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Globalization and Communication Research

The Emerging Paradigm of Comparative Communication Enquiry: Advancing Cross-National Research in Times of Globalization

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Virtually no other approach has potential to bring communication studies further forward in the age of transnationalization than the comparative approach. I am aware that this a bold statement, and I will explain in the following what I mean by it. Comparative analysis is characterized by several advantages that explain its growing prevalence (Esser & Pfetsch, 2004; Gurevitch & Blumler, 1990). It provides a contrast to naïve universalism, countering the tendency to presume that communication findings from one's own country also apply to other countries. As Paolo Mancini argues in the previous article, only comparative research draws our attention to different "models of journalism," but also to the clear differences in how journalism is currently undergoing change in societies around the world. Comparative analysis thereby helps to prevent parochialism and ethnocentrism, but also to better understand one's own system by juxtaposing its familiar structures against those of other systems. Taking a comparative perspective also draws our attention to those macro-level structures that are taken for granted within our own system and never critically reflected upon. It thus helps to render visible the specific identity of mass communication arrangements within a given system. Another advantage of comparative analysis lies in the wealth of practical knowledge and experience it offers. As we gain access to a wide range of alternative options and problem solutions, comparative research can show us ways that others have found out of dilemmas similar to our own—and their solutions may be borrowed and adapted to local conditions. Most important for us as scholars is the fact that comparative analysis expands the existing data base, and by doing so, it simplifies generalization and contextualization of theories. This has become very valuable, as there is nothing more parochial as working with theories and concepts that are confined to isolated regions. In times of transnationalization, as Livingstone put it recently, "it is no longer plausible to study one phenomenon in one country without asking, at a minimum, whether it is common across the globe or distinctive to that country or part of the world" (2012, p. 417).

This essay will address the important paradox that, while transnationalization can only adequately be tested by cross-national comparative designs (tracing above-system influences and between-system diffusion), it also undermines a premise of these designs—namely, to think of systems as self-contained things that can be independently compared. I will resolve this apparent dilemma by making several suggestions as to how traditional approaches need to be updated. First, I will outline the logic of comparative analysis. Next, I will explain its scientific relevance and justify its emerging status as an autonomous subfield in the communication discipline. Finally, I will explicate how comparative designs must be amended to account for the challenges of transnationalization.

Recent Advances

The comparative approach in the communication discipline was initially pioneered by Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch, though it has now spread across almost all subfields of the communication discipline, as the recent publication of the ICA *Handbook of Comparative Research* illustrates (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012a). Originally labeled as being in its infancy (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1975), the state of comparative analysis has now reached late adolescence (Gurevitch & Blumler, 2004). Although it has not attained mature adulthood yet (Mancini & Hallin, 2012), one may agree with Hardy's assessment that comparative communication research has advanced significantly, and that it is producing "a common body of knowledge, theories and concepts" (2012, p. 202). Uninformed comparison by convenience is becoming less and less defendable. Although comparative research has made more progress in some subject areas than in others (see Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012a), it is my argument that we are observing the gradual emergence of comparative communications as a recognized subdiscipline, comparable to *comparative politics* in political science. In the words of Blumler, we see "for the first time in the evolution of comparative communication research . . . a more or less coherent collective awareness of what the comparative venture is or can be about," as well as of the "challenges that must be faced for further progress to be achieved" (2012, p. xii). Clear indications of the maturation process include the number and range of countries analyzed, books and articles published, and variables used in increasingly sophisticated research designs.

