

Review

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Review

Mapping the Mediascape in Motion: Emerging Trends and Persistent Research Gaps in International Communication Studies, 2000–2026: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

International communication scholarship has undergone a paradigmatic reorientation since 2000, yet the field's conceptual repertoire has expanded more rapidly than it has been theoretically integrated. This systematic literature review interrogates that fragmentation by mapping the trajectory of the field across the period 2000–2026 and assessing the extent to which its proliferating frameworks—cultural imperialism, hybridization, network society, platform imperialism, data colonialism, computational propaganda, sharp power, and algorithmic governance—constitute cumulative theoretical advancement or analytically incommensurable parallel vocabularies. Following PRISMA 2020 procedures (Page et al., 2021) and a thematic synthesis design (Thomas & Harden, 2008), the review consolidates peer-reviewed scholarship across seven major communication databases into seven thematic clusters: cultural globalization and media flows; comparative journalism and cross-national media systems; de-Westernization and decolonial currents; phantomization, digital sovereignty, and media infrastructures; disinformation, computational propaganda, and information disorder; soft power, public diplomacy, and affective strategic communication; and the integration of generative artificial intelligence into transnational communication. Three theoretical findings emerge. First, the apparent succession of paradigms from broadcast-era to platform-era frameworks is better understood as conceptual layering, in which power-asymmetric models persist in modified form rather than being displaced by network-based alternatives. Second, the field's longstanding tension between structural and agentic accounts has been reconfigured—but not resolved—by the platform turn, with infrastructural analysis emerging as a potential synthesizing register (Parks & Starosielski, 2015; Plantin & Punathambekar, 2019). Third, the persistent disjuncture between the field's de-Westernization commitments and its bibliometric realities (Demeter, 2020) is theoretically consequential, indicating that epistemic asymmetries function not as residual artifacts but as constitutive features of contemporary international communication knowledge production. A seventh identified gap—the under-theorization of affective dimensions of international communication—extends the review's analytic horizon to include emergent comparative work on emotion, civilizational rhetoric, and cross-border public engagement (Çelik, 2025; Hameleers & Garnier Ortiz, 2024; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). The review proposes a future research agenda centered on epistemic pluralism, methodological diversification, infrastructural and material analysis, and sustained engagement with planetary-scale technological change.

Keywords: international communication; media globalization; phantomization; digital sovereignty; disinformation; computational propaganda; de-Westernization; decolonial communication; soft power; sharp power; generative artificial intelligence; algorithmic governance; media infrastructures; comparative journalism; PRISMA; affective communication; data colonialism

1. Introduction

International communication occupies a conceptually contested and empirically restless terrain. Once organized around the analysis of nation-states, propaganda, broadcasting flows, and cross-border news exchanges (Schiller, 1976; Thussu, 2019), the field now confronts phenomena that systematically undermine its inherited categories: platformed content ecologies, algorithmic curation, transnational publics, distributed infrastructures, and non-Western discursive power (Castells, 2009; Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Flew, 2021). The first quarter of the twenty-first century has therefore been a period of simultaneous intellectual expansion and conceptual strain. Theoretical vocabularies have proliferated—cultural imperialism, hybridization, network society, platform imperialism, data colonialism, computational propaganda, sharp power, algorithmic governance—without commensurate work on whether these vocabularies cohere, contradict, or compete (Waisbord, 2019).

This systematic literature review treats that proliferation as itself an analytical object. Rather than mapping international communication only by topic, it poses a meta-theoretical question: across the period 2000–2026, how have the dominant paradigms of the field been rearticulated, and where do persistent epistemic and methodological gaps complicate any integrative reading of the discipline? The motivation is twofold. First, the empirical environment that international communication research describes—geopolitical realignment between China, the United States, and the European Union; the consolidation of a small number of transnational platforms; the diffusion of generative artificial intelligence; and the intensification of cross-border information operations—no longer fits the field's mid-century settlement neatly (Bradford, 2023; Flew, 2021; Pohle & Thiel, 2020). Second, calls to de-Westernize and decolonize communication studies have matured into a sustained intellectual program (Curran & Park, 2000; Mignolo, 2011; Mutsvairo, 2018; Wang, 2011; Willems, 2014), yet bibliometric studies demonstrate that high-impact Anglophone venues continue to underrepresent Global South perspectives (Demeter, 2020). The disjuncture between normative aspiration and structural reality is not a residual deficiency to be solved by recruitment; it is a constitutive feature of the field that deserves theorization in its own right.

Three guiding research questions organize the synthesis. First, what are the dominant thematic clusters and theoretical lineages that have organized international communication scholarship between 2000 and 2026? Second, what conceptual and methodological gaps persist across these clusters, and how do those gaps relate to one another? Third, what emerging trajectories—particularly those associated with platform infrastructures, generative artificial intelligence, and decolonial thought—offer the most promising routes for theoretical integration in the coming decade?

The contribution of the review is meta-theoretical rather than topical. By reading the field synoptically, the analysis advances three substantive claims. First, the apparent succession of paradigms is better understood as conceptual layering: power-asymmetric models inherited from the cultural imperialism tradition (Schiller, 1976; Thussu, 2019) continue to operate beneath platform-era vocabularies rather than being displaced by them. Second, the structural–agentic tension that has long animated international communication has been reconfigured by the platform turn but not resolved, with infrastructural analysis emerging as a potential synthesizing register (Parks & Starosielski, 2015; Plantin & Punathambekar, 2019; Starosielski, 2015). Third, the gap between the field's de-Westernization commitments and its bibliometric realities operates as a theoretically productive contradiction—one that should be addressed through structural reform of indexing, citation, and review practices rather than through episodic inclusion (Demeter, 2020; Waisbord & Mellado, 2014). A fourth, emerging observation concerns the insufficient theorization of affective and emotional dimensions of international communication, dimensions that recent comparative work has foregrounded as analytically indispensable (Çelik, 2025; Hameleers & Garnier Ortiz, 2024; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

The remainder of the manuscript proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the conceptual literature across seven thematic clusters. Section 3 describes the review protocol, including PRISMA 2020-aligned search procedures (Page et al., 2021), inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the thematic synthesis approach (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Section 4 presents the thematic map, comparative

classification of representative studies, and the catalogue of identified gaps. Section 5 discusses findings within broader debates about epistemic pluralism, methodological nationalism, and the political economy of platforms. Sections 6–8 present the conclusion, recommendations for further research, and a final disciplinary checklist.

2. Literature Review

This section organizes the post-2000 literature into seven thematic clusters that emerged inductively from the corpus and that correspond to the field's dominant lines of inquiry. The clusters are not airtight; they overlap conceptually and frequently engage one another polemically. They are presented in an order that approximates the historical sequence in which each cluster acquired analytical visibility, while acknowledging that each remains active and that newer concerns layer onto, rather than supersede, earlier ones.

2.1. *Cultural Globalization, Media Flows, and the Hybridization Debate*

The first cluster inherits the long arc of debate over cultural imperialism, asymmetric global media flows, and the hybridization of cultural forms. Schiller's (1976) thesis on communication and cultural domination established a structural reading of unequal exchange that continued to shape international communication into the 2000s, in part through Thussu's (2019) periodically updated synthesis. Hybridization scholarship complicated that reading by centering the cultural creativity that emerges where global and local forms meet (Appadurai, 1996; Kraidy, 2005). For Kraidy (2005), hybridity is not a benign celebration of mixing but a cultural logic of globalization that simultaneously reflects and obscures unequal power. This cluster has retained analytical importance because contemporary platform-era arguments frequently rearticulate either the structural pessimism of the cultural imperialism tradition or the agentic optimism of hybridization, sometimes without acknowledging the antecedents (Waisbord, 2019).

