

Building Global Networks for Collaborative Journalism Research and Cross-Border Journalism Education: Lessons Learned from Five Projects at the Erich Brost Institute for International Journalism

Construyendo redes globales para la investigación colaborativa en periodismo y la educación periodística transfronteriza: lecciones aprendidas de cinco proyectos del Instituto Erich Brost de Periodismo Internacional

Construindo redes globais para a pesquisa colaborativa em jornalismo e a educação jornalística transfronteiriça: lições aprendidas a partir de cinco projetos do Instituto Erich Brost de Jornalismo Internacional

Susanne Fengler
Professor of International Journalism
Director of the Erich Brost Institute
Germany
susanne.fengler@tu-dortmund.de

Martin Kreutler
Researcher at the Erich Brost Institute
Germany
marcus.kreutler@tu-dortmund.de

Michel Leroy
Researcher at the Erich Brost Institute
Germany
michel.leroy@tu-dortmund.de

Dominik Speck
Research assistant at the Erich Brost Institute
Germany
dominik.speck@tu-dortmund.de

Merle van Berkum
Researcher at the Erich Brost Institute
Germany
merle.vanberkum@tu-dortmund.de

Richard Brandt
Research assistant at the Erich Brost Institute
Germany
richard.brandt@tu-dortmund.de

Abstract: This article examines the role of academic cooperation as a communicative and epistemic infrastructure through the experience of five international journalism research and education projects coordinated by the Erich Brost Institute for International Journalism at TU Dortmund University. Drawing on comparative studies of media accountability, migration coverage across Europe and Africa, and multilingual journalism education initiatives, the article argues that contemporary academic cooperation extends beyond institutional exchange to become a mechanism for negotiating knowledge, professional norms, and methodological frameworks across linguistic, cultural, and geopolitical boundaries. The analysis highlights both the opportunities and challenges of transnational collaboration, including issues of epistemic plurality, digital inequality, language hierarchies, and asymmetries in research infrastructure. The projects discussed demonstrate how international cooperation can foster more dialogical, context-sensitive, and inclusive forms of knowledge production while simultaneously revealing the tensions that shape global communication research and journalism education. The article concludes that academic cooperation has become a central practice for sustaining critical, comparative, and globally interconnected communication scholarship in an era of geopolitical fragmentation and democratic uncertainty.

Keywords:

Academic cooperation; journalism studies; transnational research networks; journalism education; epistemic plurality; communication infrastructure

Resumen: Este artículo examina el papel de la cooperación académica como infraestructura comunicativa y epistémica a partir de la experiencia de cinco proyectos internacionales de investigación y formación en periodismo coordinados por el Instituto Erich Brost de Periodismo Internacional de la Universidad Técnica de Dortmund. A partir de estudios comparativos sobre rendición de cuentas de los medios, cobertura migratoria en Europa y África, e iniciativas multilingües de educación periodística, se sostiene que la cooperación académica contemporánea trasciende el intercambio institucional para convertirse en un mecanismo de negociación de conocimientos, normas profesionales y marcos metodológicos a través de fronteras lingüísticas, culturales y geopolíticas. El análisis destaca tanto las oportunidades como los desafíos de la colaboración transnacional, incluyendo cuestiones relacionadas con la pluralidad epistémica, las desigualdades digitales, las jerarquías lingüísticas y las asimetrías en la infraestructura de investigación. Los proyectos analizados muestran cómo la cooperación internacional puede promover formas más dialógicas,

contextualizadas e inclusivas de producción de conocimiento, al tiempo que revelan las tensiones que atraviesan la investigación global en comunicación y la formación periodística. El artículo concluye que la cooperación académica se ha convertido en una práctica fundamental para sostener una investigación crítica, comparativa e internacionalmente articulada en comunicación en un contexto de fragmentación geopolítica e incertidumbre democrática.

Palabras clave:

Cooperación académica; estudios de periodismo; redes transnacionales de investigación; educación periodística; pluralidad epistémica; infraestructura comunicativa