Over time, communication scholars have chosen different approaches toward comparative analysis. Early attempts took the shape of edited compilations with "nation-by-chapter reporting" and no actual comparisons. Readers were presented with individual country studies, but they had to draw any comparative conclusions themselves. The second developmental step in the field's evolution was the advent of two-country comparisons. Several of these pairwise comparisons were theoretically and methodologically original and sophisticated (e.g., Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002; Semetko, Blumler, Gurevitch, & Weaver, 1991). However, because of the limited ability to generalize from them, they are now increasingly being replaced by medium-N and large-N studies. The development in comparative journalism research, for instance, began with a binational survey of British and German journalists (Köcher, 1986), then moved to a five-country study (Patterson, 2008; Patterson & Donsbach, 1996), followed by an 18-nation study (Hanitzsch et al., 2011) which will replicated soon with a substantially larger number of countries (see worldsofjournalism.org). In comparative political communication research, the formation of the European Union has triggered a substantial number of larger-scale studies, starting with Blumler's (1983) seven-country study of the 1979 EU parliamentary election, followed by a 25-country study by de Vreese, Banducci, Semetko, and Boomgaarden (2006) on the 2004 EU election, and recently leading to a 27-country comparative analysis of the 2009 EU parliamentary election by Schuck et al. (forthcoming). Even wider in scope are the transnational comparisons of international news that have a long tradition in the field, reaching from the *Foreign Images Project* with 29 countries (Sreberny-Mohammadi, Nordenstreng, Stevenson, & Ugboajah, 1985) to the *Foreign News Study* with 38 countries (Stevenson, 2003), the *News Around the World Project* with 10 countries (Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006), and the on-going *Foreign News on Television Study* with 17 countries (Cohen, forthcoming). The largest examples of large-N statistical analyses have come from Pippa Norris, with one project investigating the relationship between media system variables and human development in 135 countries (Norris, 2004), and another one studying the relationship between exposure to global information and people's moral and social values in 90 countries (Norris & Inglehart, 2009). Bigger does not necessarily mean better, though, as large-scale studies often run the risk of losing depth and settling for the lowest common denominator. Progress thus continues to rely on a combination of intensive and extensive studies.

Defining Comparative Research

Comparative research in communication and media studies is conventionally understood as contrasting different macro-level cases (e.g., world regions, countries, subnational regions, social milieux, language areas, cultural thickenings) at one or more points in time. A classic yet simple definition had been proposed by Edelstein: "It is a study that compares two or more nations with respect to some common activity" (1982, p. 14). Blumler, McLeod, and Rosengren expanded this first definitional attempt and characterized a study as comparative "when the comparisons are made across two or more geographically or historically (spatially or temporally) defined systems" (1992, p. 7). Situated within these systems are "the phenomena of scholarly interest which are embedded in a set of interrelations that are relatively coherent, patterned, comprehensive, distinct, and bounded" (ibid.).

A recent synthesis by Esser and Hanitzsch (2012b) concluded that comparative communication research involves comparisons between a minimum of two macro-level cases (systems, cultures, markets, or their sub-elements), with respect to at least one object of investigation relevant to the field of communication. Comparative research differs from non-comparative work, in that it attempts to reach conclusions beyond single cases and explains differences and similarities between objects of analysis against the backdrop of their contextual conditions. It is essential that the objects of analysis are compared on the basis of a common theoretical framework, and also that this is done by drawing on equivalent conceptualizations and methods. It should also be pointed out that spatial (cross-territorial) comparisons ought to be supplemented wherever possible by a longitudinal (cross-temporal) dimension in order to account for the fact that systems and cultures are not frozen in time, but constantly changing under the influence of transformation processes like Americanization, Europeanization, globalization, modernization, or commercialization. Despite these constant changes, the comparative scholar has no choice but to define the respective boundaries of his cases. Still, he or she can do so in a variety of ways based on structural, cultural, political, territorial or temporal qualities.[1] The contrasting cases in comparative analysis—be they world regions, countries, subnational regions, social milieux, language areas, or cultural thickenings—are assumed to contain characteristic factors of influence (*conditions*) that help to explain differences and similarities in the objects of analysis (*outcomes*) embedded in the different cases.

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[1] This distinguishes comparative analysis from global research, which needs not be comparative at all and just analyses any kind of *units* under the influence of global causes (Babones, 2006).

This last aspect is crucial. Comparative research guides our attention to the explanatory relevance of the contextual environment for communication outcomes. It aims to understand how differences in the macro-level context shape communication phenomena differentially. Any attempt to systematically link macro-level system conditions and micro-level communication behaviors and products is an important step toward explanatory research. From a comparative perspective, it is thus important to recognize that mass communication processes are shaped by several layers of systemic context. In addition to people, practices, and products of communication (at the micro-level), factors deriving from the media system (and other forms of institutional arrangement at the macro level) have to be taken into account. Hence, differences in the creation of messages and their effects across countries can be explained by the structural and cultural environment. This recognition of the (causal) significance of contextual conditions is what makes comparative research exceptionally valuable. In the words of Mancini and Hallin, "theorizing the role of context is precisely what comparative analysis is about" (2012, p. 515). This explanatory logic can be distinguished from mere descriptive comparison that is considered less mature (Gurevitch & Blumler, 2004).

