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COMMENTARY



Water research and nationalism in the post-truth era

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Introduction

Water has always been political in nature and competing narratives of water rights and equity are not new. The governance and management of water is frequently contested by stakeholders and opinions are echoed in the media and throughout civil society. However, something new is happening that deserves attention: the growing power of misinformation and its effect on the academe of water studies.

Water research is influential in shaping policies. Academia has frequently been a platform for highlighting challenges related to water scarcity, water rights, distributional impacts and resulting inequities. It has also been a platform for assessing or challenging popularly held beliefs. For example, over the past several decades, narratives of looming *water wars* in transboundary river basins have been espoused by politicians, mass media and textbooks. Academics have responded with extensive bodies of research into historical cooperation and conflict over water, arguing that cooperation is a more frequent outcome, and the notion of *water wars* is largely exaggerated. Research clearly demonstrates that one must look closely at localized circumstances and nuances before such causal claims can be made. Many academics are careful, however, not to dismiss entirely the potential for conflicts to be exacerbated by droughts and water shortages (especially at the subnational scale), noting that there is ‘ample evidence showing that water issues have led to intense political instability and that acute violence has occasionally been the result’ (Wolf, 2007, p. 245). Although the *water wars* narrative lacks historical evidence, the reality of explosive population growth, the step-changes of technology in areas of mass communication and information systems (e.g., the influence of social media in shaping narratives), and the non-stationarity of climate impacts suggests that the past might not be a reliable indication of the future.

Water policies can also be influential on shaping academia. National-level objectives, such as settling sparsely populated areas or increasing industrial production, are often coupled with the prospect of harnessing natural resources, and these objectives have long been encouraged through educational institutions. Schools in the United States once propagated the notion of *manifest destiny* to expand irrigated agricultural land in the West. Today many departments in universities around the world emphasize agriculture intensification and infrastructure to manage the challenges of future

population growth. As states promote the development of water resources to improve rural incomes and livelihoods, increase food production and enhance electrification through hydropower generation, this often concurrently strengthens or legitimizes state governments through what has been termed a *hydraulic mission*. Closely linked to both the *water wars* narrative and the *hydraulic mission* is the notion of *resource nationalism* which describes the desire by states to gain maximum national advantage from the exploitation of their natural resources. More specifically, discourses of *water nationalism* can be used to justify and legitimize a state's water policy to achieve that maximum gain (Allouche, 2020). This form of nationalism poses a growing and formidable challenge for the academe of water studies because it potentially implicates itself. While researchers from outside the regions in question have often challenged the *water wars* narrative, influential scholars from within these regions have often added a nationalist inflection to their research.

Particularly in water scarce areas, the legitimacy of a state's policy towards water is often a proxy for the legitimacy of the government itself. As we see global increases in nationalist parties and their impact on domestic and foreign policies, we see water nationalism growing particularly strong in regions where economic growth is attributed to the state's ability to control and safeguard water resources. Any nation may logically seek to safeguard their stocks and sovereignty over their resources, and those that are striving to utilize their resources to emerge from poverty face powerful internal pressures to fully capture and capitalize on those natural resources. This is closely linked to the concept of securitization of water resources by governments, but water nationalism extends far beyond governments to civil society, universities and the general public. Safeguarding precious water resources as a national objective can become a powerful narrative to promote unity within borders, vilify those outside of the borders by labelling them a threat to those resources, and even justify gross inequalities or unilateral actions to capture shared resources.

Freedom of thought?

When academic institutions are influenced by water nationalism, research on water-related issues can become subject to those pressures. Technical analyses of water supplies, demands and management options are conducted by both governmental and non-governmental entities, and significantly influence national policies. Universities are often thought to be less susceptible to political biases, although ample evidence suggests they are never entirely free from such influences in the work they do informing national policies and governmental institutions. Unsurprisingly, research coming from one country tends to align with the dominant political perspectives of that country. These can be subtle or overt biases, founded in the drive for development or protection of one's own resources and imbedded within notions of social and environmental justice, or driven by national identity and a sense of competition over common pool resources. Researchers can have biases, and when left implicit and unaddressed in the academic literature, can compromise academic integrity. In the context of a transboundary river basin, the key is not to leave these biases implicit in the research, but to make them explicit while seeking a mutual understanding of multiple perspectives across the basin.

