

Understanding the Information Environment: Insights from the Majority World

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Global North actors often research and shape the information ecosystems of the Majority World¹—for example, by studying influence operations that target Majority World countries, by setting terms of service on multinational tech platforms, or by funding projects to combat disinformation around the world. However, such efforts can easily fail or backfire because of Global North actors' poor understanding of local conditions and context. Global North governments, companies, and civil society organizations have long recognized that Majority World voices need to be involved in issues that concern their countries, yet existing approaches to research and policymaking continue to fall short in addressing Majority World concerns.² Among other reasons, it takes time, resources, and intentional relationship-building for Global North actors to obtain meaningful, granular local insights about a wide range of Majority World countries.

This article draws on structured interviews to identify Majority World experts' top recurring critiques of—and recommendations for—Global North work on the information environment. Carnegie interviewed fifty-four experts on the information environment who have long-term, on-the-ground experience in twenty-nine countries across Asia, Latin America, Africa,

and the Middle East.³ Despite interviewees' diverse backgrounds, they converged on several common ideas for how Global North actors can better tailor their research and policymaking to conditions in Majority World countries. This article highlights five themes, each illustrated with specific examples and paired with concrete recommendations:

1. Global North actors often select interventions based on efficacy research from Global North contexts, which may not translate to other countries. Rather than chasing a false notion of universal efficacy, policymakers should focus on tailoring interventions to local communication norms and community dynamics.
2. Global North researchers often neglect to review important local sources of information that are not common in their own countries, such as loudspeakers and telenovelas. Researchers need to expand their knowledge of news and non-news outlets frequently used in the Majority World.
3. The existence of a narrative within a country—for example, the official dogma propagated by state media—is often incorrectly taken to mean that

the narrative is widely believed. Researchers need to develop locally relevant impact measurements to better assess whether an intervention is needed.

4. Global guidelines on the information environment are often inapplicable in non-democratic contexts—for example, some countries have encouraged forms of social media regulation that might be abused by authoritarian states. At times, these guidelines do not align with the conduct of the democracies that are their strongest advocates. Guidelines should have clearer scopes, and Global North democracies should be held accountable to these guidelines by critics.
5. Researcher tools published by the Global North, such as those created for bot detection, often do not work in other contexts and languages. Tooling could be made more configurable to local contexts or developed locally.

Custom-Made Interventions May Outperform Generic “High Efficacy” Actions

Much has been written on the relative efficacy of various ways to combat information pollution, such as fact-checking, pre-bunking, or media literacy measures.⁴ However, interviewees argued that an intervention’s custom-tailoring to the local context is often more important than the choice of intervention itself.

Gregory Gondwe, a researcher who has lived in several African countries, highlighted that illiterate audiences are not able to properly interact with interventions that rely on the written word, such as pop-ups or information hubs.⁵ Videos, infographics, or audio explainers may be more useful depending on the circumstance, yet governments, civil society, and industry stakeholders often overlook this because their choice of interventions is guided by existing research that fails to account for illiteracy. Studies are typically carried out on a limited group of people based in the Global North or are reliant

on the assumption that users will have the literacy skills and internet access required to interact with the intervention.⁶

Marcelo Santos, a professor of communications with ties to both Brazil and Chile, said that limitations to internet access and information literacy might affect people’s browsing habits. To illustrate his point, he described how information is spread online in Chile through memes rather than links to websites. Though internet access is widespread in the country, data plans are still expensive for many, and links to websites use up more data and are more cumbersome to access than a picture that can be downloaded and accessed over a long period of time. Therefore, a Global North stakeholder trying to develop an intervention in Chile should know that monitoring and taking down specific links may not be as effective as in other areas.