Goals of Comparison

This last sentence does not mean that description of differences and similarities is useless. Providing *contextual descriptions* of a set of systems or cultures enhances our understanding and our ability to interpret diverse communication arrangements (Landman, 2008). Ideally, it produces structured, accurate, and detailed descriptions; however, it otherwise offers little by way of explanation or theory. Contextual descriptions, rather, follow an idiographic model of cross-national comparative research that treats systems or cultures as "objects of analysis" in their own right (Kohn, 1989).

An important step toward more elaborate comparative analysis is the recognition of *functional equivalents*. A fundamental problem in comparative studies, as trivial as it may sound, is comparability. If we have drawn a media sample in system A, what are the equivalent media outlets in systems B, C and D? The same is true for other objects and concepts of analysis. Only objects that meet the same function (or role) can be meaningfully compared with each other. Helpful advice for identifying functional equivalents is offered by Wirth and Kolb (2004).

The third step—which builds on the previous two—is to establish *classifications and typologies*. Classifications seek to reduce the complexity of the world by grouping cases into distinct categories with identifiable shared characteristics. The concepts used to differentiate the cases need to be identified or constructed by the scholar; these concepts then serve as multiple dimensions to classify a broader range of cases. An example is found in the work of Hallin and Mancini (2004), who first clarified the concepts "mass press," "political parallelism," "professionalization," and "state intervention," and then used them as dimensions along which to classify media systems into three prototypical models: "polarized pluralist," "democratic corporatist," and "liberal." Typologies can be considered the beginning of a theory on a subject matter (like media system), and many comparative studies culminate in similar typologies by categorizing, for example, journalism cultures (Hanitzsch et al., 2011), news cultures (Esser, 2008), or political communication cultures (Pfetsch, 2004).

The forth step is *explanation*. As Landman states, "once things have been described and classified, the comparativist can move on to search for those factors that may help explain what has been described and classified" (2008, p. 6). Comparative research aims to understand how characteristic factors of the contextual environment shape communication processes differently in different settings (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995, p. 74). To understand the relationship between divergent contextual influences and the respective implications for the object of investigation, scholars identify and operationalize key explanatory and outcome variables. This facilitates the formulation of research questions and hypotheses. Kohn (1989) distinguishes two relevant approaches here. The first is to take an explanation between causal and outcome variables that has been found in one context (and subsequently introduced in the literature as a potentially universal "model") and examine whether it holds in other systems or cultures, too. Hence, a hypothesis is exported to other settings in order to assess whether it is meaningful outside the context in which it was invented and may thus be gradually generalized. However, this would only work if both the assumed causal variables and the outcome variables were conceptualized and measured identically in all selected systems. In order to account for how and why the outcome variable varies in the different countries, external factors from the systemic context must be incorporated as explanatory, mediating, and moderating variables. These two approaches (exporting hypotheses to other contexts and explaining outcomes by additional external variables) are termed by Kohn (1989) as treating countries "as contexts" and "as units" (see also Hasebrink, 2012). Taken together, they mean that systems must be broken down into indicator-like units of analysis; an example of such units may be the *supply* and *consumption* of information programs in broadcast systems. These units *program supply* and *program consumption* must be conceptualized theoretically and measured empirically in equivalent ways in order for entire broadcast systems to be compared along these dimensions (e.g., by contrasting *information-rich* and *information-poor* systems). This setup allows the development and testing of hypotheses that relate different outcomes (*rich* versus *poor*) systematically to system-level explanatory variables. This example is drawn from Esser et al. (2012); the basic logic is not limited to systems, but can be transferred to any kind of cases.

Confirmed hypotheses are extremely valuable because they have the potential for *prediction*. Based on generalizations from the initial study, scholars can make claims about other countries not actually studied, or about outcomes in the future. The ability to predict provides a base for drawing lessons across countries and helps to find solutions for problems prevalent in many countries.