One common mechanism of research influenced by policy objectives is when funding provided by state agencies dictates the terms – what can be researched, in which geographical regions can the research take place, what are the scope conditions, etc. Ideally these influences should not dictate the outcome of the research itself, but in reality it often does. When it comes to academic freedom, substantial disparities exist, with some nations protecting the liberty of academics to teach and research topics they believe are the most relevant, while other countries ensure that their universities only produce research that does not contrast too sharply with the dominant national narrative. Limitations on research collaborations in transboundary river basin contexts can sharply inhibit the freedom to examine new ideas where compromise is required to find solutions that will achieve mutual gains. A lack of research collaboration can hinder the development of a shared understanding, reinforcing parallel perceptions of the issues at hand.

The maintenance of academic impartiality is at stake in these cases. Altbach (2001) describes the ‘Humboldtian’ role of academia emerging in the 19th century as based on concepts of *Lehrfreiheit* and *Lernfreiheit* – freedom to teach and to learn – but was at least partially bound by the Church and the state. He then argues that this freedom expanded into many ‘New World’ universities by the early 20th century to encompass a much broader position of professors as protected and even valued social critics. Contemporary researchers debate and discuss the need for explicit positionality and the ethics of positivist versus engaged research; think, for instance, of critical theory, political ecology, justice, postcolonial, feminist, etc., where the goal is not to be impartial but to promote change. This can align or clash with a perceived role of academia as being impartial seekers of ‘truth’ independent of the political views of the government or the researcher. Moreover, while the biophysical reality itself may be unbiased and objective, the way we measure/model/interpret it is not necessarily so. Although *water wars* may be off the agenda, increasing competition over scarce water will continue to challenge academics to decide whether they can be impartial researchers, biased towards their national or cultural identity, or actively working to redefine water distribution to what could be collectively perceived as a fairer water allocation towards all.

Water nationalism entrenched within Jordan Basin research

Across the Jordan Basin, and particularly within the region of Israel and Palestine, discourses of water nationalism strongly emerge in politics and across civil society. Unsurprisingly, most academics focus on water-related topics that align with the objectives of their nation and are careful to not contradict those narratives. Since the beginning of the 1900s – decades before the creation of the State of Israel – the Zionist plans for the creation of a Jewish state had water as an important element and the development of water resources was strongly emphasized. A focus for the nation-building effort was to support the agricultural sector to ‘make the desert bloom’, a commonly used slogan that, according to Allouche (2020), insinuates that Israel could do what its neighbours could not. The objectives were to establish and expand control over the land, to create jobs for the waves of Jewish settlers, to ensure food security and provisions for the growing population, and to create closer links between the new Jewish population and the local lands. Today academic research in Israel focuses heavily on efficiency in irrigation, reuse of treated wastewater, desalination and climate change impacts. A focus on these topics

avoids the controversial issues surrounding the deep distributional inequities between high water availability in Israel and low water availability in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Israeli policy discourses through academic publications often herald Israel as a champion of water conservation and an efficient water user, and often frame the Palestinian water crisis as due to mismanagement and misgovernance. For instance, a perspective paper titled *The Truth Behind the Palestinian Water Libels* (2014), published by the Begin–Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (BESA Center) at Bar-Ilan University, describes Palestinian mismanagement and misgovernance as the cause for water scarcity:

Water shortages in the Palestinian Authority are the result of Palestinian policies that deliberately waste water and destroy the regional water ecology. The Palestinians refuse to develop their own significant underground water resources, build a seawater desalination plant, fix massive leakage from their municipal water pipes, build sewage treatment plants, irrigate land with treated sewage effluents or modern water-saving devices, or bill their own citizens for consumer water usage, leading to enormous waste. At the same time, they drill illegally into Israel's water resources, and send their sewage flowing into the valleys and streams of central Israel. In short, the Palestinian Authority is using water as a weapon against the State of Israel. It is not interested in practical solutions to solve the Palestinian people's water shortages, but rather perpetuation of the shortages and the besmirching of Israel. (Gvirtzman, 2014, p. 1)

