

Traces of orientalism in media studies

Media, Culture & Society

2021, Vol. 43(6) 1136–1146

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DOI: 10.1177/01634437211022692

journals.sagepub.com/home/mcs**Banafsheh Ranji** 

University of Oslo, Norway

Abstract

This article is a response to calls for more reflexivity in media scholarship. It argues that despite various attempts towards challenging the ‘Western-centrism’ of the field (notable among them is the ‘de-Westernisation’ project), media studies has remained highly captive to the distinctions between ‘West’ and ‘non-West’ as the principal starting point for analysis. Building on Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism, and employing Said’s idea of methodological self-consciousness, this paper critically assesses the often taken-for-granted assumptions in media research. It reflects on anecdotal and personal experience, and on observations that I have made in the literature I have consulted, in the queries by colleagues, and in teaching. This article shows how and through which terminology the Orientalist discourse materializes in the field of media research. It reveals how a network of interests is shaped on any occasion when media and journalism in contexts that are deemed ‘non-Western’ are in question. This paper shows that media scholarship is marked by the use of binary terminology, collective terms and generalities, a one-sided relationship between the ‘West’ and ‘non-West’, and the notions of the superiority of Anglo-American research.

Keywords

de-Westernisation, journalism, media studies, methodological self-consciousness, orientalism, reflexivity, the ‘West’ versus the ‘non-West’

‘It must be dangerous to be a journalist in Iran, is there a lot of self-censorship?’

This is a comment I received quite a few times from scholars during the time I was doing my PhD studies at the University of Oslo, from 2016 to 2019, on the sociology of

Corresponding author:

Banafsheh Ranji, Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo, P.O. Box 1093, Blindern, Oslo 0317, Norway.

Email: banafsheh.ranji@gmail.com

journalism in Iran. This example shows how the reality of journalism in Iran, similarly to other contexts that tend to be referred to as 'non-democratic' and 'non-Western' contexts, is understood merely with reference to the state's use of coercion. The statement reveals the bias that sees Iranian journalists as those who are devoid of agency and are merely involved in 'self-censorship'. These presumptions overlook the multifaceted aspects of the reality of Iranian journalism, the influence of economic and organisational factors and the explanatory role of micro-level features of the journalistic practice, to mention a few.

This paper, through critical reflection on anecdotal and personal experience, exposes the often taken-for-granted assumptions existing in the field of media and journalism research. Starting from the case of journalism in Iran, it argues that parts of the existing narrative within media studies is characterized by Orientalist dogma: a tendency to generalize and simplify 'the Other', in this case journalism in 'non-Western' contexts (the category of 'non-Western' being in itself one of such generalisations).

The concept of Orientalism, which has been employed in postcolonial studies, explains how the 'West' –Europe and the United States–, has constructed a peculiar representation of the 'Arab' and 'Muslim' world. These representations, as Said (1978) says, form a knowledge of the Other (the Orient) that is reductionist and does not correspond to empirical reality. Orientalism is a worldview that sees the peoples of Asia, North Africa and the Middle East through a specific Western-centric lens (Kerboua, 2016). It is a way of dealing with 'questions, objects, qualities, and regions deemed Oriental' (Said, 1978: 72), which is based on 'the Orient's special space in European Western experience' (p. 1). Building on Foucault's concept of discourse, Said (1978) reveals how a certain vocabulary is employed 'whenever the Orient is spoken or written about' in the field of humanities and social sciences (p. 72). Orientalist terminology, which is mainly characterised by the use of collective terms, binary opposition and generalisations (Said, 1978) shapes a discourse of 'us' and 'them' based on 'the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, "us") and the strange (the Orient, the East, "them")' (p. 43). From an Orientalist lens, the 'the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident' (Said, 1978: 12), and the geographical distinction between the East and the West is considered as 'the starting and the end points of analysis' (p. 45). The outcome of Orientalist ideas is that 'the Oriental becomes more Oriental, the Westerner more Western', which in practice 'limit the human encounter between different cultures, traditions, and societies' (Said, 1978: 45–46). These conscious or unconscious reductionist and essentialist standpoints have gradually acquired the status of 'scientific truth' (Said, 1978: 47). They have established a consensus among scholars: 'certain things, certain types of statement, certain types of work have seemed for the Orientalist correct' upon which they build their research, and 'they in turn have pressed hard upon new writers and scholars' (Said, 1978: 202).