Several interviewees argued that interventions focus too much on how an individual interacts with information, neglecting the larger community they are situated in. Instead, they argue, communal consumption habits also affect what people are exposed to. João Guilherme Bastos dos Santos, a researcher based in Brazil, described how among indigenous groups with limited internet access, one person would go into the city with a phone, use the internet access available there to download voice messages, and bring them back for everyone to listen to as a group. He also specified that to develop better interventions, there also needs to be a better understanding of who uses which apps. For example, WhatsApp automatically downloads copies of content into users’ phones rather than storing it online, so even if the app restricted the dissemination of certain content, that intervention would have limited effect because users would still have that content on their devices and could continue disseminating it. Another researcher said that it was not uncommon in Kenya for groups of women or a family to share a device and have multiple SIM cards in that device. In that case, the information one person consumes could also affect what others who use the shared device see. Similarly, Dani Madrid-Morales described how church leaders in Kenya act as

powerful nodes of information dissemination within their communities.

An intervention can be either bolstered or undermined by the community in which it exists. Policymakers and researchers can make greater efforts to identify community dynamics that affect the efficacy of interventions. As of now, efforts to do so remain sparse. If Global North actors want to implement effective interventions customized to local contexts:

- Those who work on deploying interventions, be they policymakers, researchers, or civil society organizations, need to develop and implement multimodal forms of information dissemination that can be accessible across populations that have different literacy rates and levels of comfort with technology.
- Policymakers, researchers, and civil society organizations that develop interventions need to identify technologies that affect how people access information—for example, limitations in device or internet access that might affect the kinds of interventions they are most likely to encounter.
- Policymakers and civil society organizations can do more to identify trusted relationships and sources that people turn to for information. Understanding those community dynamics and providing those sources with reliable information during times of crisis can help amplify efforts.

Unfamiliar Information Sources Should Not Be Neglected

Over half of the interviewees independently mentioned that Global North research and policymaking on the information environment disproportionately focuses on social media, as data on social media remains relatively low-cost and easy to collect compared to outlets such as television and radio. However, social media activity is not always representative of on-the-ground sentiments. Those who work in countries with limited online connectivity, for example, described how social media

typically only captures the views of those wealthy enough to afford internet connections, and is not representative of many others who may still be reliant on sources such as community radios, televisions, and newspapers.

Several interviewees said that when Global North stakeholders study other countries, they often neglect or misunderstand information sources that do not exist in their own countries. Dang Nguyen, who conducts work on Vietnam, gave the example of non-local researchers trying to understand how the Vietnamese government used propaganda to effectively contain the COVID-19 pandemic. Many researchers noticed the publicly displayed health propaganda posters and billboards, but fewer noticed the government's use of public loudspeaker systems in the northern provinces, which the interviewee argued was a far more impactful medium of communication. While the British newspaper *The Guardian* did document the phenomenon, it characterized the loudspeakers as archaic and low-tech, illustrative of the government's old-fashioned and backward thinking.⁷ Nguyen found this interpretation Eurocentric, arguing that “on the ground, this was but part of a multichannel health propaganda campaign.” In this instance, observers from the Global North misconstrued local norms of communication, assuming that the methods of others were backwards and theirs more advanced. As a result, they neglected the salience of local models of communication—the kind of mistake that could in turn result in an incomplete understanding of local information ecosystems and the mistargeting of interventions.

Interviewees also observed that Global North research on different countries' media systems focuses primarily on news outlets, though in many countries, non-news media plays a major role in shaping beliefs and attitudes.⁸ Omar Rincón, a professor in Colombia who specializes in media studies, gave the example of telenovelas. Citing the work of Colombian researcher Jesús Martín-Barbero, he argued that in the past century, Colombians have gotten more politically salient information from telenovelas than from the news.⁹ In Colombia, domestic media is not widely considered a reliable source of news. Telenovelas, meanwhile, have often included content on

the state of corruption and justice in the country, and continue to play a major part in shaping Colombians' understanding of politics.

If researchers and policymakers want to track the flow of certain narratives across countries, they first need a more expansive understanding of what information sources exist in an ecosystem to identify the most relevant local sources of information. To do so:

- They can engage with local experts to identify sources that may not be internationally available or have any familiar counterparts in the Global North to guide where and how they should direct research efforts.
- They can reach out to local experts who specialize in fields such as cultural or demographic studies who can provide insight on how information dissemination occurs through non-news sources.