Resumo: Este artigo examina o papel da cooperação acadêmica como infraestrutura comunicativa e epistêmica a partir da experiência de cinco projetos internacionais de pesquisa e formação em jornalismo coordenados pelo Instituto Erich Brost de Jornalismo Internacional da Universidade Técnica de Dortmund. Com base em estudos comparativos sobre accountability da mídia, cobertura migratória na Europa e na África e iniciativas multilíngues de educação jornalística, argumenta-se que a cooperação acadêmica contemporânea ultrapassa o simples intercâmbio institucional para tornar-se um mecanismo de negociação de conhecimentos, normas profissionais e marcos metodológicos através de fronteiras linguísticas, culturais e geopolíticas. A análise destaca tanto as oportunidades quanto os desafios da colaboração transnacional, incluindo questões relacionadas à pluralidade epistêmica, às desigualdades digitais, às hierarquias linguísticas e às assimetrias na infraestrutura de pesquisa. Os projetos discutidos demonstram como a cooperação internacional pode fomentar formas mais dialógicas, contextualizadas e inclusivas de produção do conhecimento, ao mesmo tempo em que revelam as tensões que moldam a pesquisa global em comunicação e a educação jornalística. O artigo conclui que a cooperação acadêmica tornou-se uma prática central para sustentar uma pesquisa crítica, comparativa e globalmente conectada em comunicação em um contexto de fragmentação geopolítica e incerteza democrática.

Palavras-chave:

Cooperação acadêmica; estudos de jornalismo; redes transnacionais de pesquisa; educação jornalística; pluralidade epistêmica; infraestrutura comunicativa

1. Introduction

At a time of intensifying geopolitical polarization and democratic backsliding, academic cooperation has become more than an institutional or organizational practice. Increasingly, it constitutes a communicative infrastructure through which knowledge and professional norms are negotiated across borders. This is particularly visible in journalism and mass communication research, where – as in the case of the Erich Brost Institute of International Journalism in Germany, as represented by the authors’ team – global phenomena such as migration, climate change, and geopolitical conflict challenge nationally bounded perspectives and require transnational forms of research collaboration.

At the same time, academic cooperation itself is shaped by asymmetries in resources, infrastructure, language, and epistemic authority. Debates about de-Westernization, digital colonialism, and epistemic justice have highlighted that international research cooperation cannot simply be understood as neutral knowledge exchange. Rather, it involves questions of visibility, representation, power, and access within global communication orders.

Against this backdrop, this article reflects on several interconnected projects coordinated by the Erich Brost Institute for International Journalism at TU Dortmund University in cooperation with our partners across the globe. Drawing on comparative studies of migration coverage, multilingual online journalism education initiatives, and pan-European journalism training projects, our article argues that academic cooperation today increasingly functions as a transnational communicative infrastructure. Such cooperation does not merely produce research outputs or educational materials; it shapes how journalism itself is conceptualized, taught, and practiced across regions. The projects we highlight in this text are chosen to illustrate both the possibilities and tensions of transnational academic cooperation in journalism and mass communication research.

2. Academic Cooperation as Communication Infrastructure

Academic cooperation in communication research has traditionally been framed as a mechanism for knowledge exchange, scientific capacity building, and internationalization. However, cooperation also shapes to some extent ‘power relations’ - international research networks determine which perspectives become visible, which topics are prioritized, and which forms of expertise gain legitimacy within global academic and professional discourses.

This is particularly relevant in journalism studies. Journalism has historically been conceptualized through Western professional norms emphasizing objectivity, the concept of watchdog journalism, as well as liberal-democratic public spheres. Yet scholars from the

Global South have long criticized the universalization of these models and highlighted the situated nature of journalism practices embedded in local contexts.

Digitalization further complicates these dynamics. Online learning platforms, MOOCs, and transnational educational infrastructures create unprecedented opportunities for cross-border learning and collaboration. At the same time, they risk reproducing forms of “digital neocolonialism,” in which knowledge production remains concentrated in Western institutions and linguistic hierarchies continue to privilege English-language perspectives.

Against this background, international journalism education projects increasingly face a dual challenge: they must facilitate transnational communication while simultaneously acknowledging epistemic plurality and contextual diversity. Cooperation thus becomes not only an organizational matter but also a question of communicative architecture: how can multilingual, transnational, and more equitable spaces of knowledge production be created?

3. Lessons learned I: The Global Handbook of Media Accountability

A central methodological challenge of this project – a comparative study of media accountability practices in 44 countries on all continents (Fengler et al., 2022) – consisted in constructing a genuinely comparative and globally applicable analytical framework without reproducing the normative assumptions of Western liberal media systems that have historically dominated media accountability research. Existing scholarship on media accountability has largely been developed within the context of liberal democracies characterized by comparatively stable press freedom, professional self-regulation, institutionalized journalism cultures, and relatively autonomous media markets. The consortium therefore faced the problem that key concepts such as “self-regulation,” “transparency,” “professional responsibility,” or even “public interest journalism” carried substantially different institutional meanings across the participating countries.