The field of media and communications has experienced criticism for its Orientalist constructions founded on 'an essentialist dichotomy between Western and non-Western societies' (Gunaratne, 2010: 476). There have been attempts by media scholars to dispute 'Western-centric' canons, and most notable among them is the idea of 'de-Westernizing media theory', which itself has been a subject of reconsiderations (Waisbord and Mellado, 2014). In a search for alternative discourses, scholars of 'de-Westernisation' argue that

'Western' media theories cannot explain the realities of culturally distinct 'non-Western' countries (Ray, 2012). Some of them have therefore offered models based on a normative Arab-Islamic perspective (e.g. Ayish, 2003; Mowlana, 1993). However, part of these new reformulations has remained ultimately within the Orientalist paradigm due to their focus on the cultural distinction between what is referred to as 'West' and 'non-West' (Waisbord and Mellado, 2014). The de-Westernisation project has been criticized for not being able to transcend 'ready-made geocultural labels' (Waisbord and Mellado, 2014: 368). Promoting notions such as 'Islamic communication', 'Arab media' and 'Arab journalism', it has failed to move beyond an Orientalist canon: 'the kind of inaccuracy produced by too dogmatic a generality and too positivist a localized focus' (Said, 1978: 8). As Khiabany (2003) notes, part of the de-Westernisation scheme has consequently become trapped within a 'reverse-Orientalism' approach. He argues that 'culture' has become an essential category in trying to explain the post-1989 world, not surprisingly in all areas of social sciences including media studies, a new wave of essentialist thinking has emerged' (p. 415). The recent developments in journalism research, which claim to be engaged in alternate discourses, have largely resulted in endorsing the idea that 'they' [journalists] (those from the East or the global South) practice "our" precepts (those largely from the industrialized regions of the West or North)' (Zelizer, 2013: 466). Despite various attempts towards challenging the 'Western-centrism' of the field, the knowledge within media research has remained highly captive to the distinctions between 'West' and 'non-West' as the principal starting point for understanding. This paper employs the practice of reflexivity to respond to the hitherto calls (e.g. Waisbord and Mellado, 2014) for the reassessment of the fundamental assumptions of the field of media.

The way out of reductionist analytical frameworks that have acquired the status of 'normality' in academic discourse has been addressed by various scholars (e.g. Bourdieu, 2001/2004; Said, 1978). Said (1978) provides insights into how researchers can deal with Orientalism rooted in the knowledge through 'methodological self-consciousness', which he defines as 'continual self-examination of their [researchers] methodology and practice, a constant attempt to keep their work responsive to the material and not to a doctrinal preconception' (p. 327). He discusses two methodological devices: *strategic location* and *strategic formation*. The implementation of these tools resonates with the idea of reflexivity in research: a collective practice of being aware of our dispositions and positions as researchers and their influence on our research (Bourdieu, 2001/2004). Strategic location refers to 'a way of describing the author's position in a text with regard to the Oriental material he [sic] writes about' (Said, 1978: 20). Strategic formation is 'a way of analysing the relationship between texts and the way in which groups of texts, types of texts, even textual genres, acquire mass, density, and referential power among themselves and thereafter in the culture at large' (Said, 1978: 20).

Using the tools of methodological self-consciousness, this paper reflects on the taken-for-granted conventions from my particular point of view, which resonates with the idea of strategic location. It analyses how a group of texts and scholars within the field of media that I have encountered in the course of my work, construct a particular vision of social reality, which reflects the notion of strategic formation. I concur with Said's (1978) idea that knowledge is 'never raw, unmediated, or simply objective' (p. 273) and, as

Bourdieu (2001/2004) says, it is constructed from a point of view. Our positions in the scientific field demarcate what we can see and what we cannot see and define our position-takings towards the academic *doxa*; the unquestioned conventions about the social world and reality (Bourdieu, 2001/2004). The viewpoints addressed in this article is articulated from my position which is the product of my background and experience as a former journalist in Iran, and a current scholar of colour working in the Nordic academic context, as well as my relationship with the matter that I have taken as the object of my research, which is the sociology of journalism in politically restrictive contexts.