Measurements of Impact Are Crucial and Must Be Locally Relevant

Interviewees across all continents said that those in the Global North often assume that the mere existence of a given narrative means that people must believe in it. This assumption is often false in the Majority World, just as in the Global North. While narratives are easy to collect, they need to be accompanied by impact measurements that show whether people are swayed by or skeptical toward the narratives.

For example, virtually all interviewees in countries where state media plays a prominent role said that the populace doesn't necessarily view state media content uncritically. Drawing from his own experiences growing up in Zambia, Gondwe said, "People around me would consume news for fun, but they wouldn't necessarily treat it as something that frames their understanding of the world. They see the consumption of media as simply a chore, not something they see themselves in." He attributed this attitude to Zambia's history. "Prior to Zambia's independence, all our media was owned by

our colonial masters. Most of it was news from the UK, which did not translate culturally to our lifestyles. Then, when the first independent government took over, the media only served the rich. Because of this kind of disconnect, people around me don't see themselves as part of media." Sadibou Marong, a Senegalese journalist who leads Reporters Without Borders's Sub-Saharan Africa bureau, described how people who consume state media could still draw upon alternative sources when available. "While state media dominates," he said, "people would not watch just that. They would often go back to outlets that are private or independent to get a mix of coverage and come to their own understandings of news events."

Viewership in the Majority World is not a reliable indicator of belief—just like in the Global North. So what is a reliable indicator? Interviewees described how impact measurements must vary across countries based on communication norms and freedoms. Gilbert Sendugwa, who leads a Uganda-based pan-African NGO, described how some citizens are hesitant to publicly write in support of certain causes out of fear of political retribution. Instead, they repost others' opinions to avoid liability for expressing those views. Research on social media users in Uganda therefore needs to incorporate different methods and assumptions than research on other countries.

As researchers and policymakers try to develop effective evaluations of the impact of different narratives on a given population, they need to first contextualize their work by understanding the population they are studying. To do so:

- Global North policymakers should be careful not to overreact when they find misinformation within an ecosystem, absent independent evidence of belief. Measurements of a narrative's impact—although difficult to develop—should always inform policy decisions about whether and how to respond.

- When developing impact measurements, Global North researchers can work with local stakeholders to understand aspects of an ecosystem that might be more difficult for external researchers to make sense of without local context, such as what people’s information consumption habits are and whether they trust different sources of information.

Guidelines Should Address Non-Democracies and Be More Evenly Applied

Interviewees in non-democracies and flawed democracies reported that Global North guidelines on countering disinformation typically assume a liberal democratic context and are not suited for other countries. For example, many researchers and advocates in the Global North promote the regulation of social media and traditional media as a global best practice, but interviewees from Indonesia, Morocco, Türkiye, and Venezuela highlighted how anti-disinformation legislation has been used to crack down on free speech in their countries.¹⁰

This may seem like an obvious oversight, but it is a recurring problem. Jonathan Ong, network leader of a Global Majority Knowledge Exchange project at GloTech Lab,¹¹ gave the example of UNESCO’s draft Guidelines for Regulating Digital Platforms, published in 2023, which recommended more government regulation of technology platforms.¹² In response, over forty NGOs in Asia and the Pacific initiated the #PushBackUNESCO campaign, arguing that UNESCO’s guidelines would enable overreach by authoritarian governments and were therefore not appropriate for the political context of many countries in their region.¹³ Although UNESCO is not a Global North organization per se, and the final guidelines were ultimately softened (from “regulation” to “governance,” with corresponding changes in content), this episode showcases the pitfalls of failing to account for regime type.¹⁴

The assumed availability of independent journalism in guidelines from the Global North is another shortcoming that Majority World interviewees identified as all too common. Maria Paz Canales, a Chilean lawyer, observed that international organizations often emphasize the need for quality journalism and reliable news media to fact-check content.¹⁵ However, she argued that not all governments have the incentive or infrastructure to create or tolerate a mainstream media infrastructure that could be used as a reliable source of information.