This became particularly visible in the comparative analysis of press councils and broadcasting authorities. While formally similar institutions existed across many countries, their actual political and communicative functions differed fundamentally. In several Western European countries, press councils primarily operate as professional self-regulatory bodies intended to strengthen journalistic legitimacy and public trust. But the project also identified multiple cases in which nominally comparable institutions functioned as instruments of state control, political discipline, or symbolic legitimacy management within more authoritarian or hybrid political systems. The consortium therefore had to move beyond purely institutional comparison and develop context-sensitive analytical categories capable of distinguishing

between self-regulatory, co-regulatory, state-controlled, donor-driven, and “mimicry” forms of media accountability.

A further methodological challenge concerned the multilingual coordination of comparative empirical research across highly heterogeneous journalism cultures. Shared conceptual frameworks had to be translated not only linguistically but also epistemically across different academic traditions and political contexts. Certain categories — for example “independence,” “professional ethics,” or “accountability toward the public” — proved difficult to operationalize consistently because they were embedded in highly divergent historical experiences of journalism, statehood, and media governance. As a result, the project relied heavily on repeated revisions of analytical categories. Comparison itself became an ongoing communicative process of translation and epistemic negotiation among the participating researchers rather than a purely technical exercise.

The project also encountered significant challenges regarding asymmetries in research infrastructure and data availability. While some participating countries possessed extensive archival databases, institutional transparency, and established traditions of journalism studies, researchers in other contexts had to rely more heavily on fragmented documentation, informal networks, NGO reports, or qualitative expert knowledge. In several countries, particularly in politically sensitive contexts, the availability and reliability of information concerning ownership structures, regulatory interventions, or informal political influence on media institutions remained highly uneven. This required the consortium to proceed in a highly adaptive and reflexive manner.

At the same time, these methodological difficulties generated important conceptual and analytical gains. One major contribution of the project was the development of a substantially de-Westernized understanding of media accountability. The comparative perspective demonstrated that media accountability cannot be reduced to a fixed institutional model derived from Western liberal democracies. Instead, accountability practices emerged through highly diverse constellations involving NGOs, universities, journalism schools, donor organizations, digital communities, audience participation, informal professional networks, and platform-based communicative practices.

The project further demonstrated that media accountability must be understood as a dynamic and historically contingent process closely linked to democratization, autocratization, technological transformation, and geopolitical change. Comparative longitudinal analysis revealed identifiable “waves” of media accountability development associated with political transformation processes after 1945, after 1968, after 1989, and

following the Arab Spring. At the same time, the project documented processes of institutional erosion, political capture, and fragmentation of accountability structures even within established democracies. This comparative perspective made it possible to conceptualize media accountability not as a stable institutional arrangement but as a fragile communicative infrastructure continuously renegotiated between journalism, politics, civil society, markets, and technological systems.

4. Lessons learned II: Comparing migration coverage across Europe

Another example of our academic cooperation as communicative infrastructure is the large-scale comparative project Migration Coverage in Europe's Media, coordinated by the Erich Brost Institute together with the European Journalism Observatory (EJO) network. The project brought together researchers from 17 countries across Europe, the United States, as well as Russia and Belarus – which was still feasible in the political context of 2019/20 -, in order to analyse migration coverage across highly diverse media systems, political cultures and journalistic traditions.

Indeed, the set-up of the consortium allowed us to provide a much more comprehensive view of migrants and refugees at a time when discourse in Europe was dominated by the 'refugee crisis' of 2015, and its lasting impact on public debates and political landscapes across Europe. Germany's decision of 2015 to accept an unlimited number of refugees also needed to be interpreted in the historic context of World War II. While the former colonial powers France and the UK had decades-long experience of being destination countries, Italy and Spain had long been countries of origin of migration to Northern Europe. Also countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have been, and still are, countries of origin for many intra-EU migrants. All this shaped migration discourses in the media, as our study could show. However, also the United States was simultaneously challenged by increasing migration pressure at the Mexican border, being long the country with highest immigration numbers worldwide (more than 1 million immigrants on average per year). Less present in the Western discourse, Russia had emerged as the world's second biggest attractor of immigrants - mainly from the former Soviet republics - between 1990 and 2015. On the other hand, the emigration of up to 2 million well-educated specialists from Russia already at the time of data collection for this study – due the increase of authoritarian trends in the country, perceived suppression of freedom of speech and entrepreneurship since 2000 – had remained virtually de-thematised in the Russian public discussion.

