# Scholarly Solidarity: Building an Inclusive Field for Junior and Minority Researchers

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# Scholarly Solidarity: Building an Inclusive Field for Junior and Minority Researchers

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**ABSTRACT**

The goal of this reflective essay is to highlight challenges that junior and minority political communication researchers face and to advocate for scholarly solidarity practices, defined as actions that maintain social ties between researchers. I discuss four ways in which we can practice scholarly solidarity: solidarity in support, solidarity in responsible open science, solidarity by acknowledgment, and solidarity in the professional pipeline.

This essay is an emic consideration of scholarly solidarity within the field of political communication. While not an auto-ethnography per se, it is inspired by my experiences as a graduate student and early career scholar. As a first-generation researcher, I "discovered" the academy through my undergraduate advisor, Dr. Atsushi Tajima, who encouraged me to apply for a graduate program. It was 2009, and I was not particularly eager to pursue an industry career. More importantly, though, I had questions about the spaces where political language was produced, contested, and amplified, and I saw academia as a way to answer these questions.

I found myself in political communication for several reasons. In addition to fit, I was compelled to join an interdisciplinary field that leveraged the best research from a variety of disciplines. To me, political communication cultivated a space akin to the wild west of social science research: anything was possible, theoretically and methodologically, so long as I was clear about my approach.

But the broad nature of political communication also created challenges for synthesizing research and building a research community that is inclusive of marginalized groups, including minority researchers and early career scholars. In this essay, I argue for the need to build solidarity amongst researchers within our field using strategies such as expression of support, responsible open science, and citation inclusivity.

## Community Challenges in the Aftermath of COVID

Despite political communication's uniquely interdisciplinary community, there are many challenges that plague the field. These challenges are not unique to political communication researchers, but this field is well-suited to work on these challenges because we are able to bring a variety of perspectives and methodologies.

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One critical challenge in the field includes racial, gender, and geographic inequities. Minority groups have long been underrepresented in both communication (Chakravartty et al., 2018) and political science (Begum & Saini, 2019; Mathews & Andersen, 2001). While social media have facilitated renewed conversations regarding gender and racial inequity (e.g., Murthy, 2020), a study of first-authors from the communication citation elite suggests little progress has been made (Freelon et al., 2023). In recent years, political communication researchers have advocated, in particular, for increased support for global research and global researchers. However, there are specific challenges that make it difficult for global researchers to participate fully with the broader research community. This includes visa challenges, perceptions of comparative studies as "niche," and the prioritization of English publications.[1]

Another important issue is researcher harassment. Because politics is a hot-button issue, poitical communication scholars are targets of harassment, vitriol, and even violence, affecting both their research and their day-to-day lives as private citizens (Stein & Appel, 2021). Harassment can come in many forms, from hateful or threatening messages and doxing efforts to abuses of public information requests (Union of Concerned Scientists, 2015). The harms of these harassment efforts should not be understated—they produce a chilling effect on emperically grounded research that benefits society. These challenges are amplified for minority researchers (Stein & Appel, 2021).

A third challenge includes greater expectations to publish, engage in public conversation, and secure grants. These expectations become uniquely impractical for students and early career scholars during COVID, who experienced both a shrinking job market and disruptions to research projects (Levine et al., 2021), as noted by a recent panel at the 2023 International Communication Association conference (THanitzsch, 2023). While the long-term effects of the pandemic for academics and non-academics still remains to be seen, short-term effects include challenges to data collection, diminished communication with fellow researchers, and difficulties for promoting one's work (Woolston, 2021).

In light of these challenges, it is important for political communication scholars to ask ourselves: what can we do for each other? I argue that (one of) the answer(s) is scholarly solidarity.

## What is Scholarly Solidarity?

For this essay, I define solidarity as social ties that generate and maintain interdependence between groups of people. This definition is inspired, in part, by Durkheim's conceptualization of organic solidarity (Durkheim, 2014), a key feature of which is differentiation and dependency (Herzog, 2018). In other words, solidarity is built around a division of labor, wherein members of a community depend on one another to collectively achieve one or several goals. Thus, what undergirds organic solidarity is both a sense of shared beliefs and an ability to understand another person's unique contexts in the group (Thijssen, 2012, describes this as "instrumental and empathetic considerations," p. 468).