Concerns about government overreach in the information environment do not apply only to autocracies. Interviewees in Latin America and Africa pointed to how the Global North itself has a long history of interfering in other countries’ ecosystems.¹⁶ A notable example is the U.S. military’s secret campaign to discourage people in the Philippines from taking China’s Sinovac vaccine during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the intention of countering what the United States perceived to be China’s growing influence in the country.¹⁷

As researchers and policymakers endeavor to develop global policies on the information environment, they can account for the diversity of political and media systems through the following approaches:

- If proposed interventions apply primarily to democracies or to countries with strong public-interest media, this should be made clear.
- Independent voices within democracies can develop norms or best practices of what involvement in other countries’ ecosystems should look like.¹⁸ These guidelines can be used by outside observers to praise or condemn a country’s external engagements.
- Researchers in the Global North should continue to investigate their own governments’ involvement in the information environment and hold them publicly accountable for their actions.

Research Tooling Should Be More Usable Across Languages and Countries

Researchers in the Global North have developed tools for researcher data collection and content moderation. However, interviewees in Brazil and Singapore pointed out that most such tools could rarely be used in their countries because of differences in language and contexts.¹⁹ The most useful tools are the ones developed by local researchers, yet many countries in the Majority World have fewer resources and institutions to develop such tooling as a result of limitations in financial backing, data storage capacity, and human resources.

One researcher described the difficulties of applying a U.S.-made bot detection tool in Brazil. The tool was meant to detect posts that used a significant number of hashtags or punctuation, both of which were common markers of bot behavior in the United States. However, the researcher said, those were also common characteristics of online expression among Brazilians. Because the tool didn't account for that, it erroneously flagged many authentic accounts as bots.

Roy Ka-Wei Lee, an academic in Singapore, outlined ways in which a tool needs to be customized to be applicable within a country. "Translation is only part of the puzzle, because you also need to be able to detect slang and other unique ways people use language," he said. "Then there are differences in what counts as hate speech or repression of minorities. Different countries have different vulnerable groups. In the case of the U.S., it's African Americans that face the most disproportionate treatment. In Singapore, the three major religions are Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity, and Hindus are the minority. Then, in other regions of Southeast Asia, Christians are the vulnerable group. Differences in power dynamic determine what needs to be flagged."

What can Global North researchers and policymakers do to improve the global tooling landscape?

- When researchers release tools for social media monitoring, they can build in the capacity for

other researchers to easily reconfigure the tool based on their countries' needs.

- Policymakers and multilateral organizations in the Global North can increase funding for civil technology startups that are developing social media tooling within Majority World countries.

Conclusion

This article highlights five broad areas where Majority World experts perceive limitations in current Global North approaches. Going forward, researchers and policymakers in the Global North should take a closer look at their own specific initiatives to test whether and how they fall victim to these perceived pitfalls. To the extent that Global North actors are making the same kinds of errors year after year, they should try to understand and resolve the root causes. More generally, Global North researchers should work toward stronger and more equitable collaborative agreements with Majority World actors, to ensure that the skills, knowledge, and capacity of both groups are used to their fullest potential.

As this paper demonstrates, there is much that Global North actors can do to improve the relevance of their research and policymaking in relation to the Majority World. At the same time, another overarching sentiment across interviewees was that the Global North should not try to do too much by itself. Five interviewees independently criticized the commonplace assumption that the Global North is best positioned to resolve existing challenges across information ecosystems. While Global North actors have a wealth of expertise and capability, interviewees frequently highlighted the need for and potential of collaborations between Majority World countries with similar circumstances and complementary knowledge. For example, interviewees observed that some Majority World researchers and civil society organizations have invested substantially in developing unique methods for community-level resilience building, or finding ways to push back against government overreach, in ways that the Global North itself can also learn from.

