

[Sonia Livingstone](#)

Internationalizing media and communication studies: reflections on the International Communication Association

**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Livingstone, Sonia (2007) Internationalizing media and communication studies: reflections on the International Communication Association. [Global media and communication](#), 3 (3). pp. 273-288

DOI: [10.1177/1742766507082570](https://doi.org/10.1177/1742766507082570)

© 2007 [SAGE Publications](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/4253/>
Available in LSE Research Online: February 2010

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final manuscript accepted version of the journal article, incorporating any revisions agreed during the peer review process. Some differences between this version and the published version may remain. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

**Internationalising media and communication studies:
Reflections on the International Communication Association**

Sonia Livingstone

Department of Media and Communications
London School of Economics and Political Science
Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE, UK
Tel. +44 (0)20 7955 7710
Fax +44 (0)20 7955 7248
Email s.livingstone@lse.ac.uk

Published as Livingstone, S. (2007) Internationalizing media and communication studies: Reflections on the International Communication Association. <i>Global Media and Communication</i> , 3(3): 273-288.
--

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Carmelo Garitaonandia, Min-Sun Kim, Dafna Lemish, Shih-Hung Lo, Peter Ludes and Bella Mody, fellow members of ICA's recent task force on international standards of excellence, as well as Ulla Carlsson, Peter Golding, François Heinderyckx, Alain Kiyindou, Robin Mansell and Keyan Tomaselli, for their contributions to the round table on the role of international associations at Westminster's 'Internationalising Media Studies' conference, and Michael Haley, Karen Ross, Ron Rice, Wolfgang Donsbach, and other colleagues at ICA.

A changing field of study

What does it mean to internationalise media and communication studies? And how can international associations facilitate this? This short article examines the intersection between the field of media and communication and the multiple and overlapping national, regional and international associations that represent individual researchers. Our already fast-developing field of study is now grappling with, first, significant trends towards the globalisation of information and communication (and, indeed, society) and, second, the continued professionalisation of teaching and research activities. Whether we label these changes 'internationalising' or 'trans-nationalising' or 'globalising', it is clear that researchers worldwide are asking new questions, contemplating new possibilities and facing new expectations.

As President-Elect of the International Communication Association, an association of nearly 4000 members from over 70 countries, I have been reflecting on how ICA can and should respond to these changing conditions. As a teacher of an international student body at the London School of Economics, I have had to rethink the once-familiar basis of my courses, repositioning them for a globalised context of learning and assessment. And as a researcher, I have embarked on a cross-national comparative project, 'EU Kids Online', engaging with the diverse research traditions, languages and values of 18 countries in order to advise EU policy. I imagine many readers of this journal will, similarly, have found their working lives reoriented in recent years by the growing internationalisation of research and teaching.

But even if our research focuses on local or national issues, and even if we don't conduct multi-national collaborative projects, we all increasingly connect – electronically, and at international meetings - with colleagues around the world. As we read work conducted 'elsewhere', we inevitably wonder if it applies to our own context. Little discussed but potentially problematically, we also write references for each other, review each others' papers and sit on committees that judge each others' work. Hence we find ourselves asking, should we use a local or a universalistic lens, or is there another solution? And we wonder as we write, are we writing for local, a regional or a global audience? Such questions are often exciting but can also be disorientating or disruptive. Possibly, the potential of our field is unfulfilled insofar as the practicalities of individual expectations, energies, careers, funding,

language, expenses and many more considerations undermine the ideals of a productive, shared, even global research community (Livingstone, 2003). So, how can we be realistic but also ambitious?

What do we mean by 'internationalising'?

Beniger (1992: 35) wrote that '*all* social science research is comparative', indeed 'all analysis is comparative', for one cannot make claims about a known category or place without implying commonality with or distinctiveness from others. As our object of focus becomes internationalised, so too must our claims, our theories, our sphere of relevance. Yet what Blumler et al (1992: 8) observed of cross-national comparative research applies equally to internationalising the field, namely that it 'can pose challenges to scholars' preconceptions and is liable to be theoretically upsetting'. On the positive side, they also argued that it 'has a more creative and innovative role – opening up new avenues'. To realise such potential, Alasuutari (1995: 135) advocates an anthropological stance, namely that researchers should make the familiar strange by taking the perspective of an outsider and, simultaneously, make the strange familiar by taking the perspective of an insider. The dialogues overheard at and around international conferences, professional meetings and on message boards are often, informally, attempts to do precisely this.