This paper sketches on my observations in the literature I have consulted, in the queries by colleagues and my teaching. It shows how assumptions I have come across, put in Said's (1978) words, are not 'value-free' and 'objective' despite the ostensible 'neutrality' of their tone (p. 47). This article addresses how a network of interests is shaped on any occasion when media and journalism in contexts that are deemed 'non-Western' are in question. It shows how and through which terminology the Orientalist canon materializes in the field of media research, which defines and confines the Other. In particular, I discuss the following elements that I have observed: the use of binary terminology, collective terms and generalities, a one-sided relationship between the 'West' and 'non-West' and the notions of the superiority of Anglo-American research. Underlying all the features mentioned above is the binomial opposition of 'West' and 'non-West' with the former always holding the state of superiority. In this article, I discuss how these formulations distort knowledge of not only the countries that tend to be referred to as 'non-Western' but also those contexts that are deemed 'Western'.

Generalities and binary terminology

The use of binary terminology of Western/non-Western, democratic/non-democratic and free/non-free is entrenched in media scholarship to the extent that it is almost impossible to communicate without them, while it is often unclear what these terms refer to. The chief aspect of Orientalism revolves around the use of large generalisations and a limited vocabulary based on the division between two halves: The West and non-West (East) (Said, 1978). Consequently, a binary typology of 'rational, developed, humane, superior' (the West), and 'aberrant, undeveloped, inferior' (the East) is constructed (Said, 1978: 300). This approach takes it for granted that these categories are neutral and 'ahistorical' and therefore not subject to scrutiny (Said 1978: 333), while they are socially constituted and socially acquired (Bourdieu, 2001/2004). An example of the use of fuzzy classifications is the use of binary typologies to refer to political systems of a variety of countries. For instance, in the article 'Mapping Journalism Cultures across Nations' (Hanitzsch et al., 2011) the scholars discuss role perceptions, epistemological orientations and ethical views of journalists in 18 countries, and they divide these countries into two opposite poles of 'democratic' and 'authoritarian'. This dichotomous logic limits our understanding of journalism in various situations as if there is no reality in between dualities. This is, for instance, evident in the following statement from the book, *Worlds of Journalism: Journalistic Cultures Around the Globe* (2019) in which a binary taxonomy of 'Western democracies,' 'developed democracies' versus 'nondemocratic regimes', 'other societies' (the Other, which is not in need of explicit identification) is constructed.

Journalists in *Western democracies* tend to have greater editorial autonomy than their colleagues in *other societies*; however, the demarcation and differences are not clear-cut enough to be reduced to a simple Western/non-Western classification. There are a number of *noteworthy exceptions* to this pattern related to the fact that many *nondemocratic* regimes (e.g., China) do allow some journalistic freedom at the local level, while some *developed democracies* (e.g., Israel) are notorious for restricting press freedom (Hamada et al., 2019: 156, emphasis added).

While scholars have established that journalistic autonomy, in any context, cannot be defined only in reference to the structural condition and the political system (e.g. Reich and Hanitzsch, 2013; Sjøvaag, 2013), the statement above takes for granted that journalists in ‘Western democracies’ enjoy greater ‘editorial autonomy’ than their counterparts in ‘non-Western’ settings, and any experience other than this pattern is only *an exception to the rule*. These notions do not adequately correspond to empirical reality as data from several studies suggest that despite structural constraints, journalists in more restrictive political contexts such as Iran, China and Russia can maintain a certain level of autonomy in defining their roles and in their everyday practices (e.g. Hassid, 2016; Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2018; Ranji, 2020). Moreover, the categories of ‘nondemocratic’ and ‘democratic’ in the above-mentioned statement are ambiguous owing to the fact that one may ask if Israel restricts press freedom, on what grounds is the country categorised as a ‘democracy’?

Scholars have argued that the close tie between journalism practice in various contexts and the ideas of ‘freedom’, ‘democracy’ and ‘autonomy’ seems to be the exception rather than the rule (e.g. Josephi, 2013; Waisbord, 2013; Zelizer, 2013). Several lines of evidence (such as Hallin’s and Mancini’s theorisation of three models of media systems in 18 ‘liberal democracies’) dispute the image of journalism in the ‘West’ as a free field, and suggest that journalists in the American and European contexts work under the imperatives of the market and the political field. Yet the either/or approach is recurrent in the literature, which constructs an understanding of journalism in both ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ contexts as monolithic and stagnant, while ignoring the diversity of forms and dynamism that journalism has taken at different times. An example is the following statement that represents journalism as an absolutely autonomous field in ‘liberal democracies’, and journalism in the contexts that are referred to as ‘other’ as an entirely subordinated field.