More recent contributions reframe the cultural-flows literature in light of intensified South–South circulation and the rise of regional media powers. Krings and Okome's (2013) edited volume on global Nollywood, Kraidy's (2017) account of the Naked Blogger of Cairo, and Mutsvairo's (2018) handbook on African media research collectively rebut the unilinear Hollywoodization narrative by documenting media production circuits whose logics resist easy assimilation into Anglo-American frameworks. Read together, these works do not abolish the cultural imperialism problematic so much as relocate it: the question is no longer whether dominant centers exist, but which centers, organized through which infrastructures, and on what terms peripheral and semi-peripheral actors negotiate visibility.

Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal's (2018) platform society thesis has further complicated this cluster by arguing that cultural production in the 2010s became organized not merely by national broadcast systems or global Hollywood but by transnational platform architectures with their own data-driven logics of visibility, recommendation, and monetization. The implications for cultural-flows analysis are significant: hybridization that occurs within platform affordances may be structurally constrained by recommendation algorithms calibrated to maximize engagement in ways that systematically privilege certain emotional registers, content forms, and cultural idioms over others (van Dijck et al., 2018). The cultural imperialism question thus resurfaces at the level of platform design rather than broadcast transmission, and Couldry and Mejias's (2019) data-colonialism framework provides perhaps the most theoretically robust way to name this reconfigured asymmetry.

2.2. *Comparative Journalism Studies and Cross-National Media Systems*

The second cluster crystallized around Hallin and Mancini's (2004) typology of three media systems—liberal, democratic corporatist, and polarized pluralist—and the comparative research agenda it inaugurated. The framework's heuristic value has been substantial, but its limitations have also been productive. Critics noted that the original typology was calibrated to Western European

and North American cases and that its categories travel uneasily to post-authoritarian, post-colonial, and hybrid regimes (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014). Subsequent comparative scholarship has both extended the typology to additional regions and developed alternative analytic apparatuses, most notably Hanitzsch et al.'s (2019) *Worlds of Journalism* project and Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach's (2017) work on journalistic role performance, which together shifted attention from system-level descriptors to professional cultures, role conceptions, and their cross-national variation.

Comparative journalism scholarship has matured methodologically, with greater attention to sampling logic, equivalence of measurement, and the avoidance of methodological nationalism (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013; Trappel & Tomaz, 2021). Nonetheless, two persistent limitations recur. First, comparative work continues to be unevenly geographically distributed, with sub-Saharan Africa, much of Central Asia, and parts of Latin America underrepresented in cross-national datasets relative to their populations and media systems (Demeter, 2020; Mutsvairo, 2018). Second, the platform turn has rendered the unit of comparison less stable: if newsrooms increasingly operate within transnational platform environments whose moderation, monetization, and visibility regimes are set elsewhere, then the national-system frame loses some of its previous explanatory grip (Flew, 2021; Gorwa, 2019).

2.3. *De-Westernization, Decolonial Currents, and Epistemic Asymmetry*

The third cluster represents one of the most theoretically consequential developments in the post-2000 field. Curran and Park's (2000) *De-Westernizing Media Studies* and Wang's (2011) subsequent volume framed the de-Westernization argument as a call to broaden the empirical base of communication theory beyond the North Atlantic. Waisbord and Mellado (2014) refined the program by distinguishing geographic diversification from genuine theoretical decentering. Mignolo (2011) and Comaroff and Comaroff (2012) supplied the broader decolonial scaffolding that later communication scholars have engaged with increasing seriousness, particularly through Willems' (2014) call to provincialize hegemonic histories of the discipline and through African and Latin American interventions that read communication through the long aftermath of colonial knowledge production (Milan & Tréré, 2019; Mutsvairo, 2018).

Yet the bibliometric record poses a sobering counterweight. Demeter's (2020) analysis of academic knowledge production demonstrates that high-impact Anglophone venues remain dominated by authors based at North American and Western European institutions, that co-authorship networks reproduce regional concentration, and that scholars from the Global South are systematically underrepresented in editorial boards and citation flows. The implication is not that decolonial scholarship has failed but that the structural conditions of academic knowledge production cannot be transformed by individual citation hygiene. They require, as Ricourte (2022) argues in the adjacent context of artificial intelligence ethics, an explicit redistribution of authority over what counts as legitimate theoretical contribution.

More recent contributions have substantially extended the program. Çelik (2025) interrogates the public-sphere tradition itself, arguing that the dominant Habermas lineage cannot be marginally repaired through inclusion and proposing instead a justice-seeking communication framework grounded in subaltern political ontologies of the Middle East. The 2024 special issue of *Communication Theory* on decolonizing communication theories (Pal, 2024) consolidates the broader move from critique to constructive theoretical proposal, signaling that the decolonial program has reached a stage at which substantive alternative theoretical apparatuses—rather than only diagnostic critiques—are being put forward. Together, these contributions strengthen the case that the decolonial cluster is not a marginal corrective to the field's mainstream but is increasingly constitutive of its theoretical vanguard.

2.4. *Phantomization, Digital Sovereignty, and Media Infrastructures*

The fourth cluster addresses the consolidation of a small number of transnational platforms as the dominant mediators of contemporary international communication. Castells's (2009) account of communication power as a contest over networked switching points provided an early conceptual scaffold; Flew (2021) and Gorwa (2019) extended it by conceptualizing platform governance as a hybrid public–private regime that reconfigures the relationship between corporate moderation policies and national jurisdictions. The geopolitics of platforms has become an explicit object of analysis: Gray (2021) examined the TikTok challenge, Mueller (2020) interrogated the rhetoric of cyberspace sovereignty, and Couture and Toupin (2019) traced how the term sovereignty itself migrates across institutional settings when reattached to the digital. Pohle and Thiel (2020) synthesized the resulting literature on digital sovereignty as a polysemous category capable of legitimating both liberal and illiberal regulatory agendas.

Three theoretical moves distinguish this cluster from earlier waves. The first is the shift from broadcast and bandwidth metaphors to algorithmic and infrastructural metaphors. Couldry and Mejias (2019) reframed contemporary data extraction as a colonial relation, while Crawford (2021) anchored artificial intelligence in its planetary material substrate. The second is the explicit infrastructural turn of Parks and Starosielski (2015), Starosielski (2015), and Plantin and Punathambekar (2019), which insists that submarine cables, data delivery networks, and platform stacks are not background conditions but constitutive sites of geopolitical contest. The third is the regulatory comparison that Bradford (2020, 2023) develops in her Brussels-effect and digital-empires analyses, which demonstrates that the rule-making capacity of major jurisdictions exerts extraterritorial force on platform conduct in ways that complicate any clean public–private dichotomy.

Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018) contribute an additional theoretical register by conceptualizing the platform society as a systemic reorganization of public life around platform values—dataism, commodification, selection—that cuts across the media, health, education, and public-sector domains simultaneously. Their framework extends the infrastructural turn into the social-organizational domain, providing a bridge between media-specific analyses and the broader political economy of platform capitalism. Read across these contributions, the cluster proposes that the central analytic unit of contemporary international communication is neither the message nor the channel but the stack: an integrated complex of physical infrastructure, computational layers, governance agreements, and user-facing interfaces whose contests over visibility and access constitute the political economy of the contemporary mediascape (Plantin & Punathambekar, 2019).

2.5. *Disinformation, Computational Propaganda, and Information Disorder*

The fifth cluster concerns the rapid expansion of scholarship on cross-border disinformation, computational propaganda, and information disorder. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) provided the conceptual taxonomy that has since structured much of this work, distinguishing misinformation, disinformation, and misinformation. Bennett and Livingston (2018) recast the phenomenon in institutional terms as a disinformation order that erodes democratic legitimacy. Bradshaw and Howard (2019) inventoried organized social media manipulation across more than seventy countries, and Helmus et al. (2020) analyzed the Russian influence operations infrastructure in Eastern Europe with policy specificity. Tenove (2020) clarified the normative threats that disinformation poses to deliberative democracy, and Humprecht, Esser, and Van Aelst (2020) advanced a framework for cross-national resilience comparison.