It is important to acknowledge that the aforementioned definition of solidarity is an ideal type, "in the Weberian sense" (Herzog, 2018, p. 113): it is a simplification of the complex dynamics of social interactions. Thus, it is equally important to consider how solidarity *manifests*: what does solidarity look like in observable reality? To answer this,

I turn to the current literature on solidarity and social justice. Succinctly, Anita (2020) describes solidarity as, "a commitment to social justice that translates into action" (p. 2). This commitment is identifiable through public shows of support, sometimes at the risk of one's safety.

One could argue that such manifestations of solidarity are performative. However, performance should not be treated derogatorily: as Kampf (2016) argues, communicating solidarity (in spoken or written word) is necessary to coordinate efforts, leverage mutual support, and express concern toward the wellbeing of others within the group. Expressions of solidarity can raise awareness about an issue (Luengo & Ihlebæk, 2019), encourage social change (Smith et al., 2018), and motivate communicative action (Schlosberg, 1995).

So now that we know what solidarity is, what is *scholarly solidarity*? The term has appeared minimally in the literature. Scoping the term narrowly, fields may share "scholarly solidarity" with "neighboring disciplines," suggesting that interdisciplinary recognition is a component of scholastic solidarity. This makes sense, as scholarly solidarity should rely on a recognition of and respect for a plurality of research approaches (Sil, 2000). However, interdisciplinary acceptance and encouragement is not the only way scholarly solidarity can be seen. I define scholarly solidarity more broadly, as social ties among researchers that generate and maintain interdependence for the production of scholarship.

We can see scholarly solidarity expressed through collective resistance (Bell et al., 2021; Museus, 2020) and resilience (e.g., Ahn et al., 2021). What are political communication researchers resisting? Well, many things, from field colonization and disproportionate recognition to the exploitation of time and labor. As noted in the prior section, the challenges experienced by political communication scholars are varied and complex, and can apply to junior scholars across many disciplines.

An important consideration for scholarly solidarity is advocacy for systemic change, rather than individualistic ones. For example, when it comes to service and gender inequalities, one common solution is to encourage individual advocacy (i.e., telling women to simply say no to more service). However, this puts the onus on women to disappoint others, potentially harming female scholars who are already asked to do more service (Guarino & Borden, 2017). Instead, scholars have advocated for systemic interventions to distribute service obligations more equitably (Ahn et al., 2021; Pyke, 2011).

The need for scholarly solidarity is especially pronounced in fields where findings may be perceived as controversial or undesirable. While all STEM, social sciences, or humanities research has the capacity to shape social, political, and economic actions; fields that address complex societal challenges – such as political communication – may experience undue external pressures to shape the kind of research that is conducted, and the way that research is interpreted (other examples include tobacco research, historically, and climate research). Scholarly solidarity is therefore especially needed in these fields.

For political communication scholars, scholarly solidarity is not only important to maintain independence – it is also a way for researchers to "practice what they preach." If solidarity and connection are important to the health of democracies, open speech, and public discourse (Overgaard et al., 2022), it is necessary to reflect upon this internally with a consideration for who is excluded from our own conversations about political communication.

## Who "Counts" as Part of Scholarly Solidarity?

Given the professionalized nature of higher education and the academy, it is common to gatekeep who is or is not a scholar. Often, scholars are indiviuals associated with academic institutions, and one could consider academic solidarity to be a specific form of scholarly solidarity (Bieliauskaitė, 2021; Rodino-Colocino, 2016). This is not inherently bad—after all, there are nuances to being an academic scholar. For example, academics in some countries (including the United States and Brazil) are required to submit their research design to an institutional review board, which is not necessarily required for non-academic researchers. Academic work is also produced primarily for academic scholars. Therefore, to engage with a broader audience, academics need to translate their work. However, this perspective effectively centers those with the most power to do research. This includes not only the citation elite (Freelon et al., 2023), but those in leadership roles.