In liberal democracies, editorial autonomy is considered a fundamental asset to ensure that individuals and institutions that are supposed to serve the public remain transparent and are held accountable. In other contexts, a different vision is articulated, one that conceptualizes journalism as serving the state’s development agenda (Hamada et al., 2019: 157).

The statement above conveys the message that the journalism field, in ‘liberal democracies’ can separate itself from ‘the state’, while journalism in ‘other contexts’ is not able to do so. The underlying assumption of such representation is the Orientalist notion that ‘unlike normal (“our”) societies’, other societies are totally political because they are not able to separate, as ‘Western’ societies do, politics from other realms (Said, 1978: 299). Consequently, economics, for instance, does not matter, and micro- and meso-processes

do not count for an explanation of journalism in ‘non-Western’ contexts. These kinds of accounts such as the following, which define the whole reality of media in certain contexts with reference to politics are commonplace in the literature: ‘In non-democratic regimes, the key role of the media is to shape a common narrative that supports the regime’ (Placek, 2020: 1415). Another example is the following account that promotes a dichotomous view of Iranian journalists either being repressed by the established rules or functioning as the mouthpiece of the state. The statement also conveys the message that unlike in ‘Western’ contexts, social realms in Iran (including the media field) is dominated by ‘religion, culture, or nationalism’.

This project focuses on what predicts selectivity in contexts where national media outlets are controlled by the state, where journalists are jailed and intimidated, and where social and political arrangements are governed by overarching identities based on religion, culture, or nationalism rather than Western political ideology. Authoritarian regimes should be of special interest to communication scholars. There, media play a crucial role in sustaining regime stability (Wojcieszak et al., 2019: 70).

In queries by colleagues, I have observed that there is a disproportionate interest about politically imposed censorship in Iran, rather than an interest in knowing about other forms of obstacles including economic precariousness and organisational forces as evidenced in the data I collected. I have also noticed a desire to hear about the practice of self-censorship among Iranian journalists shaped by the state’s use of coercion, rather than how journalists manage their everyday work and how they can exert agency (however limited) within these obvious restrictions. In fact, the intricacy of the reality evidenced in the empirical material that I collected through interviews with journalists appeared to be irrelevant, which reflects a feature of Orientalism: ‘truth, in short, becomes a function of learned judgment, not of the material itself’ (Said, 1978: 67).

The duality of good-journalism/bad-journalism, in which the ‘Western’ journalist always holds the upper hand, is another example of how journalism is approached through uncritical standpoints. In a course that I was teaching to graduate students of journalism, I asked the students whether, in their opinion, good and bad journalism exists and where. They classified Denmark and China as the countries where good and bad journalism happens respectively. They, not surprisingly, used human rights organisations’ reports, mainly Freedom House, as the source of information. To provide an example in the literature, the article ‘Journalists or activists? Self-identity in the Ethiopian diaspora online community’ (2011) argues that the standards of Ethiopian diaspora online media do not measure up to that of ‘professional journalists in the common western sense of the term’ and accordingly ‘they are occupied with something that *looks like* journalism’.

Evidently, many of the managers of diaspora websites are not professional journalists in the common western sense of the term. They may not belong to established media houses, they have not been educated as journalists, they are rarely members of a professional media organization, their main occupation is something else than the media venture, and so forth. Yet they are occupied with something that *looks like* journalism (Skjerdal, 2011: 728).

In the statement above, it is presupposed that journalistic professionalism ‘in the common western sense of the term’ is the bedrock of judgement about professionalism of journalism elsewhere, and that ‘professional’ journalism and its components only happen in the ‘West’. Why is it necessary to mention the word ‘Western’ while talking about the almost universal criteria of ‘professionalism’? We are not told. These sorts of formulations promote the essentialist idea that bedrock concepts that are central to the field of journalism, such as ‘democracy’ and ‘autonomy’, only belong to journalism in contexts that are deemed ‘Western’. The de-Westernisation project has reproduced this standpoint by clinging to the idea of cultural peculiarity between ‘West’ and ‘non-West’, and the notion that ‘professionalism’ is dictated by ‘Western’ civilisation that is inconsistent with the essentially alien ‘non-Western’ culture. The following questions, among others, arise: What are ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ cultures? Is the notion of a distinct culture a useful one in understating journalism in different circumstances? And as Said (1978) asks: ‘Do cultural differences matter more than socio-economic categories, or politicohistorical ones?’ (p. 321). An example within the de-Westernisation literature is the following statement that constructs an image of journalism in African countries as something incompatible with the one that exists in the ‘Western’ context. The statement sees the application of ‘Western textbooks and curricula’ in African countries merely as a ‘problem’ that should be fixed through ‘Africanisation’ of journalism.