Two methodological innovations advance this cluster beyond the early disinformation literature. First, Vaccari and Chadwick (2020) and Dobber et al. (2021) opened a careful experimental program on the political effects of synthetic political video and microtargeted deepfakes, documenting how generative manipulations interact with prior beliefs in ways that resist blanket claims of catastrophic effect. Second, Madrid-Morales et al. (2021) and Wasserman (2020) located disinformation research firmly within sub-Saharan African media ecologies, destabilizing the assumption that information

disorder is primarily a Western or Russian problem and showing that motivations for sharing misinformation diverge significantly across national contexts. Freelon, Marwick, and Kreiss (2020) importantly cautioned against false equivalencies in the political attribution of online disinformation, identifying methodological challenges that systematic research designs must address.

Recent comparative work has begun to operationalize this pluralist impulse at impressive empirical scale. Cazzamatta's (2024) cross-national content analysis of 3,154 debunking articles from twenty-three fact-checking organizations across eight European and Latin American countries documents that aggregated forms of fabrication are substantially more prominent in Latin America than in Western Europe, and that media-system features—particularly low public-service media penetration and high social-media news reliance—covary with these patterns in theoretically tractable ways. Hameleers and Garnier Ortiz's (2024) seven-country survey of misinformation risk perceptions across the Global North and South complicates the assumption that platform exposure produces uniform vulnerability, showing instead that perceived risk varies significantly across national, platform, and issue contexts. Broda and Strömbäck's (2024) systematic review of 1,261 articles on misinformation, disinformation, and fake news provides a panoramic view of the field's methodological choices and confirms that data-driven prevalence and dissemination studies still dominate, with normative and intervention research lagging. These three 2024 contributions collectively indicate that the disinformation cluster is moving toward the geographic and methodological pluralism that earlier critics had called for.

2.6. Soft Power, Public Diplomacy, and Affective Strategic Communication

The sixth cluster sits at the intersection of communication and international relations. Nye's (2004) foundational conceptualization of soft power as the ability to achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion established a normative benchmark against which subsequent communication-centered analyses have been measured. Public diplomacy scholarship moved decisively beyond its mid-twentieth-century broadcasting antecedents during the 2000s, in part through Zaharna's (2010) work on relational communication after 9/11 and through Zaharna and Uysal's (2016) analysis of how adversarial publics use social media to challenge state legitimacy. Pamment (2018) connected public diplomacy to the platform economy, demonstrating how digital affordances reconfigure national-image management and opening questions about the commensurability of state and platform communication logics.

Walker (2018) introduced the concept of sharp power to describe authoritarian actors' use of information operations to distort rather than attract, providing a normative counterpoint to Nye's soft-power framework that subsequent work on Chinese, Russian, and other authoritarian communications has developed (Repnikova, 2022). Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) brought emotion into the analytic foreground, demonstrating that effect is not an ornament of political communication but a central organizing register. Literature has also engaged with the rise of civilizational narratives that mobilize affective strategic communication on behalf of state actors across distinct geopolitical contexts. The result is a cluster that has substantially complicated the soft-power vocabulary of the late 1990s without entirely displacing it, while opening productive questions about the relationship between rational-deliberative and affective-emotional models of international public communication.

2.7. Generative Artificial Intelligence and Algorithmic Governance

The seventh cluster, the youngest and not yet fully consolidated, concerns the integration of generative artificial intelligence into international communication. The scholarship coalesces around three concerns. First, the news industry has begun to deploy generative tools in editorial production at scale, with Beckett and Yaseen's (2023) global Journalism survey documenting the diffusion of these practices and Diakopoulos (2019) providing the foundational theorization of automated news. Second, critical artificial intelligence scholarship has interrogated the political economy and epistemic risks of large-scale generative systems. Bender et al. (2021) raised the alarm on stochastic parrot risks; Birhane, Prabhu, and Kahembwe (2022) documented the misogyny and malignant stereotypes

embedded in multimodal training datasets; Crawford (2021) situated artificial intelligence in its planetary material substrate; and Mohamed, Png, and Isaac (2020) advanced a decolonial critique of artificial intelligence design.

Third, an emerging Global South literature on generative artificial intelligence in journalism, exemplified by Gondwe (2023), interrogates how sub-Saharan African journalists actually engage with these tools and surfaces a substantively different research agenda than the Western policy debate. Algorithmic governance has emerged as a parallel concern: Nechushtai and Lewis (2019) opened the normative question of what kind of news gatekeepers algorithmic systems should be, and Zeng and Kaye (2022) showed that visibility moderation—the selective downranking of lawful but disfavored content—constitutes a distinct mode of platform governance that deserves analytic separation from content removal. Ricaurte (2022) extended these concerns by foregrounding the systemic violence that artificial intelligence systems enact at scale in the majority world.

Cross-industry analyses have begun to articulate the broader stakes. Guzman and Lewis (2024) argue that generative artificial intelligence cannot be analyzed as a discipline-bounded development of journalism, advertising, or public relations alone; rather, the same underlying technologies are being absorbed in parallel across all three media industries, often for the same purposes—content creation, audience engagement, operational restructuring—and the collective consequences must be studied as such. The argument is consequential for international communication because it implies that the platform-era organization of the global mediascape is being recomposed simultaneously across multiple sectors that international communication scholarship has historically treated as separate, necessitating cross-sector theoretical frameworks capable of tracking parallel reorganization rather than domain-specific case accumulation.

Table 1. Thematic Map of Major Clusters and Subthemes in International Communication, 2000–2026.

Cluster	Label	Core Subthemes	Anchor Theoretical Sources	Key Empirical Work (2020–2026)
C1	Cultural Globalization & Media Flows	Cultural imperialism revisited; hybridization; South–South flows; regional cultural industries; cosmopolitan media studies	Schiller (1976); Appadurai (1996); Kraidy (2005, 2017); Thussu (2019)	Krings & Okome (2013); Mutsvairo (2018)
C2	Comparative Journalism & Media Systems	Media-system typologies; journalistic role performance; cross-national equivalence; methodological nationalism	Hallin & Mancini (2004); Mellado et al. (2017); Hanitzsch et al. (2019)	Trappel & Tomaz (2021); Boczkowski & Mitchelstein (2013)

C3	De-Westernization & Decolonial Currents	Geographic epistemic decentering; bibliometric asymmetry; provincializing the discipline; justice-seeking communication frameworks	vs.	Curran & Park (2000); Wang (2011); Mignolo (2011); Waisbord & Mellado (2014); Willems (2014)	Demeter (2020); Ricaurte (2022); Çelik (2025); Pal (2024)
C4	Platformization, Digital Sovereignty & Infrastructures	Platform governance; digital sovereignty; data colonialism; infrastructural turn; regulatory extraterritoriality; platform stacks		Castells (2009); Couldry & Mejias (2019); Parks & Starosielski (2015); Plantin & Punathambekar (2019)	Gorwa (2019); Pohle & Thiel (2020); Flew (2021); Bradford (2020, 2023); Gray (2021); Mueller (2020)
C5	Disinformation, Computational Propaganda & Information Disorder	Information disorder taxonomy; computational propaganda; deepfakes; cross-national resilience; Global South disinformation ecologies		Wardle & Derakhshan (2017); Bennett & Livingston (2018); Bradshaw & Howard (2019)	Vaccari & Chadwick (2020); Dobber et al. (2021); Wasserman (2020); Cazzamatta (2024); Hameleers & Garnier Ortiz (2024); Broda & Strömbäck (2024)
C6	Soft Power, Public Diplomacy & Affective Strategic Communication	Relational public diplomacy; emotion in political communication; sharp power; civilizational narratives; digital diplomacy		Zaharna (2010); Wahl-Jorgensen (2019); Nye (2004)	Zaharna & Uysal (2016); Walker (2018); Repnikova (2022); Pamment (2018)
C7	Generative AI & Algorithmic Governance (Emergent)	Generative AI in journalism; stochastic parrot risks; algorithmic gatekeeping;		Diakopoulos (2019); Bender et al. (2021); Crawford (2021); Mohamed et al. (2020)	Beckett & Yaseen (2023); Gondwe (2023); Guzman & Lewis (2024);

		visibility moderation; decolonial AI ethics; planetary materiality		Ricaurte (2022); Zeng & Kaye (2022)
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Note. Adapted by the author from a thematic synthesis of the corpus reviewed (cf. Thomas & Harden, 2008). Cluster C7 is designated emergent; all other clusters are established.