I advocate for a more expanded definition of the term "scholar," not only inclusive of students and early career researchers (who contribute greatly to the advancement of academic research, but are often underpaid and undervalued, working in precarious conditions semester by semester), but of non-academic scholars as well. This inclusion is especially important as more doctorates are hired into industry positions (Smith, 2019). In fact, as of 2019, Ph.Ds are as likely to go to industry as they are to pursue an academic career (Langin, 2019). One exemplar of this is in the technology industry, which has long relied on Ph.D-level expertise. In many cases, non-academic researchers, whether working independently or with a company, also produce peer-reviewed work, bridging the research conducted in both the academy and the industry. The presence of disciplinary experts across a range of professions should encourage a more expansive consideration of scholars, inclusive of academic, industry,[2] and civil society researchers.

## Scholarly Solidarity in Practice

What has scholarly solidarity looked like for political communication researchers, and what should it look like moving forward? As with many disciplines, we have taken a piecemeal approach to solidarity, seeking to address inequity in specific circumstances. This is a step in the right direction: different minority groups have different challenges within political communication, whether it's disproportionate service expectations (Guarino & Borden, 2017; Pyke, 2011), implicit and explicit racism in a review process,[3] or the reframing of a concept as "new" when it is merely an adoption of perspectives from adjacent fields (Brown & Searles, 2023).

Most recently, these efforts have coalesced around providing greater support for international scholarship and representation (e.g., Lawrence, 2023); for example, the creation of international liaisons at the International Communication Association. These efforts are important – and we should continue them – but this must go further. Below, I recommend four areas where scholastic solidarity can be furthered.

### Solidarity in Support

At a time when political communication scholars may be under threat (Chakravartty, 2020; Meyers & Frankel, 2023), it is more important than ever to express support for researchers

who are affected by efforts to chill independent research. Let me not mince words: the harassment of researchers not only damages the ability for them to do robust, independent research, but it dehumanizes researchers by threatening their safety and wellbeing.

While not a silver bullet to these challenges, expressions of support are nevertheless essential for showing solidarity with researchers who are harassed. Research in mental health has shown that expressions of support and the reinforcement of social ties can support people's wellbeing (Thoits, 2011). Programs such as Expert Voices Together (EVT; Tromble, 2021), which provides support for female journalists, are critical rapid-response strategies for combating harassment. Collaborative, organized efforts, in particular, can help create and maintained sustained public and private expressions of support, buffering the harm of researcher harassment.

## Solidarity in Responsible Open Science and Data Access

Another, perhaps more internally focused, way in which researchers can share in scholarly solidarity is making resources accessible to one another. This is in line with open science principles, which encourage pre-registration, open materials, and open data (Dienlin et al., 2021). However, whereas open science is often framed as improving research robustness, it has an added (often underrecognized) benefit of also facilitating equity (Staunton et al., 2021). Making one's material accessible is not only good for replication, it also becomes easier for scholars to learn from one another's work.

Of course, this comes with caveats, particularly for open data practices. While the idea of sharing data has been considered a form of solidarity in other fields (e.g., Afnan et al., 2022), data used by political communication scholars may contain copyrighted or sensitive content, including publicly identifying information. However, political communication scholars should do their best to share and advocate for more open data access. For example, researchers can share data that are anonymized or aggregated if there are concerns about sharing raw data.

Researchers can also express solidarity and engage in collective action by advocating for greater data access, particularly for platforms and mediums where data access are limited (e.g., social media platforms, see de Vreese & Tromble, 2023). In this area, European scholars (and foreign researchers working with them) have made significant strides in advocating for researcher data access. But greater data access should not be limited to researchers in Europe and the United States – data access is as important for researchers in the Global South.

## Solidarity by Acknowledgement

As an interdisciplinary field, political communication leverages scholarship from many fields beyond political science and communication studies, including (but not limited to) psychology, sociology, anthropology, area studies, linguistics, and rhetoric. The synthesis of these fields is an important strength of political communication – we are not bounded by arbitrary disciplinary divisions to answer pressing social science questions. However, the introduction of literature into the field of political communication also runs the risk of creating harm, particularly when we treat a longstanding subject area as "new" simply because it is being incorporated into political communication (Brown & Searles, 2023).