On the other hand, an internationalising perspective may threaten the vital link between research and the specific context that gives it meaning. In many ways, researchers are voting with their feet in support of a proliferation of specialist journals, small symposia, topic-focused mailing lists – in other words, in favour of diversity and specialisation. There are echoes here of the etic/emic debate within methodology, for internationalising a field raises similar issues – should one share and compare research frameworks, methods and analysis or embed research in its specific context? Can a 'neutral' theory or methodology be found or is this an impossibility? Is the 'national character' of some research to be welcomed or eliminated (especially given the continued importance of national institutions, policies and, indeed, research funding)? As with many research decisions, adopting a comparative, international or trans-national focus must be a decision that flows from one's research questions. For some, internationalisation may be more important than others: in communication law, scholars may legitimately focus on the specificities of their national policy frameworks and have less to gain from a detailed knowledge of other systems; in mass media studies, the conglomeration of media ownership makes an international or globalised approach hard to avoid; for new media, a globalised perspective tends to be the very starting point for any analysis. Thus, internationalising may not be appropriate for an individual project, but it should be enabled, when it is appropriate, by an international research community and, therefore, an international association.

How far should a field internationalise? So far as to require everyone to speak Esperanto (or, today, English as a Foreign Language)? Or is this, in practice, to construct a Tower of Babel? If internationalisation means exchanging knowledge and understanding across borders, then we would probably all sign up to it, confident that national approaches or concerns could find their place within this larger forum. But if internationalisation means achieving a shared consensus regarding theories, methods and approaches, the project risks becoming a Trojan horse, smuggling in the priorities or perspectives of some at the expense of others. Indeed, the more ambitious one becomes for the internationalising effort, the more sceptical voices come to the fore, concerned that the perspectives of the already-powerful dominate over that of others. As Curran and Park (2000: 3) scathingly observe, 'it has become routine for universalistic observations about the media to be advanced in English-language books on the basis of evidence derived from a tiny handful of countries'. Thus, there is a great difference between the internationalising project that seeks to extend the reach of a largely Westernised field of study and that which, instead, seeks to diversify or de-Westernise the field.

Not only are universalistic observations often uncritically disseminated but the standards of some countries may be imposed willy-nilly on others. One example is the UK's Research Assessment Exercise, a national audit mechanism by which university funding is allocated according to the proportion of faculty who are graded as producing 'international' (often read as 'American') rather than 'national' work. Another is the increasingly widespread use of the

Social Science Citation Index (which lists mainly American and exclusively English-language journals) or of formal rankings of international (i.e. English language) journals, thus distorting local scholarship, small language communities and national academic cultures. For smaller countries especially, we must debate not only the advantages or disadvantages of joining an international research community but also the continued legitimacy of national research communities. For these reasons, I believe that, although enthusiasm for internationalising media studies is likely to grow, following the globalisation of communication and information processes, the pace of change should be led by the research community. It is when governments regulate or evaluate researchers by importing 'international standards' from elsewhere that research cultures become distorted and individual researchers feel oppressed.

From principles to practice

In ICA there is a definite desire for change. This is evident from recent annual conference themes - communication in the global community, (mis)communicating across boundaries, communication in borderlands, communication research in the public interest, networking communication research, and so forth. It is also evident as a spontaneous desire among members. When surveyed recently by then-president Wolfgang Donsbach, one third of ICA members said they preferred a mainly US association with an international agenda and involvement from around the world (perhaps, as exists now). But fully half wanted a truly global association, with conferences, membership, publications, committees, etc. representing global media and communication scholarship world wide – and this was endorsed by US as well as non US members (Donsbach, 2006). In a task force I recently chaired for ICA on 'international standards of excellence', we agreed on a set of principles to guide the association - quality, originality, inclusiveness, diversity, openness, rigour, professionalism. This was not hard. Rather, it is the practices required to implement these principles that require continual effort, negotiation and critical review. It seems that, for an international organisation, it can be precisely the gap between the aspirations for a global community of shared ideas and ideals and the realities of different, even clashing ways of working and thinking that poses the hardest tasks in serving the interests of their members.