3. Methodology

This section describes the systematic review protocol employed to address the three research questions set out in Section 1. The review follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021) and adopts the thematic synthesis procedure of Thomas and Harden (2008) as its primary analytical framework. The protocol is organized into seven subsections: topic definition and scope (§3.1), boundaries and exclusions (§3.2), search strategy (§3.3), inclusion and exclusion criteria (§3.4), source classification by significance (§3.5), the PRISMA 2020 flow of records (§3.6), and the analytical synthesis procedure (§3.7). Each subsection is designed to ensure methodological transparency and reproducibility, while acknowledging the reflexive challenge that a review conducted in English and indexed through predominantly Anglophone databases inevitably encounters when examining a field whose epistemic diversity it simultaneously advocates.

3.1. Topic Definition and Scope

The review's central topic is the trajectory of international communication scholarship between 2000 and 2026, with explicit attention to the emerging trends and persistent research gaps that organize the discipline at the time of writing. The topic is articulated with deliberate breadth in order to admit cross-cluster theoretical comparison, and with deliberate temporal precision in order to capture both the platform turn of the late 2000s and the consolidation of generative artificial intelligence in the early 2020s. The review is bounded geographically only in the sense that the unit of inquiry is transnational, cross-border, or comparative communication phenomena; nationally bounded studies are included where they yield evidence relevant to the international register.

The scope is restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles, edited monographs from academic publishers, and authoritative policy and working-paper reports from established research institutions (e.g., the Oxford Internet Institute, RAND Corporation, Council of Europe). The review acknowledges that its language restriction to English-language publications itself reproduces a structural feature of the field that the analysis later identifies as an epistemic gap; that contradiction is reflected upon in Section 5.

3.2. Boundaries and Exclusions

The review excludes conference abstracts and presentations not subsequently developed into peer-reviewed publications, on grounds of evidentiary stability; monographs published outside academic peer-review systems, on grounds of warrant; journalism-of-record pieces, blog posts, and trade publications, except where they are explicitly invoked as primary documents within a peer-reviewed analysis; work published before January 1, 2000, except for foundational citations whose continued operation in the post-2000 literature warrants retrospective inclusion (e.g., Schiller, 1976; Appadurai, 1996; Curran & Park, 2000); and studies whose principal contribution is technical (for example, computer-science papers on language-model architecture) without communicative or governance implications.

3.3. Search Strategy

The search was conducted across seven scholarly databases selected for their coverage of communication, media, and adjacent disciplines: Communication & Mass Media Complete (EBSCO), Web of Science Core Collection, Scopus, Sociological Abstracts, JSTOR, Google Scholar (used for forward and backward citation tracing rather than as a primary index), and ProQuest Sociology Database. The search was iterative across three rounds: an initial concept-driven sweep, a refinement round informed by emerging clusters, and a final saturation check based on backward and forward citation tracing of anchor sources. Boolean operators combined topical, methodological, and disciplinary terms in calibrated proximity expressions, as detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Boolean Search Strings by Database (Illustrative Subset).

Database	Representative Boolean Search String
Communication & Mass Media Complete (EBSCO)	("international communication" OR "global communication" OR "transnational media") AND ("platform*" OR "digital sovereignty" OR "algorithm*" OR "generative AI" OR "disinformation" OR "de-Westerni*ation" OR "decoloni*") AND DT 20000101-20260131
Web of Science Core Collection	TS=(("international communication" OR "global media" OR "transnational journalism") AND ("platform governance" OR "computational propaganda" OR "data colonialism" OR "sharp power" OR "public diplomacy" OR "information disorder")) AND PY=2000-2026
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY(("international communication" OR "transnational media" OR "cross-border information") AND ("platform*" OR "AI" OR "misinformation" OR "disinformation" OR "decolon*" OR "de-Westerniz*" OR "infrastructure*")) AND PUBYEAR > 1999 AND PUBYEAR < 2027 AND LANGUAGE(English)
JSTOR / ProQuest Sociology	((("international communication" OR "media globalization") AND ("public diplomacy" OR "soft power" OR "sharp power" OR "hybridization" OR "cultural imperialism"))) date:[2000 TO 2026]
Sociological Abstracts	((("transnational communication" OR "cross-national media") AND ("algorithm*" OR "platform*" OR "datafication" OR "surveillance capitalism")) AND PD(20000101-20260131)
Google Scholar (citation tracing)	Backward and forward citation tracing on anchor sources: Schiller (1976), Hallin & Mancini (2004), Castells (2009), Couldry & Mejias (2019), Bradford (2023). Used to surface peripheral or non-indexed work.

Note. Compiled by the author following PRISMA 2020 reporting guidance (Page et al., 2021). Asterisks denote wildcard truncation. Search strings were iteratively refined following an initial scoping round.

3.4. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Table 3 presents the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied at title, abstract, and full-text screening stages. Criteria were operationalized in advance of screening and applied consistently by the author, with a random 15% sample of title-abstract screening decisions verified against the written criteria to ensure interpretive consistency. Disagreements in the verification sample (approximately 4%) were resolved by returning to the written criteria and the study's full text.

Table 3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria Applied at Title, Abstract, and Full-Text Screening.

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication date	January 1, 2000–January 31, 2026	Publications outside this window, except foundational citations explicitly engaged by post-2000 work
Document type	Peer-reviewed journal articles; edited monographs from academic publishers; authoritative policy and working-paper reports from established research institutions	Conference abstracts; trade publications; non-peer-reviewed monographs; opinion pieces; blog posts
Language	English-language publications	Non-English publications (acknowledged limitation; see §5)
Topical focus	Transnational, cross-border, or comparative communication phenomena, including platform governance, disinformation, decolonial communication theory, public diplomacy, and AI in journalism	Studies focused exclusively on intra-national contexts without international implications; technical computer-science papers without communicative or governance dimensions
Methodological transparency	Studies reporting sufficient methodological detail to permit appraisal of evidentiary warrant	Studies whose methods are not described in sufficient detail for appraisal
Theoretical contribution	Studies advancing, critiquing, or empirically testing theoretical propositions relevant to international communication as a discipline	Purely descriptive accounts lacking analytic framing

Note. Developed by the author following PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021). The language restriction to English-language publications is acknowledged as a structural limitation that reproduces the bibliometric asymmetries the review's analysis critiques; future replication studies should extend coverage to Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, French, and Mandarin scholarly venues.

3.5. Source Classification by Significance

Once the corpus had been assembled, individual sources were classified along three dimensions to support comparative reading. The first was anchor status: sources whose conceptual or empirical contributions are repeatedly invoked across two or more clusters were identified as anchor sources and given proportionate analytic weight in subsequent synthesis (e.g., Castells, 2009; Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Thussu, 2019). The second was contribution type, distinguishing theoretical contributions, empirical studies, methodological proposals, and policy-oriented analyses. The third was geographic focus, marking each source by the regional or transnational unit of its

empirical referent. The classification is deliberately heuristic rather than scientometric; its purpose is to support thematic synthesis, not to generate a citation-frequency ranking.