The practice of taking and reframing concepts as new is especially common for knowledge produced by marginalized populations. In fact, minority researchers suffer from a dual problem: their theories and concepts are often ignored for mainstream paradigms (Ocholla, 2007; Rossini, 2023) and then, when they are incorporated, the theory may be (at best) decontextualized (Waisbord, 2016) or (at worst) passed off as new knowledge.

The result of this is that white and male scholars are overwhelmingly represented in citations (Nettasinghe et al., 2021). Alarmingly, one recent study found that 91.5% of communication citation elite first-authors were White, and 74.3% were men (Freelon et al., 2023). To combat this, it is important to recognize acknowledgment, in the form of academic citations, as a form of solidarity. This is in lines with ongoing calls to diversify citation sources (e.g., Dion et al., 2018; Zurn et al., 2020) by encouraging the inclusion of relevant research from female scholars and scholars of color.

However, acknowledgment is not limited to other researchers (within and outside of the academy): in our work, we should also acknowledge the labor of our participants and research subjects. This can be done by collaborating to produce research and tools (e.g., Matias & Mou, 2018) and by crediting work or insights produced by individuals within our study. Scholars can also build transnational solidarity, which can build new, alternative "spaces for knowledge production" (Korkman, 2022, p. 166). Such forms of acknowledgment are not only important for building solidarity between researchers, but between the research community and society as a whole, which is essential for political communication scholars who seek to study and improve social systems, political institutions, and people's quality of life.

## Solidarity in the Professional Pipeline

In this last suggestion, I focus specifically on early career scholars—inclusive of students, staff, and those who have recently received graduate degrees—for two reasons. First, early career scholars are the future of political communication, literally. They are the ones developing new theories and methods to advance the field. As an exemplar: computational work done in political communication is often conducted by early career scholars (regardless of their position in the authorship list). Second, early career scholars are often the most precarious group within the research community. In the academy, across disciplines, early career scholars – particularly students – are underpaid and overworked (Roskos et al., 2023). This results in unique and sometimes extreme mental health challenges (Aloia, 2022; Housel, 2021), which are further exacerbated by the accelerated pattern of academic publishing (June & Doran, 2009), as well as pressures to balance their own projects with managing the projects of their principal investigator (including, but not limited to, project management and data engineering).

If we want political communication to remain healthy and thriving as a field, we cannot only include early career scholars as part of our solidaristic efforts—we must also recognize where the field is failing early career scholars in their career pipeline. For example, graduate students and staffers should not be excluded from authorship lists simply because they are paid research assistants or employees. For research with heightened mental health risks, such as the study of far-right extremism, researchers should consider additional support, either in the form of mental health services or hazard pay. And, as we prepare political communication early career scholars for the next stage of their career, we must provide at

least minimal training on skills that are relevant to both academic and industry positions such as time and project management, network building, and clear writing for communicating with general audiences.

## Conclusion

The pursuit of knowledge (like the pursuit of politics) is not a solo operation. It is not possible to build a field on the back of one researcher. It requires a plurality of ideas and empirical approaches working together, and sometimes against each other. Given its interdisciplinary nature, political communication researchers know this better than most. We stand on the shoulders of giants, adding and building on the foundation of knowledge from our predecessors. But for this foundation to grow, we need to make it accessible to all scholars, not just those in privileged positions at elite institutions.

While it is true that we are not the only field to have these challenges, we must not be satisfied with the status quo. Instead, political communication should be trend-setters in scholarly solidarity, not only to improve our field's research, but to ensure that the job of being a political communication researcher is healthy, happy, and fruitful.

## Notes

1. International students experience additional barriers. For example, they may be limited in the numbers of hours they are able to work or may have to pay extra international student fees.
2. To be clear, this does not refer to solidarity with companies, but solidarity with researchers working for those companies.
3. The practice of giving feedback that recommends an author consult with a "native English speaker" or assumes the national or ethnic identity of the researcher is outdated and should not be used.

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