In many African countries in particular, journalism education is still largely imported through Western textbooks and curricula. There is a heightened awareness of this problem, as displayed through regular calls for a de-Westernization and Africanization of journalism on the continent (Hanusch et al., 2019: 273–274).

The use of generic terms is also evident within de-Westernisation literature, and the articles in which abstract generalities are used without critical examination is a case in point. These include titles such as ‘Journalism and the Islamic Worldview: Journalistic roles in Muslim-majority countries’ (Mughtar et al., 2017) and ‘The mission of Arab journalism: Creating change in a time of turmoil’ (Pintak and Ginges, 2008). The terms such as ‘Arab world’, ‘Arab journalism’ and ‘Muslim countries’ are employed to refer to an undifferentiated entity as if there is only one ‘Muslim’ or ‘Arab’ community. As Khiabany (2003) notes, this terminology forms an ‘essentialist thinking about the non-existent singular, homogeneous “Muslim society”’ (p. 421) ‘with no distinct social locations and groupings, and certainly no class, gender, ethnic or regional differences’ (p. 417). In the following statement from the article ‘Islam, identity and professional values: A study of journalists in three Muslim majority regions’ (2014), it is not clear which Arab countries the author refers to: ‘This study analyzes the results of three surveys involving a total of 1596 journalists in 14 Arab countries (n=601), Indonesia (n=600) and Pakistan (n=395) [. . .]’ (Pintak, 2014: 486).

An alternative to the use of binary terminology is using the expressions that imply relative meanings, such as ‘less/more restrictive countries’, ‘less/more democratic countries’ and ‘relatively restrictive countries’. I have used these words to convey the idea that social reality in multiple contexts is situated on a spectrum with many strands, rather

than on two extreme points. Although these expressions may not be the best possible alternatives, it could have important implications for transcending binaries, and replacing vague and general expressions with novel and more accurate terms. However, I have faced occasions in which colleagues have criticized me for using ‘soft’ terms, such as ‘restrictive’ and ‘less-democratic’ to refer to ‘non-democratic’ contexts, and I have been accused of ignoring the severity of ‘authoritarian’ regimes. Far from being defensive of the political repression, I aim to shed light on the argument that there are multiple dimensions to reality. Contesting the use of oppositions, Bourdieu uses the example of the notion of ‘totalitarianism’ that was proposed concerning Soviet-types societies, and argues that the term (we may add other terms such as ‘non-democratic’ and ‘non-free’) results in seeing the social world as an apparatus, and covers ‘the reality, however repressed, of ongoing social contentions’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 103). Even though speaking in a different language than the one that is established in the academic discourse would be to make our texts complex to the audience, lack of better expressions in lay terms should not get in the way of questioning reductionist terminology.

A one-sided relationship

While there are dozens of articles that make the realities of ‘non-Western’ contexts meaningful with reference to ‘Western’ contexts and what the ‘West’ is not, there is rarely a piece that makes meaning of the ‘West’ through the presentation of the ‘non-West’. This is a typical Orientalist standpoint that constructs ‘a one-sided’ relationship between the ‘West’ and ‘non-West’ (Said, 1978: 324). In fact, the ‘West’, unlike the ‘non-West’ is assumed to be self-contained. Here I am not talking of the works that adopt a comparative research design, but those studies that unclearly make comparisons of the ‘West’ and the ‘non-West’ without any explanation of whether and in what ways the comparison is significant. In these works, the condition of the ‘West’ is seen as a natural reference point to interpret the ‘non-West’.

This standpoint has resulted in analysing media/journalism in ‘non-Western’ contexts through the distinction between what ‘non-western’ media/journalists do and cannot do or understand as ‘Western’ media/journalists do and understand. For instance, in the article ‘What Drives Media Use in Authoritarian Regimes? Extending Selective Exposure Theory to Iran’ (2019), Iranian media is discussed in contrast to the ‘Western’ media as if the reality of the Iranian society are only worth narrating if they are addressed in relation to its distinction from the ‘West’. An example is the following statement in which an either/or approach is reproduced.