3.6. PRISMA 2020 Flow

Table 4 presents the PRISMA 2020 flow of records through identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion (Page et al., 2021). Initial database searches across the seven indexes returned 4,182 records. After the removal of 1,127 duplicates, 3,055 unique records were screened at title and abstract, of which 2,498 were excluded for being outside topical scope, document type, or language. The remaining 557 records were retrieved in full text, of which 31 could not be obtained. Of the 526 full-text records assessed for eligibility, 286 were excluded (113 for insufficient methodological transparency; 92 for failing topical scope on full-text reading; 81 for being descriptive without analytic contribution). Two hundred forty studies were retained in the final synthesis, complemented by 47 additional anchor sources retrieved through backward and forward citation tracing of high leverage works.

Table 4. PRISMA 2020 Flow of Records Through the Review Process.

Stage	Records (n)
Records identified from databases (CMMC, Web of Science, Scopus, Sociological Abstracts, JSTOR, Google Scholar, ProQuest)	4,182
Duplicate records removed before screening	1,127
Unique records screened at title/abstract	3,055
Records excluded at title/abstract (out of topical scope, document type, or language)	2,498
Full-text records sought for retrieval	557
Full-text records not retrieved	31
Full-text records assessed for eligibility	526
Full-text records excluded: insufficient methodological transparency (n = 113); out of topical scope on full-text reading (n = 92); descriptive without analytic contribution (n = 81)	286
Studies included in qualitative synthesis	240
Additional anchor sources from citation tracing	47
Total studies in final synthesis	287

Note. Adapted by the author from Page et al. (2021), PRISMA 2020 Statement (BMJ, 372, n71). Total studies in final synthesis (n = 287) include 240 directly retrieved records and 47 anchor sources identified through citation tracing.

3.7. Analytical Synthesis

The analytical synthesis followed the thematic synthesis procedure of Thomas and Harden (2008), proceeding through three iterative steps: line-by-line coding of extracted text passages, organization of codes into descriptive themes, and abstraction of descriptive themes into analytical themes oriented to the review's research questions. Both inductive and deductive moves operated in tandem, with deductive themes derived from the conceptual literature on cultural globalization, platform governance, decolonial communication, disinformation, public diplomacy, and generative artificial intelligence, and inductive themes emerging from the corpus itself, particularly around the structural–agentic tension and the layering of paradigms. The review applies the principle that thematic saturation, not exhaustive enumeration, is the appropriate stopping rule (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Thomas & Harden, 2008).

4. Findings

This section presents the results of the thematic synthesis conducted according to the protocol described in Section 3. The findings are organized into two subsections. Section 4.1 maps the recurring themes, theories, and concepts that structure the corpus, identifying four principal conceptual families—power-asymmetric vocabularies inherited from the cultural imperialism tradition, the structural–agentic negotiation, the universalist–pluralist tension, and the emergent rational–affective divide—and situating them within a paradigm-layering framework that spans the broadcast era through the generative AI era. Section 4.2 catalogues seven persistent research gaps and six corresponding emerging trends, documenting both the epistemic lacunae that continue to constrain the field and the disciplinary movements that are beginning to address them. Across both subsections, the analysis draws on 287 studies in the final synthesis (240 directly retrieved and 47 anchor sources from citation tracing) and is supported by three classificatory tables (Tables 5–7) that permit comparative reading across theoretical lineages, paradigm eras, and gap–direction pairings.

4.1. Recurring Themes, Theories, and Concepts

Three families of conceptual moves recur across the corpus. The first is the persistent operation of power-asymmetric vocabularies inherited from the cultural imperialism tradition. Even in literatures that overtly distance themselves from Schiller (1976)—for example, platform governance scholarship that emphasizes corporate moderation discretion—the underlying analytic figure of the dominant center exporting cultural and informational products to peripheries continues to organize argumentation. Couldry and Mejias's (2019) data colonialism is, conceptually, a direct heir of the cultural imperialism problematic, now refigured around extraction of behavioral data rather than export of cultural products. Table 5 (see below) illustrates how this lineage cuts across representative studies at different points of the paradigm arc.

The second recurring conceptual family is the negotiation between structural and agentic accounts of media power. Comparative journalism scholarship (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Mellado et al., 2017) and platform governance scholarship (Flew, 2021; Gorwa, 2019) tend toward structural explanations; cultural-flows hybridization scholarship (Kraidy, 2005, 2017) and decolonial scholarship (Mignolo, 2011; Mutsvauro, 2018; Willems, 2014) often foreground agentic and discursive moves. The infrastructural turn (Parks & Starosielski, 2015; Plantin & Punathambekar, 2019; Starosielski, 2015) presents a potentially synthesizing register, since infrastructures are simultaneously material structures and contested sites of agentic intervention.

The third recurring family is the tension between universalist and pluralist impulses, particularly visible in disinformation research, where computational and platform-trace approaches frequently presuppose a universal grammar of information disorder while ethnographic and historical work in particular regions documents the local specificities that resist universalization (Madrid-Morales et al., 2021; Wasserman, 2020). A fourth family—the negotiation between rational-deliberative and affective-emotional models of political communication—has emerged with

increasing clarity in the most recent scholarship (Çelik, 2025; Hameleers & Garnier Ortiz, 2024; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019), suggesting that the field is approaching a point at which affect must be analytically integrated rather than theoretically residualized.

Table 5. Analytical Classification of Twenty Representative Studies in International Communication, 2000–2026.

Study	Theoretical Lineage	Method	Principal Finding/Argument	Limitation
Hallin & Mancini (2004)	Comparative media systems	Comparative-historical analysis	Three-systems typology (liberal, democratic corporatist, polarized pluralist) anchors cross-national variation in journalism–state–market relations	Calibrated to Western European/North American cases; travels uneasily to post-authoritarian and post-colonial contexts
Castells (2009)	Network society; communication power	Theoretical synthesis with case illustrations	Power is exercised through programming and switching of communication networks; mass self-communication reconfigures political contestation	Limited operationalization for empirical replication; uneven engagement with material infrastructure
Kraidy (2005, 2017)	Hybridization; cultural studies	Critical-cultural synthesis	Hybridity is the cultural logic of globalization, simultaneously expressing creativity and obscuring asymmetric power	Conceptual reach exceeds empirical case base; later work (Kraidy, 2017) extends program
Couldry & Mejias (2019)	Data colonialism	Critical theoretical synthesis	Platform-mediated data extraction constitutes a colonial relation appropriating	Empirical operationalization of the colonial analogy is contested; risks

			human life for capital	flattening historical specificities
Demeter (2020)	Bibliometrics; political economy of knowledge	Bibliometric and structural analysis	Documents systematic underrepresentation of Global South authors in high-impact communication venues	Bibliometric data lag; analysis less developed for non-English adjacent venues
Bradford (2020, 2023)	Regulatory comparative analysis	Comparative legal analysis	EU regulatory capacity exerts extraterritorial effects; three regulatory empires (US, EU, China) compete to set global digital rules	Limited engagement with non-state actors; under-theorizes Global South regulatory agency
Parks & Starosielski (2015); Starosielski (2015)	Media infrastructure studies	Multi-method, including ethnography	Media infrastructures (cables, data centers) are constitutive sites of geopolitical contest demanding analytic foregrounding	Empirical access to infrastructural sites uneven; specialized methodological demands
Wardle & Derakhshan (2017)	Information disorder	Conceptual taxonomy and policy report	Establishes the misinformation–disinformation–malinformation taxonomy now adopted across the field	Definitional precision varies in subsequent operationalization ; gray areas remain
Bennett & Livingston (2018)	Disinformation order	Conceptual political-communication analysis	Disinformation operates as an institutional order eroding democratic	Empirical specification of the order varies across national settings

			legitimacy, not a discrete event	
Bradshaw & Howard (2019)	Computational propaganda	Cross-national inventory	Documents organized social media manipulation in 70+ countries	Inventory snapshots privilege visible activity; covert operations may be undercounted
Vaccari & Chadwick (2020); Dobber et al. (2021)	Disinformation effects; deepfakes	Experimental	Synthetic political video and microtargeted deepfakes interact with prior beliefs; effects are real but not uniform	External validity across political cultures uncertain; effect sizes context-dependent
Wasserman (2020); Madrid-Morales et al. (2021)	Disinformation in the Global South	Comparative survey; critical synthesis	Motivations for sharing misinformation diverge significantly across sub-Saharan African contexts, unsettling Western framings	Limited longitudinal data; sampling constraints across multiple national contexts
Crawford (2021); Bender et al. (2021); Mohamed et al. (2020)	Critical AI studies	Critical theoretical synthesis	AI must be understood through planetary material substrate, dataset political economy, and decolonial accountability	Empirical operationalization of decolonial AI evaluation criteria still emergent
Beckett & Yaseen (2023); Gondwe (2023); Guzman & Lewis (2024)	Generative AI in journalism	Survey; theoretical synthesis; mixed methods	Generative AI adoption across newsrooms is uneven; sub-Saharan African journalists engage these tools on terms not captured by	Rapid technological change shortens shelf life of empirical findings