In sum, the purpose of comparative research is to describe (and understand), to explain, and to predict. It pursues two overarching goals: By testing the degree to which hypotheses are robust to contextual influences in different settings, comparative research contributes to clarifying the travelling capacity of hypotheses and theories, and thus their cross-national generalizability. Moreover, comparative studies can also make an important contribution to the contextualization of theories: By systematically considering context variables, one can discern those conditions under which the theory would have validity.

Comparing in the Age of Transnationalization

The "old" logic of comparative research particularly in political science presumed the continued importance of the nation-state. Also, in communications, many cross-national studies treat the nation as the "natural" default category of comparative analysis. This has come under criticism from those who consider "nation" as a category too under-theorized for academic research and too compromised by the undermining influence of transnationalization. Norris and Inglehart (2009) have recently produced a ranking that illustrates very vividly the extent to which the world's countries have become cosmopolitan, meaning absorbent of transborder influences. Esser and Pfetsch concluded already some time ago that, "[i]n times of growing globalization and supranational integration . . . it is becoming increasingly difficult to treat societies and cultures as isolated units" (2004, p. 401). Originally, the comparative approach was, indeed, focused on clearly demarcated, tradition-bound, institutionally-integrated countries that could be considered independent of each other and contrasted in comparative analysis. Yet, as Livingstone states, in "an age of globalization the nation-state is no longer the automatic starting point for comparative research, for media and communications flow within and across nations" (2012, p. 419). For this reason, Kohn (1989) had created, with great vision, another model for international comparison which he called the "transnational model." It treats countries as loci of border-transgressing trends. Two sub-approaches can be distinguished here.

The objective of the first sub-approach is to investigate transnational phenomena and how they can be observed in different countries. An example would be to investigate transnational broadcasters like Al Jazeera or BBC World Service, transnational Internet platforms like Facebook or YouTube, or transnational entertainment formats like Big Brother, Who Wants to Be a Millionaire, or Disney productions. This sub-approach is interested in how transnational media products are domesticated, and in how local settings influence the reception and interpretation of transnational products differently. The comparative research question is thus, "How do transnational or transcultural phenomena show up in different countries?" (Hasebrink, 2012, p. 386). This sub-approach acknowledges that producers, products, and audiences are no longer primarily defined by membership to national communities. Instead, other forms of belonging come to the forefront.

This brings us to the second sub-approach. Many examples show that, in a globalized world, transnational flows of communication intersect in new spaces that do not necessarily correspondent with national boundaries. These new spaces are "de-territorialized," meaning that they are no longer confined to territorial borders, and have been variously called translocal "mediascapes" (Appadurai, 1996) or "media cultures" (Couldry & Hepp, 2012). Examples of deterritoralized communities include international movements of online activism, audiences of international entertainment programs, fans of international celebrities, followers of international religious movements, or ethnic diasporas dispersed over many countries.

Whereas the first sub-approach (termed "glocalization") asks how global media phenomena are appropriated within distinct national borders, the second sub-approach (called "deterritorialization") questions the idea of fixed national borders and asks which new border-transgressing scapes and cultures have emerged that are cutting across national borders. The goal of the second sub-approach is to develop new classification schemes that may serve as a foundation for new forms of comparison. Analysis from such a deterritorialized perspective "does not start within the binary semantics of national comparison—understanding each cultural pattern as an exclusive expression of a national media culture—but develops a manifold process of comparison . . . outside of a reductive national frame" (Couldry & Hepp, 2012, p.

257). Researchers look for newly emerging communities that share characteristic patterns in thinking, discourse, and communicative practice. This approach asks for a different comparative strategy that has become known in the literature as "incorporating comparison" (Comstock, 2012, see also below).