Based on these findings, some may argue that countries' ecosystems are so unique that it is not possible to generalize or develop blanket recommendations for all of them. This is not entirely accurate. Many Majority World countries, despite their geographical, political and cultural differences, share similar concerns and struggles. Changes in approach can be applicable not only to one or two countries, but to many that share similar political or communication infrastructure.

Many outstanding questions remain, but one takeaway is clear: International research and policymaking on the information environment are essential for furthering collective understanding of the field overall. For that to happen, researchers and policymakers in the Global North first need to adjust their approaches to improve the global applicability of existing and future efforts.

About the Author

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Notes

- 1 The term "Global North" typically refers to a group of relatively wealthy and powerful countries, largely clustered in the Northern Hemisphere, that have outsized influence over the current global order. In the context of the information environment, such influence can be exercised via multilateral organizations, global technology companies, top-ranked universities, and international philanthropy, among other mechanisms. Countries outside of the Global North are often called the "Global South," but this article refers to them as the "Majority World," a more recent alternative term that highlights that a majority of the world's population lives in these countries.

Where to draw the dividing line between the Global North and the Majority World (or Global South) is not universally agreed upon. This article primarily focuses on countries that are indisputably part of the Majority World; however, it also touches on several high-income states, such as Bahrain, Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, and the UAE. Although prosperous, these countries each have at least some characteristics—including recent histories under colonialism, and linguistic and ethnic differences from the Anglo-European core of the Global North—that are relevant to the some of the dynamics described in this article.

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- 3 These interviews occurred from August to November 2023. Interviewees included academics and civil society researchers. The countries represented were Argentina, Bahrain, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Malawi, Malaysia, Mexico, Morocco, Nigeria, the Philippines, Senegal, Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Türkiye, Uganda, the United Arab Emirates,

- Venezuela, and Vietnam. This sample likely overrepresents views from democracies, where this research work can be conducted with fewer restrictions. For example, more researchers based in Latin America and Africa were open to being named in the report, whereas a majority of those based in the Middle East and Asia requested anonymity.
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 - 6 Rachael Piltch-Loeb et al., “Testing the Efficacy of Attitudinal Inoculation Videos to Enhance COVID-19 Vaccine Acceptance: Quasi-Experimental Intervention Trial,” *JMIR Public Health and Surveillance* 8, no. 6 (2022): e34615; and Hendrik Bruns et al., “Investigating the Role of Source and Source Trust in Prebunks and Debunks of Misinformation in Online Experiments Across Four EU Countries,” *Scientific Reports* 14, no. 1 (2024): 20723.
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 - 9 Jesús Martín Barbero, “La Telenovela en Colombia: Television, Melodrama y Vida Cotidiana,” *Felafacs*, 1987, <https://felafacs.org/dialogos/pdf17/barbero.pdf>; Omar Rincón, “First Take: Our Telenovela, Ourselves,” *Revista* 17, no.1, <https://revista.dclas.harvard.edu/first-take-our-telenovela-ourselves/>.
 - 10 John Otis, “Venezuela’s Anti-Hate Law Provides Maduro with Another Tool to Intimidate the Press,” Committee to Protect Journalists, February 6, 2018, <https://cpj.org/2018/02/venezuelas-anti-hate-law-provides-maduro-with-anot/>; Irene Poetranto, “Blunt Instruments for Complex Problems: Challenges in Indonesia’s Regulation of Disinformation and Content Moderation,” *Konferensi Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik*, January 18, 2024, <https://saferinternetlab.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Irene-Poetranto-KISIP-PAPER-2024.pdf>; and Alper Coşkun, “Turkey’s New Disinformation Law Affects More Than Meets the Eye,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 19, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2022/12/turkeys-new-disinformation-law-affects-more-than-meets-the-eye?lang=en>.
 - 11 “GloTech | UMassAmherst,” GloTech Lab, accessed October 15, 2024, <https://glotechlab.net/>.
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 - 19 Singapore is often considered to be part of the Global North because of its economic status. The author included the perspective of a Singaporean researcher in this article because the country’s norms vary from those of the Global North and remain underrepresented in existing research and policymaking.