In another article of the BESA Center titled 'The Israeli-Palestinian water conflict: An Israeli perspective' (2012), Israel is represented as adhering to all commitments, and on putting the blame for water scarcity in Palestine on the Palestinian Authority (PA). It also argues that per capita consumption of natural water between Israelis and Palestinians is the same:

This paper details the water agreements between Israel and the Palestinians and in doing so refutes any criticism against Israel for not adhering to its commitments. Israel has not only fulfilled all of its obligations stemming from the 1995 Interim Agreement signed with the PA but has met all water commitments requisite of a permanent status agreement as well. As a result, there is almost no difference today in the per capita consumption of natural water between Israelis and Palestinians. The large difference that existed in 1967, when the administration of Judea and Samaria was handed over from Jordan to Israel, has been reduced over the last 40 years and is now negligible. (Gvirtzman, 2012, pp. 31–32)

In Palestine, water-related research focuses primarily on groundwater quality, power asymmetries in water allocation, water as a human right and international water law. These topics reflect the realities of the occupation on the ground since self-control over existing and potential water sources is limited. Yihdego et al. (2019) refer to the challenge of water scarcity in the Occupied Palestinian Territories as a *political drought* or *occupation drought*, suggesting that overuse by Israel and unfair management policies are more to blame for the lack of available water rather than a hydrologically induced drought or global climate changes.

Despite the physical proximity of the researchers, reconciling differing viewpoints through exchanges and collaborations between the Israeli and Palestinian academic communities has been very limited and sporadic due to deep mistrust and travel restrictions. Palestinian civil society launched a call in 2005 for boycotts, divestments and economic sanctions (BDS) against Israel to pressure the Israeli government to stop the

occupation of the Palestinian territories. Within this call, the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) launched the boycott of Israeli academic institutions. The campaign's rationale is that 'all Israeli academic institutions, unless proven otherwise, are complicit in maintaining the Israeli occupation and denial of basic Palestinian rights' (BDS, 2014). According to this perspective, scholars participating in academic research with Israeli institutions would alienate a large part of the Palestinian and – to some extent – Arab academic communities as they would be breaking the boycott's call and contributing to the normalization of relations with Israel. The anti-normalization movement would therefore isolate these scholars and boycott any collaborations with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and academic institutions that have a regional dimension, including Israel. In this context, Western donors and agencies – such as the German Research Foundation (DFG) – have been providing research funding for consortia with at least one Israeli institution and one Palestinian/Arab institution as a key requirement for eligibility for funding. Both the boycott and the responses to it are clear examples of mechanisms to dictate the terms – what can and cannot be researched, in which geographical regions the research can take place, and particularly who should or should not be involved.

Flagrant academic nationalism along the Nile

Water nationalism can also be seen readily today in scholarship emerging from the Nile River Basin and most recently around the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). Egypt has long projected a sense that its national identity is bound up with the river. Its largest academic institution, Cairo University, recently urged students and staff to sign a 'Nile Bond' that states:

Due to fierce attack against the River Nile, the lifeblood of the Egyptians, and the gift of their presence, and out of respect for Egypt's constitution, which recognizes the state's commitment to River Nile protection and the preservation of Egypt's historical rights associated with it, and the rationalization of benefiting from it without wasting its water or contaminating it, emphasizing the right of every citizen in enjoying the River Nile, without abusing it, therefore, I declare joining the 'Nile Guards' Committee to protect the river from any infringement. I perform a popular role of censorship, I follow-up the Nile affairs, and participate in raising the awareness of citizens within the National Campaign for the River Nile Protection, and I swear not to contaminate or infringe on it. (Cairo University, 2015)

Is this a reasonable role to expect students and staff to play? In recent years, the drive for development by upstream countries through the expansion of hydropower generation and increasing consumptive uses of water has resulted in heightened concerns over the impacts on the downstream countries of Sudan and Egypt. Since the inception of the GERD in 2011, the academic literature from the region has been flooded with articles that either espouse the benefits or highlight the impacts of the GERD, with often not-so-subtle conclusions from the researchers that the dam is a good or bad thing. More frequently than not, the conclusions map onto the nationality of the authors.