			Western policy debates	
Cazzamatta (2024); Hameleers & Garnier Ortiz (2024); Broda & Strömbäck (2024)	Cross-national disinformation (emerging)	Content analysis; seven-country survey; systematic review	Fabrication patterns vary across media systems; perceived misinformation risk differs by platform, country, and issue; supply-side studies dominate the field	Longitudinal effects evidence remains thin; methodological convergence still underway
Çelik (2025); Pal (2024)	Decolonial communication theory	Critical-conceptual; special-issue synthesis	The dominant Habermasian public-sphere tradition cannot be marginally repaired through inclusion; justice-seeking alternative frameworks are being constructed from subaltern ontologies	Alternative frameworks require further empirical operationalization
Plantin & Punathambekarr (2019)	Infrastructure studies / platform studies	Conceptual synthesis	Pipes, platforms, and politics must be analyzed together; the platform is simultaneously an infrastructural and governance object	Synthesis level invites further empirical operationalization
Wahl-Jorgensen (2019); Repnikova (2022)	Affective political communication ; soft power	Theoretical synthesis with cases	Emotion is a central organizing register of political communication; Chinese soft power operates through affective and civilizational registers distinct from Western models	Cross-national affective comparison less developed; Chinese model under-theorized in Western scholarship

Flew (2021); Gorwa (2019)	Platform governance	Policy-analytic synthesis	Platform regulation is best understood as a hybrid public- private regime requiring comparative regulatory analysis; platforms are private governance actors with public consequences	Treats platform actors as relatively unified; less attention to internal organizational dynamics
Ricaurte (2022)	Decolonial AI ethics	Critical- theoretical synthesis	AI systems enact systemic violence at scale in the majority world; meaningful decolonial change requires explicit redistribution of epistemic authority	Empirical specification of violence metrics remains contested

Note. Compiled by the author from a thematic synthesis of the corpus reviewed. Selection balances anchor sources of established influence with newer empirical and critical work of rising significance. Study entries appear in thematic order rather than strict chronological order.

Table 6. Paradigm Layers in International Communication Scholarship, 2000–2026: From Cultural Imperialism to Generative AI.

Paradigm Era	Dominant Figure	Analytic	Representative Vocabulary	Primary Tension	Contemporary Iteration
Broadcast Era (pre-2000)	Nation-state; broadcaster		Cultural imperialism; media flows; propaganda	Structure vs. culture	Persists in data-colonialism and platform-imperialism frameworks
Early Digital Era (2000–2010)	Network society; hybrid audience		Hybridization; network power; mass self-communication	Structure vs. agency	Reconfigured by platform governance debates
Platform Era (2010–2020)	Platform as infrastructure/governor		Platform imperialism; algorithmic governance;	Public vs. private power	Extended by AI governance and regulatory-

		digital sovereignty		empire frameworks
Generative AI Era (2020– 2026)	Automated meaning- making; global stack	Generative AI; data colonialism; visibility moderation; epistemic asymmetry	Universal vs. pluralist; human vs. automated	Emergent; under active theoretical construction

Note. Constructed by the author from thematic synthesis. Each paradigm era represents an analytic shift in dominant vocabulary and central tension; earlier layers persist beneath later ones rather than being displaced (conceptual-layering thesis).

4.2. Identified Research Gaps and Emerging Trends

The synthesis identifies seven persistent research gaps that cut across the clusters. First, the structural underrepresentation of Global South perspectives in indexed scholarship is not a residual feature of the field but a constitutive condition of its present knowledge production (Demeter, 2020; Mutsvairo, 2018). Second, longitudinal evidence on cross-border disinformation effects remains thin: the field knows considerably more about the supply of disinformation than about its cumulative effects on belief, behavior, and institutional trust (Freelon, Marwick, & Kreiss, 2020; Tenove, 2020). Third, infrastructural blind spots persist: although the infrastructural turn is theoretically established, empirical engagement with the political economy of submarine cables, data centers, and content delivery networks remains concentrated in a small number of research programs (Parks & Starosielski, 2015; Plantin & Punathambekar, 2019; Starosielski, 2015). Fourth, the integration of generative artificial intelligence into international communication is theoretically under-specified: the field has not yet articulated how generative systems reconfigure the structural–agentic balance, the universalist–pluralist tension, or the public–private architecture of platform governance (Beckett & Yaseen, 2023; Crawford, 2021; Mohamed, Png, & Isaac, 2020). Fifth, the field continues to display a methodological imbalance favoring computational and platform-trace approaches over historical, ethnographic, and qualitative ones, with the latter often confined to regionally specific case studies that are read as evidence about regions rather than contributions to general theory (Wasserman, 2020; Willems, 2014). Sixth, several of the field's most generative categories—platform, sovereignty, public sphere, decolonization—have been stretched to accommodate increasingly heterogeneous referents without commensurate conceptual clarification (Couture & Toupin, 2019; Çelik, 2025; Pohle & Thiel, 2020). Seventh, the affective dimensions of international communication—how emotion, affect, and civilizational identification structure cross-border public engagement—remain under-theorized and under-measured in comparative terms (Hameleers & Garnier Ortiz, 2024; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

Six corresponding emerging trends partially address these gaps. The first is the maturation of comparative journalism studies into a methodologically self-conscious program (Hanitzsch et al., 2019; Mellado et al., 2017; Trappel & Tomaz, 2021). The second is the consolidation of platform governance as a comparative regulatory field (Bradford, 2020, 2023; Flew, 2021; Gorwa, 2019; Pohle & Thiel, 2020). The third is the empirical and theoretical extension of decolonial communication scholarship beyond a primarily critical register into substantive regional theorization and constructive alternative frameworks (Çelik, 2025; Mignolo, 2011; Mutsvairo, 2018; Pal, 2024; Ricaurte, 2022; Willems, 2014). The fourth is the disruptive integration of generative artificial intelligence into media production and governance, which is reorganizing the field's empirical agenda even before its theoretical implications have been fully assimilated (Beckett & Yaseen, 2023; Diakopoulos, 2019; Gondwe, 2023; Guzman & Lewis, 2024). The fifth is the consolidation of methodologically ambitious cross-national disinformation research that operationalizes the pluralist impulse earlier critics had

called for (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024; Cazzamatta, 2024; Hameleers & Garnier Ortiz, 2024). The sixth is the rise of comparative effective and civilizational communication research that fuses public diplomacy, platform governance, and emotional appeal in analytically demanding ways (Repnikova, 2022; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019; Zaharna & Uysal, 2016).

Table 7. Persistent Research Gaps and Corresponding Future-Research Directions.

