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences.” This also applies to the way we narrate the history of media institutions and technologies, as well as to how we document the historical emergence of the field of media and communication studies. A key task of media historians should be to unearth the field’s multiple silences and to reveal how these are linked to the exercise of power as, in Trouillot’s words, “the ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots”.

In a 2014 *Communication Theory* article entitled “Provincializing Hegemonic Histories of Media and Communication Studies: Toward a Genealogy of Epistemic Resistance in Africa,” I critiqued how calls for the “internationalising” or “de-Westernising” of media and communication studies implicitly silence a much longer history of media and communication studies outside the so-called West. I argued that these calls suggested that scholars in the non-West had somehow not previously engaged in critical knowledge production on media and communication. My article reinscribed the epistemological and historical foundations of media and communication studies in Africa, which hegemonic histories of the field had marginalized. It called for an acknowledgment of the multiple genealogies of media and communication studies in different parts of the world.

Since my article’s publication, demands for internationalization and de-Westernization have increasingly been replaced with calls for

“decolonization” in the wake of the 2015 #RhodesMustFall protests at the University of Cape Town and other universities across the globe, as well as following the 2015 and 2020 #BlackLivesMatter protests. Demonstrations have pointed to the need for universities to transform in a number of ways, including teaching more diverse curricula, making higher education more accessible to students from marginalized economic backgrounds, revising teaching methodologies and research ethics to render them more democratic and less hierarchical, hiring a diverse pool of faculty, and addressing how universities have benefited from slavery or fed into colonialism through eugenics and scientific racism, as well as the need for reparations. Again, it is important to acknowledge here the longer genealogy of demands for decolonisation and liberation in the African context, ranging from **W. E. B. Du Bois** to **Frantz Fanon** to **Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o**.

These calls for decolonisation have provoked a response in our field, primarily from U.S.-based, African, and **Latin American** scholars who –if somewhat separately– have drawn attention to a multitude of problem areas; the continued **marginalisation of scholars of colour** in publication rates, citation rates, and editorial journal positions; the need for **systemic redress**; the silence on the history of European and American imperialism in **graduate communication studies syllabi** and **canonical texts in media and communications**; the characterisation of research on media, communication, and race as **addressing peripheral rather than core issues**; the need to **centre Africa** in media and communication studies and to **problematize claims to universality** in much of the work focused on the United States and Europe; the **marginalisation of African media studies** in the U.S.

academy; and the **relevance of decolonial approaches** in making sense of media and communications in Africa and the Global South.

This body of work has once more highlighted that **our field has always been raced**, as evidenced by the white vantage points (presumed to be universal) adopted in canonical texts centred in the field, as well as by the longer history of institutionally racist practices in universities, journals, and professional associations. While both the older and newer calls for decolonisation may have different meanings in distinct geographical contexts, they are ultimately connected in their response to the afterlives of shared racialized histories of slavery and colonialism and their contestation of anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity in various parts of the world.

These studies offer much food for thought to historians of media and media studies. They point to the need for more inclusive and complicated histories of our field, ones that acknowledge both its multiple global origins and the racialized history of media and media studies. Yet increasingly, the notion of decolonisation runs the risk of turning into an **empty metaphor**, used to tick boxes or to attract new pools of student customers who can populate a diverse classroom that will enhance the competitiveness of the neoliberal university. Too frequently, the call for decolonisation translates into a call for diversity and inclusion. While the latter is important, it is crucial to go a step further and ask how the act of including different vantage points challenges, disrupts, subverts, and problematizes dominant theoretical approaches and concepts, received histories, and canonical texts in our field.

Armond Towns (2019) offers a good start here in critiquing both the way in which media history has been written and how received histories have become canonized in the field. His **work on Marshall McLuhan** shows **McLuhan's** failure to acknowledge the crucial role of Black bodies in the emergence of Western media technologies. Relatedly, while media historians might have examined how the BBC promoted the idea of Empire through its overseas service, they have less frequently asked how histories of slavery and colonialism enabled the institution's emergence, and what implications this question might have for debates on reparations.

Similarly, **Gurminder K. Bhambra** highlights the **erasure of slavery and colonialism in the Frankfurt School's theorisation of modernity**. As she argues, modernity did not "emerge from separation or rupture, but through the connected and entangled histories of European colonisation" (Bhambra 2021: 81). What, for example, would **Jürgen Habermas's** eighteenth-century European public sphere look like if its emergence had been understood in the context of slavery and the slave trade? While the role of media and technology in perpetuating racism is relatively well documented, media and communication studies has yet to acknowledge the *constitutive* nature of race, recognising how histories of slavery and colonialism made possible particular media institutions and technologies.

The intimate histories extant among Africa, Europe, and the United States do not only relate to the history of media institutions and technologies but also to that of media and communication studies as a field. In his work on McLuhan, Towns highlights how McLuhan appropriated the racist ideas of John Carothers on "the African mind." Carothers was a British psychiatrist who worked for the

Kenyan colonial government. Other influential scholars in our field built their careers drawing on fieldwork in Africa. For example, **Leonard W. Doob**, a psychologist at Yale University associated with the field of cognitive psychology and propaganda studies, researched the link between media and modernisation. In his book *Communication in Africa: A Search for Boundaries*, one of the first academic monographs on communication in Africa, Doob discusses the sociocultural, linguistic, and psychological variables impinging on communication patterns in Africa. In other work, Doob sought to measure the levels of “**psychological modernisation**” in Africa and to assess the role of media in the process of modernisation based on empirical research in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Somalia.

A number of studies have situated the work of modernisation scholars such as **Wilbur Schramm** and **Daniel Lerner** within the political context of the Cold War, but less often have commentators viewed those scholars’ research through the prism of race or sufficiently examined how their fieldwork in Africa shaped both their individual careers and early formations of media and communications studies on the African continent. Doing so would offer us a better understanding of the racialized and entangled histories of media and communication studies across different continents.

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Dr Wendy Willems is Associate Professor in LSE's Department of Media and Communications. Her research interests include urban communication, global digital culture and social change and postcolonial/decolonial approaches to media and communications. She has published over 30 peer-reviewed book chapters and articles in journals such as *Communication Theory*, *Information, Communication and Society*, *Popular Communication*, and *Media, Culture and Society*. She is co-editor of *Civic Agency in Africa: Arts of Resistance in the Twenty-First Century* (James Currey, 2014; with Ebenezer Obadare) and *Everyday Media Culture in Africa: Audiences and Users* (Routledge, 2016, with Winston Mano).

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