Language represented a major intercultural challenge in this project. Search terms and coding categories had to be translated and adapted across multiple linguistic contexts. Yet translation itself proved insufficient, because concepts associated with migration often carry different historical and political connotations across regions. Terms such as “refugee crisis,” “mobility,” “forced displacement,” or “illegal migration” reflected distinct national and regional debates. Intercultural cooperation therefore involved constant negotiation over semantic equivalence and contextual interpretation.

The project therefore demonstrated that international journalism research is actively constituted through communicative infrastructures that enable shared knowledge production across fragmented political, linguistic and epistemic environments. Comparative methodology itself emerged as a form of transnational communication practice in which scientific collaboration and methodological negotiation became constitutive elements of research production. At the same time, the project strengthened the role of the European Journalism Observatory (EJO) as a transnational infrastructure linking journalism research across Europe.

5. Lessons learned III: Comparing migration coverage in Europe and Africa

The need for such transnational approaches became particularly visible in our comparative research on migration coverage conducted between African and European partner institutions (Fengler et al., 2026). Migration represents one of the most globalized and politicized issues of contemporary journalism. Yet media coverage often remains nationally or regionally framed and – even within the EU - strongly shaped by domestic political agendas.

A comparative content analysis of 1,871 online news articles from thirty media outlets in fifteen African and European countries demonstrated significant differences, but also emerging interconnections, in migration reporting across continents. The study identified three dominant patterns of migration coverage summarized as “deals, disasters, and domestication.”

European media coverage continued to emphasize political conflict, border control, and securitization, often portraying migration primarily through crisis narratives. African media, by contrast, increasingly focused on intra-African migration, economic mobility, and bilateral migration agreements. Particularly notable was the growing editorial autonomy of African outlets, which – compared to our prior study with data from 2025/2016 – no longer

merely reproduced European narratives but increasingly domesticated migration reporting according to local concerns and regional dynamics.

At the same time, the project revealed persistent blind spots across regions. Climate change as a structural driver of migration remained underreported, despite its increasing relevance for both African and European societies. Migrants themselves were rarely represented as active voices, while institutional and political actors dominated reporting.

Importantly, these findings only became visible through transnational cooperation itself. The comparative design required researchers from fifteen countries to negotiate categories, methodological assumptions, and contextual interpretations collaboratively. In this sense, the project functioned not merely as a study of migration coverage, but as an experiment in transnational knowledge production. It demonstrated that comparative communication research can challenge nationally isolated perspectives and make visible the interconnectedness of public discourses across regions.

One of the central lessons of the project was methodological rather than merely empirical: This became particularly visible in the process of country and media selection. Rather than applying a standardized Eurocentric understanding of “quality media” or “opinion-leading journalism,” national researchers selected outlets based on contextual expertise regarding ownership structures, political influence, linguistic diversity, and audience relevance within their respective media systems. The project therefore deliberately combined centralized methodological coordination with decentralized local expertise. This approach acknowledged that media systems differ profoundly across political, economic, and historical contexts and that meaningful comparison requires sensitivity to these differences rather than their elimination.

Moreover, comparative communication research across continents requires continuous intercultural negotiation about what counts as “migration,” “crisis,” “political conflict,” or even “journalism” itself. Categories that initially appeared self-evident from European perspectives often required substantial adaptation once researchers from African partner institutions introduced locally grounded understandings of migration dynamics and media practices.

The study also revealed how transnational collaboration can reduce structural asymmetries in global communication research. African journalism has often been represented through externally produced narratives or analyzed primarily through Western theoretical frameworks. By involving researchers from fifteen countries in the conceptualization, coding, interpretation, and contextualization of the findings, the project

sought to move beyond extractive research models and toward more dialogical forms of comparative communication research.

At the same time, the project exposed the practical challenges of intercultural cooperation: unequal access to research infrastructure, different institutional capacities, varying archive accessibility, and contrasting academic traditions required substantial flexibility and trust-building among partners. Comparative communication research across regions therefore emerged not simply as a technical exercise, but as an ongoing communicative negotiation process shaped by intercultural dialogue itself.

6. Lessons learned IV: Journalism Education and Multilingual Cooperation - the CoMMPASS Project

The question of communicative interconnectedness also shaped the CoMMPASS project, a multilingual online journalism education initiative co-funded by the European Union between 2023 and 2026 (Leroy et al., forthcoming). The project developed fourteen online course modules on migration reporting in English, French, Portuguese, and Kiswahili and already trained more than 1,000 journalism students and journalists from twenty-nine sub-Saharan African countries.