Traditionally, comparativists managed to get by with three basic approaches. The first is to conduct a set of case studies that use a common comparative framework and are closely synchronized in theory, method, analysis, and interpretation (for details on comparative case study analyses, see George & Bennett, 2005). The second approach is to employ either a most similar or most different systems design, whereby cases are selected in such a way that they correspond with different characteristics of the explanatory variables. The cases are then compared to see the degree to which these explanatory variables co-vary with differences in the outcome variables (for details on these quasi-experimental strategies, see Przeworski & Teune, 1970). The third approach is large-N statistical analysis where *control* is not realized by case selection, but by strategies of data analysis; it is often less interested in differences and more in establishing universal laws between key variables across as many countries as possible (for an illuminating example, see Norris, 2004). This is not the place to elaborate on these fundamental methodological approaches (for a useful introduction, see Landman, 2008), or to discuss more sophisticated extensions (on qualitative comparative analysis, see Rihoux & Ragin, 2008; on multilevel modeling, see van de Vijver, van Hemert, & Poortinga, 2008). Rather, I would like to explicate how the specific subfield of comparative *communication* research needs to retool its approaches to account for implications caused by the emergence of a globalized media arena and the feared decline of the national media system.

Necessary Extensions

The fact is that cases (like media systems) are no longer isolated, self-contained units, but embedded in an increasingly globalized communication system characterized by a multiplicity of diffusion, dependency, exchange, and integration, and this has consequences. I will discuss six of them.[2]

First, we need to realize that explanatory variables for certain communication outcomes will no longer come from domestic contexts alone, but also from foreign models. Additional variables need to be incorporated in comparative designs, namely those that represent these international relations (Esser & Pfetsch, 2004). It is thus the job of the comparative scholar to translate external influences into variables. These external influences can express structural power or dependency relations between media systems (i.e., the hegemonic impact of core powers on peripheral systems in a given network), cultural imperialism of values ("Americanization"), penetration of ideological or economic values (from the West to the South or East), or more neutral processes of interconnectivity and diffusion of ideas. The comparativist should aim to identify the linking mechanism as accurately as possible, whether it stems from international legal treaties like GATS or WTO, customer relations with information wholesalers (APTN, Reuters, World TV), membership in news exchange mechanisms (Eurovision), membership in supranational governance bodies (the EU), or general trade relations, or if it arises from other forms of diffusion stemming from

[2] The idea for this section was partially inspired by Wessler and Brueggemann (2012), who in their book draw on my own work—a nice example of cumulative science.

international training standards and recognized professional practices, transnational corporate ownership, or the influence of overseas consultants and personal networks. The existence, frequency, and intensity of the various types of diffusion mechanisms need to be operationalized and accounted for in explanatory comparative designs. Diffusion mechanisms should to be studied at multiple points in time (thus combining a cross-spatial with a cross-temporal dimension) to account for their process-like character, and also to track their long-term impact on the cases under study.

In addition to incorporating new variables, we also need to study the interplay between these external (border-transgressing) and internal (domestic) factors to examine how media systems respond to transnational influences. Media systems are not empty containers, after all, and journalists or news organizations are not passive receivers of outside stimuli. The manners in which they respond are likely to demonstrate valuable information about the specific conditions of the media system in question. In fact, context-sensitive comparativists should expect a systematic relationship between the structural and cultural factors of a given media system and its unique adoption and adaptation strategies for dealing with transborder influences. Put differently, global influences are negotiated and articulated at the level of the individual media system (Chadha & Kavoori, 2005). Media systems, in turn, are embedded in national and, increasingly, supranational media landscapes. The nation-state is thus not the only context for media systems anymore (but is still a relevant one—think of regulatory frameworks, the political economy of media industries, or audience preferences). Without a doubt, transborder influences trigger substantial cultural shifts and structural transformations within media systems. These processes, however, still occur within national contexts, and these national pathways can still be subjected to comparative analysis (Pfetsch & Esser, 2008). This line of argumentation finds empirical support in the comparative political communication literature, where the hegemonic Americanization thesis has long been rejected in favor of the more context-sensitive hybridization thesis (see Esser & Strömbäck, 2012). It states that U.S. campaigning models are not imported and imitated wholesale by campaigners in other countries, but rather, they are broken down into smaller components and implemented selectively. Especially those techniques that can be fitted easily into the institutional and cultural home context are adopted. The result is a hybrid mix of traditional campaigns styles supplemented by elements of a transnationally traded (albeit U.S.-inspired) model. Humphreys (2011) reports many more examples that demonstrate the continuing relevance of the *national* in international media systems research.