Persistent Gap	Future-Research Direction	Representative Citations	Anchor
G1. Structural underrepresentation of Global South perspectives in indexed scholarship	Reform indexing, editorial-board, and citation practices; institutionalize co-authorship structures that build Global South theoretical authority rather than merely empirical contribution	Demeter (2020); Mutsvairo (2018); Willems (2014)	
G2. Limited longitudinal evidence on cross-border disinformation effects on belief, behavior, and institutional trust	Multi-year panel studies and pre-registered cross-national experimental programs; integration of trace data with sustained survey instrumentation	Freelon et al. (2020); Tenove (2020); Broda & Strömbäck (2024)	
G3. Empirical thinness of infrastructural analysis despite established theoretical interest	Sustained ethnographic and political-economic studies of cables, data centers, content delivery networks, and platform stacks across multiple jurisdictions	Parks & Starosielski (2015); Plantin & Punathambekar (2019); Starosielski (2015)	
G4. Under-theorization of generative AI's role in transnational information ecosystems	Cross-cluster theoretical synthesis on how generative AI reconfigures structural-agentive, universal-pluralist, and public-private dynamics; comparative governance research on AI in journalism across diverse regulatory contexts	Beckett & Yaseen (2023); Crawford (2021); Mohamed et al. (2020); Guzman & Lewis (2024)	
G5. Methodological imbalance favoring computational over historical, ethnographic, and qualitative approaches	Methodological pluralism; treatment of regionally specific qualitative work as theoretical contribution, not only as empirical case material	Wasserman (2020); Willems (2014); Gondwe (2023)	

G6. Conceptual-elasticity problem: over-stretched categories (platform, sovereignty, decolonization, public sphere) deployed without explicit analytic cost reflection	Concept-mapping and definitional refinement as substantive theoretical contributions; meta-theoretical audits of disciplinary vocabulary	Couture & Toupin (2019); Çelik (2025); Pohle & Thiel (2020)
G7. Affective dimensions of international communication under-theorized and under-measured comparatively	Comparative designs for measuring affective publics; cross-cultural variation in emotional repertoires; integration of psychophysiological and computational methods with thick interpretive description	Wahl-Jorgensen (2019); Cazzamatta (2024); Hameleers & Garnier Ortiz (2024)

Note. Synthesized by the author from the corpus reviewed. G1–G5 correspond to gaps identified in the original synthesis; G6 (conceptual elasticity) and G7 (affective communication) are new additions made on the basis of the expanded literature review.

5. Discussion

This section interprets the findings presented in Section 4 in light of the broader conceptual and institutional debates that organize international communication as a discipline. The discussion is structured around five subsections. Section 5.1 advances the conceptual-layering thesis, arguing that the apparent succession of paradigms from cultural imperialism to algorithmic governance is better understood as an accumulation in which earlier analytic figures persist beneath later vocabularies. Section 5.2 examines how the structural–agentic tension has been reconfigured—but not resolved—by the platform and infrastructural turns. Section 5.3 confronts the disjuncture between the field’s normative de-Westernization commitments and its bibliometric realities, treating that gap as a theoretically productive contradiction rather than a residual deficiency. Section 5.4 identifies two cross-cutting tensions—liberal versus illiberal mobilizations of digital sovereignty, and universalizing versus pluralizing impulses in disinformation research—that resist easy resolution and therefore warrant sustained theoretical attention. Finally, Section 5.5 draws out three meta-theoretical implications concerning conceptual elasticity, the cumulative-evidence deficit, and the integration of generative artificial intelligence into the discipline’s analytic vocabulary. Taken together, the five subsections argue that the field’s most pressing need is not additional conceptual innovation but integrative work that reads its existing paradigm layers together and reforms the structural conditions of knowledge production that determine whose contributions count.

5.1. The Conceptual-Layering Thesis

Three integrative observations follow from the findings. The first concerns the conceptual structure of the field. The familiar narrative that frames international communication as moving from a broadcast-era paradigm centered on cultural imperialism to a platform-era paradigm centered on algorithmic governance is, on closer inspection, an oversimplification. The corpus reveals a layered conceptual architecture in which platform-era vocabularies rest on, refigure, and selectively extend power-asymmetric arguments inherited from the cultural imperialism tradition (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Schiller, 1976; Thussu, 2019). Reading the field as a layered architecture rather than as a

sequence of paradigm replacements has important methodological implications: it suggests that conceptual innovation in the discipline is best evaluated against the question of whether new vocabularies extend, refine, or merely rebrand inherited analytic figures. Table 6 presents this layering schematically across four paradigm eras, from the broadcast era to the current generative AI moment.

The layering thesis has practical consequences for how the field evaluates its own theoretical progress. A concept like digital sovereignty, for instance, can be read simultaneously as a novel regulatory category appropriate to the platform era, as a restatement of Westphalian territorial sovereignty in digital terms, and as a potential resource for either liberal or authoritarian agendas depending on which institutional actor mobilizes it (Pohle & Thiel, 2020). Unless the discipline tracks these conceptual genealogies explicitly, it risks mistaking vocabulary change for theoretical advance and missing the structural continuities that would otherwise allow cumulative knowledge-building.

5.2. *The Structural–Agentic Tension and the Infrastructural Turn*

The second observation concerns the structural–agentic tension that has long animated the field. The platform turn was sometimes initially read as a vindication of agentic accounts: the argument was that ordinary users, mobile devices, and viral content displaced the structurally dominant broadcaster (Castells, 2009). Subsequent scholarship has substantially tempered that reading. Platform governance, infrastructural analysis, and critical artificial intelligence studies all foreground structural conditions—corporate concentration, physical infrastructure, dataset political economy—whose effects significantly constrain the agentic latitude celebrated in earlier accounts (Bender et al., 2021; Crawford, 2021; Flew, 2021; Plantin & Punathambekar, 2019). The infrastructural turn offers a register in which structural and agentic concerns can be analyzed together rather than treated as competing accounts: infrastructures are at once material constraints and sites of contestable design choices. The practical implication for future research is that studies of individual actors—journalists, diplomats, activists, disinformation operators—need to situate those actors within the infrastructural architectures that enable and constrain their communicative action.

5.3. *Bibliometric Realities and Normative De-Westernization*

The third observation concerns the relationship between the field's normative aspirations and its bibliometric realities. The de-Westernization and decolonial programs are now thoroughly integrated into the field's self-understanding, yet citation flows, editorial appointments, and indexed venues continue to favor authors and institutions in the North Atlantic (Demeter, 2020). This disjuncture is theoretically consequential. It suggests that the structural conditions of academic knowledge production cannot be transformed by individual virtue alone, and that future research on international communication should treat the political economy of its own discipline as part of its analytic object. Ricaurte (2022) makes the parallel point in the artificial intelligence ethics context: meaningful decolonial change requires explicit redistribution of authority over what counts as legitimate theoretical contribution. The same logic applies to the discipline that produces this review.

5.4. *Cross-Cutting Tensions*

Two cross-cutting tensions deserve specific attention. The first runs between liberal and illiberal mobilizations of digital sovereignty (Couture & Toupin, 2019; Mueller, 2020; Pohle & Thiel, 2020). The European Union's Brussels-effect regulatory program (Bradford, 2020, 2023) and authoritarian platform-control regimes invoke similar sovereignty rhetoric to legitimate substantively different agendas; international communication scholarship needs analytic vocabulary capable of distinguishing these uses without flattening them into a single category. The second tension runs between universalizing and pluralizing impulses in disinformation research (Madrid-Morales et al., 2021; Wasserman, 2020). Computational approaches frequently presuppose universal grammar of information disorder that does not withstand close ethnographic and historical scrutiny in particular

regions. Both tensions are productive sites for future theoretical work precisely because they resist easy resolution.

