# Digital silence: how algorithmic censorship undermines academic freedom in the Global South

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The new silencers do not ban books, imprison thinkers, or storm newsrooms. They reside in the code. They move between cloud servers and data centers, attired in harmless user interfaces and ensnared in the optimizing logic. They are not malicious and not subject to inspection. Their labor is neither seen nor violent—it is procedural. You are now living in the age of algorithmic censorship, where academic freedom is not taken apart by fiat but silently chipped away at through invisibility.

For years, censorship has been the subject of conversations focused on nation-states, regimes, and the power to control the media. Now, another kind of censorship is being built—a one that favors platforms instead of parliaments, and algorithms rather than arguments. And it is there, in this new structure, where the new form of silencing is taking place: silence in the digital age. It doesn't ban speech; it merely makes certain it is never heard. In the Global South, where traditional academic dissemination is already restricted, this algorithmic shelving has even deeper implications (Kummangal et al., 2024). The scholar is no longer silenced by legislation, but by code. The journal article doesn't disappear—it simply doesn't show up anymore when you search for it. The lecture isn't canceled—it is demonetized, down-ranked, or marked as suspicious by algorithms designed to distrust dissidence.

Algorithmic censorship is not conspiratorial; it is the result. It is the result of the data-driven reasoning of platform governance, where visibility is controlled through training data, engagement signals, and rules of moderation optimized for a Western informational context. Take the instance of a Nigerian scholar whose video on climate justice in the Niger Delta got de-ranked for "low engagement" although it had been referenced in an official local report (Kaur et al., 2023). Or of a Tamil scholar whose online article on indigenous land rights did not show up on search engines because it didn't have "authoritative" citations—references that only appear on English-language, Western-indexed databases (Pratt and de Vries, 2023). These are not special occurrences. They are structural results created through algorithms optimized for size, homogeneity, and familiarity.

Academic freedom, formerly envisioned as a right to speak, is now reimagined as the right to be seen. Within an ecology where visibility on platforms decides relevance, lack of access becomes the lack of impact. This is particularly the case for Global South scholars, whose research appears in regional languages, addresses local concerns, and is grounded in epistemologies kept outside dominant archives of data (Ford and Alemneh, 2022). The writing can be exquisite, but unless the algorithm "recognizes" it, the global scholarly community doesn't either (Rowlands and Wright, 2022).

What is most perilous about this censorship is that it masquerades behind the mask of neutrality. It is predicated upon the belief algorithms are apolitical, that moderation is objective, and visibility is meritorious. The meritocratic reasoning behind AI systems is fundamentally faulty. Natural Language Processing models are predominantly trained on Angloscript corpora, with heavy performances losses when processing indigenous, low-resource, languages (Lassen et al., 2024). Automated moderation platforms flag nuanced debates around postcolonial politics, gender justice, decolonial ideas, "as being controversial," "unreliable," "harmful" simply because they refuse to fit pre-sanitized Western paradigms (Andrews and Chiazor, 2024). A query around Kashmir's hydropolitics or Palestine's education rights is much likelier to trigger the suppression compared to one around the discourse of climate change in Europe. The algorithm is not interested in the nuances but only measures proximity to expected patterns (Catala, 2024). And when the model is global North-centric, the rest gets filtered out.

This filtering is not only technical; it is distinctly epistemic. It instantiates what theorists describe as epistemic injustice—the systemically downgrading of specific ways of knowing. When an AI model is unable to identify with a research tradition, mistranslates an idea, or represses a story for lack of "context," it is perpetrating an erasure. Not intentionally but habitually. This erasure mounts cumulatively with time. It produces an uneven terrain upon which certain knowledge systems flourish and others perish. Where Western scholarly discourse is reproduced by default and Southern discourse is pushed to digital peripheries.

Even the best-intended attempts at inclusivity suffer from this trap. Fact-checking algorithms tend to give preference to verification sources from Western think tanks and state portals (Wasserman and Richards, 2015). When Southern intellectuals base their arguments on local NGOs, oral traditions, or community insight, their work becomes marked as unsubstantiated (Koch, 2020). Hence, we have the feedback loop: only the indexed and vetted is credible, and only the credible is given amplification. The rest gets filtered, marked, or lost.

The consequences are not just academic—they are material. A paper that cannot be found cannot be cited. A lecture that is de-ranked cannot attract students. A voice that is labeled "controversial" cannot access funding, collaboration, or public discourse. For scholars in the Global South, whose access to institutional support is already limited, these algorithmic roadblocks are not inconveniences—they are career obstacles. Worse, they reinforce colonial hierarchies in global knowledge production (Dübgen, 2020; Wasserman and Richards, 2015). The very platforms that promised to democratize education and communication are, in practice, perpetuating digital versions of imperial gatekeeping.

We must understand this moment not as an anomaly, but as a structural continuity. The same logic that once excluded colonized subjects from the academy now excludes them from the algorithm (Abimbola, 2023; Bhakuni and Abimbola, 2021). The same extractive gaze that mined resources now mines data. The same imperial logic that silenced indigenous knowledge now simulates it—poorly—through machine learning (Tangwa, 2023). The platforms may be new, but the politics are not. The Global South is once again positioned as a source of raw material—cultural,

linguistic, intellectual—to be scraped, reprocessed, and redeployed through systems it did not design and cannot fully access.

The solution does not lie in dismantling technology, but in reimagining it. Platform governance must be made accountable to academic freedom as a global principle, not a privilege granted to those who align with Western norms. Algorithmic transparency must be mandated—not requested—especially for systems that govern scholarly communication. Academic platforms must expand their indexing frameworks to include multilingual, oral, and alternative epistemologies (Ford and Alemneh, 2022). Search engines must revise their authority metrics to value indigenous and community-based knowledge systems (Pratt and de Vries, 2023). And above all, scholars from the Global South must be included in the design, testing, and auditing of AI systems that affect their visibility.

This is not a call for token inclusion, but for epistemic sovereignty. Without it, we risk creating an academic future in which knowledge is not shared, but simulated. Not debated, but auto-curated. Not global, but filtered through the lens of a few dominant systems trained to mistrust complexity and difference. In such a world, academic freedom is a ghost—it appears in policy documents, but not in practice. It is promised, but not protected.

Digital silence is not loud. It does not shock or outrage. It is subtle, cumulative, and deadly. It creeps in through failed translations, invisible search results, and de-ranked voices. But silence, too, is a form of speech—it tells us who matters and who does not. If we are to reclaim academic freedom for the digital age, we must begin by listening to what the silence reveals. Because sometimes, what's missing speaks louder than what's said.

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