A third innovation besides incorporating external variables and examining their interplay with domestic variables is to marry the "glocalization" and "deterritorialization" sub-approaches and integrate their logic into comparative designs. If we take *news* as an example, glocalization asks how incoming information about a major news event (e.g., the shooting of Osama Bin Laden) is reframed and repackaged according to national power structures, cultural repertoires, and political-economic interests, as well as pre-existing audience schemas to meet (and further legitimize) national expectations (Clausen, 2003). Deterritorialization asks where and to which extent new communities of *globalized* journalists and *globalized* audiences become apparent that can no longer be pinned down to places defined by common geography and state-bound terrain. This leads to new differentiations. It may no longer suffice to compare one nation's journalists to another national sample (and their respective inclinations to domesticate "global" news), but in addition, both must be compared to a third emerging type: an increasingly transnationally oriented community of journalists working in different countries for transnationally oriented media (e.g., *Financial Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times'* global edition, *International Herald Tribune*, *TIME*, *The Economist*, CNN, BBC World Service). We thus may need to increase the number of cases in comparative designs by including an additional *globalized* control group to allow for a better assessment of how relevant the national still is vis-à-vis the transnational (Reese, 2008).

A fourth innovation will be to adopt a multilevel approach in comparative communication research where the national level is merely one among many levels. The nation-state has long ceased to be the only meaningful category; as such, additional levels of analyses—both above and below the nation-state—must be included, depending on the research question of inquiry. Studies at the supranational level often come in the form of analytical area studies. One example is research into democratization processes in different world regions. Voltmer (2008, 2012), for instance, compares political communication in world regions like Eastern Europe, South America, and Africa and examines a set of hypotheses about the path-dependent development of media systems in developing democracies. Research into the level below the state can be found in analyses of subcultures or subsectors of society. For instance, in a study by Adoni, Caspi, and Cohen (2006), the media of Arab and Russian ethnic communities in Israel are compared and discussed against the background of Israeli majority media. In another example, Pfetsch (2004; see also Pfetsch & Mayerhoeffer, 2012) explores political subcultures in European capitals with respect to the communicative interactions between politicians and journalists. Pfetsch's comparative research seeks to identify types of political communication culture at a subnational level. As these examples illustrate, comparative designs ought to include additional levels of analysis both below and above the nation-state level.

A fifth suggestion is to drop "nation" in those instances where this category has become too discredited, and replace it with more theoretically adequate conceptualizations. One obvious alternative is *media system*, as introduced by Hallin and Mancini (2004); another is *political communication system*, as introduced by Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) and developed further by Pfetsch and Esser (2012). Other options are *media markets* (Picard & Rossi, 2012), *communication culture* (Kim, 2012), *journalism culture* (Hanitzsch, 2007), *journalistic fields* (Benson, 2005), or *political communication culture* (Pfetsch, 2008). On the other hand, it should be said that "nation" has not become untouchable. To still compare nations does not automatically mean to "to commit the sin of methodological nationalism," provided it is an explicit strategy "not to presume the nation's importance but rather to test it" (Livingstone, 2012, p. 423). Even Beck and Sznaider (2006), the biggest critics of methodological nationalism, defend such a more reflective, context-sensitive approach that incorporates multiple scales and perspectives besides the national. In whatever way the cases are ultimately conceptualized by the researcher, one must not forget that they are increasingly also integrated in new supranational landscapes, which Straubhaar (2007) has termed geo-cultural or cultural-linguistic media markets, and Tunstall (2008) has referred to as major media regions.

All five supplementary proposals stay well within the boundaries of the social scientific paradigm that favors formal strategies (like MSSD or MDSD) and variable-based data analysis for comparative studies in an effort to uncover causal regularities between varying contextual conditions and varying outcomes. This also describes my own academic socialization. However, there is also an interpretative school that favors historically- and culturally-grounded qualitative approaches in order to reconstruct, rather than causally explain, relationships by way of comparison. Because both perspectives potentially enrich, rather than exclude, each other, my sixth suggestion is to also take interpretative approaches into account as sources of inspiration when tackling the difficult relationships between larger supranational forces and comparative cases. I would like to draw particular attention to "encompassing comparisons" by Tilly (1984) and "incorporating comparisons" by McMichael (1990). Tilly's encompassing comparison requires the researcher to spell out, in concrete terms, what the "big structures and large processes within a particular world system" (1984, p. 74) look like that span and connect a certain set of cases (e.g., media systems). The next crucial step is to "select locations within the structure or process and explain similarities and differences among those locations as consequences of their relationship to the whole" (ibid., p. 125). Encompassing comparison thus presumes potent transborder network structures (like a Euro-American film industry, a common transnational journalism culture, an Asian media market, etc.) that affect the behaviors of its parts. "With this logic," as Comstock explains, "the encompassing method selects cases on the basis of their representativeness of common positions in the overall system" (2012, p. 376). The goal of the analysis is "to identify patterns of difference in how hierarchically related localities respond to the same system-level dynamics and perpetuate systemic inequality" (ibid.)—for instance, between more and less powerful components.