Therefore, it was unsurprising when one debate recently took place following the publication of a book chapter. Offering no primary research on GERD dam safety in support of their claims, Egyptian authors boldly asserted in their abstract: 'It is more

probable that the GERD Dam will collapse. Experts said the dam was created to collapse. The safety of the dam is very low' (Dandrawy & Omran, 2020, pp. 533–534). Many elements in this chapter were sharply rebuked by a team of predominantly Ethiopian scholars stating that Dandrawy and Omran 'present factual errors, methodological flaws, wrong assumptions, inadequate data use, misleading conclusions and scientific misconducts' (Abera et al., 2020, p. 1). The authors of the original article then replied by reinforcing the political nature of their arguments, suggesting design changes, and cited other book chapters that made similar but somewhat but less provocative arguments by Egyptian scholars.

Since the construction of the GERD began, numerous such articles on this topic have been submitted not only to *Water International* but also across a wide variety of scientific publications. While it is notable that this particular exchange took place outside of the rigorously peer-reviewed literature, it is not unique. Some submissions make it into the hands of reviewers who are aware of the political dimensions, while other reviewers may be unaware of the deeply political nature of the issue and hastily recommend acceptance of a manuscript. The pressure and rush to publish is likely familiar to all academics, editors and reviewers, especially given the timeliness of these issues. Scholars from universities in all countries need to publish articles for their career advancement, and the marked rise of online forums and predatory journals has generated more and more inadequately reviewed scientific articles and the propagation of misinformation. The media, which may cite these articles, are often blind to what is 'peer reviewed' and what is not, which has had a profound effect on nationalist narratives surrounding the GERD.

Conclusions

A common characteristic of research published in *Water International* is to unpack complex water-related issues in contexts such as Israel–Palestine and the Nile River, and potentially contribute to the solutions of unresolved problems. These problems may be fundamental in nature or considered 'wicked' problems with multiple interconnections between science and society, which are dynamic over time with intertwining cause–effect relationships. Transboundary water conflicts have often been identified as one such 'wicked' problem, and the trend towards water nationalism complicates these problems further when influential academic researchers advocate for solutions by looking through a single lens. We do not diminish the importance of presenting a particular perspective on highly contentious issues related to water management through the academic literature. Furthermore, the right for an author to argue or highlight a particular perspective should be upheld, whether those perspectives support or contradict the national policies from whence the authors come. However, it is clear that the complexity of these problems is likely to increase with growing populations, non-stationarity and increasing pressure on scarce resources, thus viewing these problems through a single national lens is certain to be insufficient.

The growing challenge is therefore to distinguish facts from opinion, and to parse out misinformation from both in an era of mass information. This challenge is laid at the feet of the scientific publication process where the number of publishing outlets is growing and the propagation of ideas across social media shapes public opinions in hours compared with the weeks or months historically required to verify and communicate

reputable facts. The voluntary-based peer-review process is often slow and frustrating for authors, editors and reviewers alike, but when it comes to politically delicate topics such as transboundary river basins, finding a balanced set of peer reviewers is imperative under the current system.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, even before the publication process begins, collaborative research – from the design, data collection and analysis – can lend a degree of credibility to research outcomes that address contentious transboundary topics. Collaborative research over internationally shared resources can be explicitly encouraged by funding agencies. Universities can support cross-border exchanges for students and faculty with the explicit objective of building understanding and empathy. When academics demonstrate that they can set aside their national identities to work with colleagues from opposite sides of a debate to produce robust water science and equitable management solutions, it can not only expedite a peer-review process but also provide a much-needed example for government leaders to follow.

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