For even when researchers push for greater internationalisation, their feet always remain on the ground, inflecting the questions they ask, the way they conduct research, the frameworks they bring to bear on analysis and, especially, the ways they evaluate the work of others. On the ground, nations vary in the role of the academy in society, with universities institutionalised within different kinds of structures and traditions, with career ladders and research prospects managed in different ways. These factors matter, and are often beyond the control of an international association to manage. I will end, therefore, on the positive developments recently agreed and underway in ICA, for these establish some realistic but valuable ways forward for internationalising a professional association and, consequently, the field of scholarship that it represents. In noting these, I wish to acknowledge the work of Karen Ross, Ted Zorn and others on ICA's Internationalisation Committee as well as ICA's Executive Committee and Board in developing and taking forward an agenda for internationalisation.

In an age of new information technologies, some aspects of internationalisation can be furthered fairly simply by enhancing visibility – for example, linking national associations worldwide to the website of an international association (an initiative currently underway at ICA), putting colleagues in touch with like-minded others (as in ICA's new 'find-a-colleague' search facility on its website), and facilitating mutually beneficial relations among the different associations – national, regional and international – to which individual researchers may belong.

Others require resources, both financial and human. The challenge posed by language is one such, and ICA is fortunate that it can now begin to translate the abstracts of its four (soon to be five) journals into several major languages, taking a step away from the exclusive focus on English. Other translation efforts remain more sporadic – for example, simultaneous translation of some conference sessions. One recently agreed initiative is to provide language guidance for non-native speakers of English when submitting articles to the association's journals, though not without a cost to the individual researcher. Another substantial initiative is

the decision to initiate a new journal, entitled 'Communication, Culture and Critique', to complement ICA's existing journals, especially in terms of including qualitative, critical and international research.

Yet further initiatives require the active and reflexive efforts of the research community. ICA's mission statement has just been revised to replace a universalistic purpose ('to advance the scholarly study of human communication ... so as to be of maximum benefit to humankind') with a commitment to 'encouraging and facilitating excellence in academic research worldwide' by providing an international forum, scholarly publication and knowledge exchange, and promoting inclusiveness and debate among the diversity of scholars. This is designed to signal ICA members' collective willingness to enable and encourage diverse scholarly practices, allowing excellent work to find a place within the association's conferences and journals while also recognising such contributions through its awards and publications. The intention is to follow through on these aims by reviewing criteria for publication, awards and committees, by a programme of regional conferences around the world, by directing financial support towards those from less privileged countries, and so forth.

Putting the 'I' back into ICA is, of course, a work-in-progress and one that must be, as I have indicated, led both by developments in the field and by the interests of those who work within it. I find these initiatives, and the ambitions that motivate them, both exciting and encouraging, and I welcome the involvement of the media and communication research community worldwide in helping to take these initiatives forward. For future developments, visit www.icahdq.org and see what's next!

References

Alasuutari, P. (1995). *Researching Culture: Qualitative Methods and Cultural Studies*. London: Sage.

Beniger, J. R. (1992). Comparison, Yes, But - The Case of Technological and Cultural Change. In J. G. Blumler, J. M. McLeod and K. E. Rosengren (Eds.), *Comparatively Speaking: Communication and culture across space and time*. London: Sage Publications. (pp. 35-50).

Blumler, J. G., McLeod, J. M., & Rosengren, K. E. (1992). An introduction to comparative communication research. In J. G. Blumler, J. M. McLeod & K. E. Rosengren (Eds.), *Comparatively speaking: communication and culture across space and time* (pp. 3-18). Newbury Park: Sage.

Curran, J. and Park, M-J. (2000) Beyond globalization theory. In J. Curran and M-J Park (Eds.), *De-Westernizing Media Studies*. London: Routledge. (pp. 3-18).

Donsbach, W. (2006). The identity of communication research. *Journal of Communication*, 56, 437-448.

Livingstone, S. (2003). On the challenges of cross-national comparative media research. *European Journal of Communication*, 18(4), 477-500.