CoMMPASS emerged from the observation that migration journalism in Africa often remains under-resourced, externally influenced, and insufficiently contextualized. Existing journalism training materials on migration were frequently designed from European perspectives and rarely reflected African migration realities, particularly intra-African mobility and regional migration governance.

The project therefore aimed to create a multilingual and epistemically plural journalism education platform. Importantly, most course modules were developed directly by African partner universities, while the European institutions mainly coordinated the overall framework and contributed selected methodological components. This structure deliberately sought to avoid reproducing one-directional knowledge transfer models.

The multilingual design played a central role in this process. By offering the courses in four languages, the project challenged the dominance of English in online journalism education and facilitated communication across linguistic regions that often remain isolated within African journalism education itself. In doing so, CoMMPASS created new forms of transnational professional interaction among journalism students and educators.

At the same time, the project also revealed structural inequalities within digital education infrastructures. Access to stable internet connections, technological resources, and

institutional support varied substantially across participating countries. The implementation of online journalism education therefore required constant adaptation to local realities rather than the simple transfer of standardized digital models.

The project illustrates how academic cooperation increasingly operates simultaneously on pedagogical, technological, and epistemic levels. Journalism education becomes a site where broader struggles over communication, representation, and professional norms are negotiated.

7. Lessons learned V: Journalism Education and Multilingual Cooperation - The COPE Project

While CoMMPASS focused on journalism education in Africa, the COPE project addressed related challenges within Europe (Fengler et al., 2025). The project was developed by journalism institutes from all twenty-seven EU member states and aimed to strengthen journalism students' understanding of European institutions, cohesion policy, and EU governance.

The initiative responded to a significant gap identified through surveys conducted among approximately 500 journalism students across Europe. More than sixty percent lacked basic knowledge about EU institutions and policies, while many journalism programs still offered limited teaching on European affairs. This lack of EU literacy has broader democratic implications, particularly in times of growing Euroscepticism, populism, and disinformation.

COPE therefore developed a multilingual online learning platform available in twenty-one EU languages and adapted to national contexts through localized modules. More than 1,500 journalism students tested the platform successfully during the project phase.

The project highlights a key paradox of European communication: despite decades of political integration, journalism education and media reporting often remain strongly nationalized. European cooperation in journalism education therefore seeks not only to provide technical knowledge but also to strengthen the communicative foundations of a shared European public sphere.

At the same time, the project demonstrates that transnational journalism education itself requires extensive organizational and communicative coordination. The multilingual translation process, adaptation of local modules, and coordination among partner institutions across Europe represented a complex form of communicative cooperation extending far beyond traditional academic exchange.

In this sense, COPE illustrates how journalism education increasingly functions as a form of democratic infrastructure. The project sought to strengthen journalists' capacity to report critically and competently on European governance structures, thereby contributing to informed public debate within the EU.

8. Conclusion

The projects discussed in this article demonstrate that academic cooperation in journalism and mass communication research and education increasingly functions as a communicative and epistemic infrastructure in a fragmented global communication order. At the same time, these projects also illustrate the tensions inherent in international cooperation. Questions of language, epistemic authority, digital inequality, and institutional asymmetry remain central challenges. Cooperation does not automatically produce equality or plurality; it requires continuous negotiation of communicative power relations and contextual differences.

Nevertheless, the examples suggest as well that transnational academic cooperation can create spaces for more pluralistic and interconnected forms of journalism education and mass communication research. Particularly in fields shaped by global crises and geopolitical polarization, such cooperation becomes increasingly essential for understanding how public communication is produced across borders.

In this sense, academic cooperation should not merely be viewed as a supporting framework for research and teaching. It has itself become a central communicative practice through which global public knowledge, professional journalism cultures, and democratic discourse are negotiated in the twenty-first century.

9. References

- Fengler, S., Berkum, M. van., Amores, J. J., Chibita, M. B., Costa, A., Evans, M., Abulghasem Gulam, K., Jjuuko, M., Kizaale, E., Kuś, M., Labova, S., Leroy, M., Louati, F., Mack, J., Pinto-Martinho, A., Namusoga-Kaale, S., Ndeketa, H., Roppen, J., Semakula, J., ... Tayeebwa, W. (2026). Deals, domestication, and disasters: Results of a comparative content analysis of migration coverage in 15 African and European countries. *Journalism*, 0(0), 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849261429589>
- Fengler, S., Ebenrem, T., & Karmasin, M. (2022). *The Global Handbook of Media Accountability* [This summarizing paper was presented at the 2022 ICA Conference in Paris, France]. Routledge.