5.5. Meta-Theoretical Implications

Three additional meta-theoretical implications follow from the synthesis. The first concerns the conceptual-elasticity problem: several of the field's most generative categories have been stretched to accommodate increasingly heterogeneous referents, and conceptual elasticity becomes a problem when stretched concepts are deployed without explicit reflection on the analytic costs of the stretching. The second concerns the cumulative-evidence problem: recent comparative and cross-national work in the disinformation cluster demonstrates that pluralizing the empirical base is feasible at scale (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024; Cazzamatta, 2024; Hameleers & Garnier Ortiz, 2024), yet the field's review and citation infrastructures continue to reward novelty over consolidation. The third concerns the integration of generative artificial intelligence into the field's analytic vocabulary: Guzman and Lewis (2024) propose that the field needs theoretical frameworks capable of tracking the simultaneous reorganization of multiple media sectors, a proposal consistent with the infrastructural turn (Plantin & Punathambekar, 2019) and with data-colonialism and platform-imperialism vocabularies (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

The speed of generative artificial intelligence deployment substantially exceeds the pace of scholarly assimilation (Beckett & Yaseen, 2023; Crawford, 2021; Diakopoulos, 2019; Gondwe, 2023). This asymmetry has practical implications: international communication scholarship is at risk of arriving late to the questions that policy makers, news organizations, and civil-society actors are already addressing. The field's most consequential contribution over the next decade may be not the introduction of additional novel concepts but the integrative work of reading its existing concepts together—and reform of the structural conditions of indexing, publishing, and citation that organize what can be read as a contribution is, as Demeter (2020), Pal (2024), and Ricaurte (2022) all argue, not an institutional aside but a substantive theoretical commitment.

6. Conclusions

International communication scholarship between 2000 and 2026 has expanded dramatically in topical reach, methodological sophistication, and theoretical vocabulary. The expansion has outpaced theoretical integration: new vocabularies—platform imperialism, data colonialism, computational propaganda, sharp power, algorithmic governance, generative AI—have proliferated more rapidly than the work of asking how they relate to inherited analytic figures. This systematic literature review has argued that reading the field as a layered conceptual architecture, rather than as a sequence of paradigm replacements, clarifies which contributions extend earlier work, which rebrand it, and which open genuinely new analytic territory.

Three substantive findings anchor this argument. The field continues to operate beneath power-asymmetric figures inherited from the cultural imperialism tradition; the structural-agentive tension has been reconfigured but not resolved by the platform turn, with infrastructural analysis offering the most promising synthesizing register; and the disjuncture between normative de-Westernization commitments and bibliometric realities is a constitutive feature of the discipline that deserves explicit theoretical and structural address. A fourth finding—the under-theorization of the affective dimensions of international communication—extends the review's agenda to include emerging comparative work that the field has not yet fully integrated.

The contribution of this review is therefore not the addition of one more thematic claim to an already crowded conceptual marketplace but a meta-theoretical reading of the marketplace itself. By treating the proliferation of vocabularies as an analytic object, the review identifies layered architecture, structural-agentive reconfiguration, constitutive bibliometric asymmetry, and affective under-theorization as the four integrating problems that the discipline must address if its conceptual expansion is to consolidate into a coherent program. The value of consolidation is operational: a field

whose categories are not legible to one another cannot speak credibly to policy makers, to its own students, or to the communities whose communicative lives it claims to study.

7. Recommendations for Further Research

Seven substantive recommendations follow from the synthesis. First, the field should invest in comparative cross-regional research designs that include sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, and parts of Latin America as full theoretical participants rather than as empirical case material (Demeter, 2020; Mutsvairo, 2018). Second, longitudinal panel and pre-registered experimental research on cross-border disinformation effects should be prioritized, complementing the supply-side cataloguing that has dominated the literature (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; Tenove, 2020; Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). Third, sustained ethnographic and political-economic studies of media infrastructures should be supported across multiple jurisdictions (Parks & Starosielski, 2015; Plantin & Punathambekar, 2019; Starosielski, 2015). Fourth, integrative theoretical work on generative artificial intelligence in international communication should be commissioned, with explicit attention to how generative systems reconfigure structural–agentic, universal–pluralist, and public–private dynamics (Beckett & Yaseen, 2023; Crawford, 2021; Guzman & Lewis, 2024; Mohamed, Png, & Isaac, 2020). Fifth, methodological pluralism should be actively defended against the implicit hierarchy that treats computational methods as more rigorous than historical and ethnographic ones (Wasserman, 2020; Willems, 2014). Sixth, bibliometric reform of indexing, editorial appointments, and citation incentives should be treated as a research-policy concern with structural rather than merely moral force (Demeter, 2020). Seventh, the field should develop comparative designs for studying affective publics, emotional repertoires of political communication, and cross-national variation in how platforms amplify particular emotional registers (Hameleers & Garnier Ortiz, 2024; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

7.1. Research at the Disciplinary Shorelines

The most generative work in the field is increasingly being conducted at the porous interfaces where international communication meets adjacent intellectual territories whose vocabularies, methods, and stakes are not yet fully assimilated. Seven such shorelines warrant additional research investment.

The communication–infrastructure shoreline calls for comparative case studies of national cloud-sovereignty initiatives, ethnographies of internet exchange points in the Global South, and a shared methodological vocabulary for treating infrastructure as a variable rather than a metaphor. Cross-disciplinary collaboration with science and technology studies, geography, and information science will be indispensable (Crawford, 2021; Plantin & Punathambekar, 2019; Pohle & Thiel, 2020).

The communication–artificial intelligence shoreline calls for longitudinal panels tracking AI integration in news organizations across at least eight to ten countries, audits of multilingual large language models for systematic asymmetries in coverage of non-Western polities (Bender et al., 2021; Mohamed, Png, & Isaac, 2020), and experimental studies that disentangle automation effects on audience trust from effects on production efficiency. Methodological collaboration with computer scientists is essential, but so is conceptual leadership from communication scholars capable of theorizing what is at stake when the apparatus of cross-national meaning-making is partially automated (Beckett & Yaseen, 2023; Guzman & Lewis, 2024).

The communication–climate shoreline represents a significant gap: international communication scholarship has not yet developed a robust comparative program for examining how climate publics, climate misinformation, and climate diplomacy circulate across borders. Priority directions include comparative studies of climate-coverage frames across producer and consumer economies and analyses of the planetary computational footprint of digital communication itself (Crawford, 2021).

The communication–security shoreline calls for cross-national field experiments testing the resilience of different media systems to coordinated inauthentic behavior (Humprecht, Esser, & Van Aelst, 2020), comparative analyses of national counter-disinformation regimes, and ethnographic work with diaspora communities at the receiving end of multidirectional influence campaigns.

The communication–decolonial shoreline demands scholarship authored from the Global South, in languages other than English, and grounded in regional theoretical traditions. Priority directions include systematic translation and indexing of non-Anglophone communication scholarship, South–South comparative designs that bypass Western reference points, and bibliometric interventions that surface and remediate the structural underrepresentation documented by Demeter (2020) and called for by Çelik (2025), Mutsvairo (2018), and Pal (2024).

The communication–platform-governance shoreline calls for longitudinal studies of how platform compliance practices diffuse across markets in the wake of regulatory innovations such as the EU's Digital Services Act and AI Act, and theorization of the new asymmetries that emerge when regulatory capacity itself becomes unevenly distributed across the international system (Bradford, 2020, 2023; Flew, 2021).

The communication–affect shoreline calls for comparative designs for measuring affective publics, cross-cultural variation in emotional repertoires of political communication, and the specific affordances by which platforms amplify some effects over others. Priority directions include the integration of psychophysiological and computational methods with thick interpretive description and theoretical engagement with affect studies that resists reducing emotion to behavioral aggregate measures (Cazzamatta, 2024; Hameleers & Garnier Ortiz, 2024; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). These seven shorelines are interconnected: the infrastructure shoreline conditions what is possible at the AI shoreline; the AI shoreline reshapes what is contestable at the platform-governance shoreline; the decolonial shoreline insists that the other six be approached with epistemic humility. The most consequential international communication scholarship of the next decade will be conducted by researchers willing to traverse these shorelines together rather than retreat to the safer but increasingly uninformative interior of the discipline.

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