In non-free media systems, citizens can choose between state-controlled media, such as national outlets or regime authorities, or more independent sources, such as international media or online blogs or news websites. When it comes to national media, in stable democracies the media not only provide pluralistic information and a forum for public debate but also serve as a watchdog of state institutions (Wojcieszak et al., 2019: 72).

In another part of the article, the authors mention: ‘We focus on the Islamic Republic of Iran not only due to its geopolitical importance for the West but also because it is

categorized as a hard-core autocracy' (Wojcieszak et al., 2019: 75). In this statement, the significance of the study of Iranian media is said to lie in its importance for the 'Western' gaze as well as its type of political system, the latter signifies the obsession with politics when it comes to the question of media in Iran, which I have already discussed.

The notions of superiority of Anglo-American research

An important outcome of Orientalism is that everything that is 'non-West' is confined in its own 'special' domain from the vantage of the 'West' (Said, 1978). This is evident in the assumptions about what counts as legitimate knowledge for theory building in the field of media studies. I have observed that research in certain countries (such as China, Iran, Turkey and Russia) is seen as investigations of country-specific issues that are only of interest to scholars of Area Studies (the emergence and rise of Area Studies and Middle Eastern Studies is another feature of modern Orientalism addressed by Said). Whereas the product of research on North America and the UK is seen as theories and conceptual perspectives benefiting the whole field that is of interest to a varied international audience. My research on the sociology of journalism has often been deemed as a piece that should tell the story of the situation of human rights concerning Iranian journalists. On several occasions in conferences and seminars, I have been requested by other researchers to specify the number of journalists who have been arrested and killed in Iran. In fact, I have observed little interest in the theoretical contributions and the sociological aspect of my work.

The following example from the feedback that I received from a reviewer for my book proposal entitled "Practicing Journalism in Iran: A Sociological and Professional Perspective" exposes the prevalent American-centric approach towards journalism research. It shows how media research is assumed to be appealing to the worldwide audience only if narrates the story of the US context, while studies on contexts such as Iran are assumed to have a 'limited' and 'fairly fixed' readership.

Editor's inquiry:	'Is interest in this subject area [the subject area of the proposed book] growing, stable or falling?'
Reviewer's comment:	'In general, interest in journalism is growing, especially given Trumpish dismissal of 'fake news', the challenge of social media and disinformation, etc. I don't think interest in Iranian media has shifted much; there is a limited, fairly fixed, readership for this content.'

This view is also evident in the literature. An example is the article 'The Internet and Agenda Setting in China: The Influence of Online Public Opinion on Media Coverage and Government Policy' (2014) in which the author views 'Western' scholars as those who are involved in advanced and quality research while seeing Chinese researchers as those who do undeveloped research. This perspective forms the bias that only certain approaches that belong to 'Western' scholarship are legitimate forms of knowledge.

Unlike Western scholars, who usually use empirical and quantitative approaches to test agenda-setting effects, most agenda-setting research in China is based on impressionistic observations

and analytical argumentation due to the non-empirical research tradition and deficiency in methodology (Luo, 2014: 1292).

Stand by the heretic

I have so far revealed the academic doxa regarding the Orientalist dogma to make others see what I see. The first step in dealing with Orientalism is seeing it and acknowledging that it exists in our everyday academic practices of researching, teaching, performing peer reviews and communicating with colleagues. However, the effort to dispute it should not be confined to maintaining critical consciousness as *individuals*. It necessitates a *collective* effort by holding up those of us who are willing to challenge what has been established as ‘normality’. Challenging what is generally accepted in the academic discourse; playing the role of a heretic, is a provocative act. Those who speak out may fear being ostracised as we hold different positions in the academic field, thus, possess diverse (and unequal) levels of power to succeed while speaking out. The costs of playing the role of a heretic may be high for junior researchers who hold a fragile and non-established position in the academic milieu. I would like to urge colleagues to stand by the heretic as we often thrive by maintaining a network of support.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Cristina Archetti for providing feedback on an earlier draft of this article, and for standing by me and making me feel supported. Thanks also to Roohollah Sepandar and for providing comments, and for always making me feel self-assured in my critical thinking.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Banafsheh Ranji  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0679-4193>

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