McMichael's (1990) incorporating comparison builds on this, but it rejects the idea of thinking in discrete, independent "cases"; he also rejects the idea of scholars "placing" cases in grander frameworks for comparative analysis. Instead of trying to compare distinct localities, he suggests focusing on mutual influences and interdependences and using these cross-place relationships, transcultural exchanges, and active adaptation processes to account for how similarities and connections between places are produced. Because of the high level of connectivity, the global totality should not be perceived as an above-reigning external cause, but rather, as an imminent, emergent quality (McMichael, 1990, p. 391; 1992, p. 359). Further, the comparative method should not be understood as an outside tool, but as a conceptual procedure inherent to the construction of results (McMichael, 1990, p. 389; 1992, p. 359). The latter aspect explains the label "incorporating comparison." Seemingly independent of McMichael, but still in line with his interpretative approach, Couldry and Hepp (2012) have recently proposed a similar strategy for the communication discipline and called it a "transcultural approach to comparative media research." They have suggested that scholars should compare cultural thickenings instead of localities, aggregate results to other levels than the national, and beware of the constructionist quality of findings in comparative media research (ibid., pp. 256–258).

I personally strongly prefer a more formal, variable-based, and causality-seeking approach that includes larger samples in order to allow for generalizations, but I acknowledge that the field will benefit from increased triangulation, or the use of multiple methods and theories. With regard to methodological pluralism, I agree with Hallin and Mancini (2012, p. 217), who expect for the future "many styles of comparative analysis" that coexist side by side—some large-scale and others small-scale, some quantitative and others qualitative, some descriptive and others hypothesis-based and explanatory. "This is normal," they state, and "this is how a field should develop" (ibid.).

Conclusions

Cross-national research has reached a stage where those engaging in it should take comparative analysis seriously. Uninformed comparison by convenience is becoming less and less tolerable. It is ironic, however, that at just the point when the communication discipline has gotten a firmer grip on methodological approaches, useful frameworks, and role-model studies (see Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012a), the processes of transnationalization are seeming to undermine the comparative rationale. The emergence of a global communication system has become at least a theoretical possibility. This would, methodologically speaking, let us end up with N=1 cases, thus making comparative analysis pointless. We would be thrown back to a single case study of *one* large organism. However, there is little empirical evidence in support of such a global "system," and comparativists have learned to be much more precise about the concrete mechanisms that connect and influence specific sets of cases under specific conditions. Even where within-case changes do occur under the influence of diffusion and supranational integration, these transformations show structurally and culturally distinctive patterns that are determined by domestic contexts. Put differently, they follow characteristic local paths that can still be subjected to comparative analysis (Humphreys, 2011; Pfetsch & Esser, 2008). Nevertheless, we are well-advised to expand our research designs by the six strategies laid out in this article:

- Incorporate additional variables that represent external influences and transborder diffusion processes;
- Study the interplay between external and internal variables, and also how transborder influences are negotiated locally;
- Where necessary, incorporate additional denationalized control cases;
- Adopt a multiscalar, multilevel approach to comparative research that includes subnational and supranational layers of influences that all rank equally;
- Replace the nation-state with analytic categories and frameworks that are theoretically richer and more reflective of the challenges problematized here; and
- Allow for pluralism, both methodologically and theoretically, as the weaknesses inherent in any one approach can often be compensated for by the strengths of another.

With these necessary extensions, the comparative approach will continue to contribute substantially to the progression of knowledge in the communication discipline.

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