

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD CHALLENGES FOR CONTEMPORARY MEDIA SYSTEMS ANALYSIS¹

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Abstract

The paper discusses whether and to what degree the discrimination of nationally bounded communication systems is still a valid and meaningful concept for the investigation of political communication. It takes globalization as a starting point of media development and reflects on the nature and meaning of "global" research. Then it discusses the dilemmas that arise from the fact that globalization leads to more transnationalized forms of governance while at the same time political communication is still bound to the nation state.

Keywords

Globalization; Media Systems; Transnational Communication; Political Communication.

I. Introduction

Talking about challenges of contemporary political communication, I like to discuss the challenges for research in comparative media systems that arise from globalization and transnationalization of communication systems and politics. "New realities" regarding the study of media systems derive from the fact that as a consequence of globalization, national boundaries are overcome through new modes of information flow, economic exchange and transnational governance. The question arises as to whether and to what degree the discrimination of nationally bounded communication systems is still a valid and meaningful concept for the investigation of political communication. If the answer is yes, we need to ask how we can readjust our approach to comparative media systems facing global phenomena of governance and communication.

In my presentation, I discuss the impact of globalization on media systems analysis by raising three points:

1. First, I take globalization as a starting point of media development and reflect on the nature and meaning of "global" research. Does such a perspective exist, and how should it be conceived? Does global research equate with the end of the comparative

1 This presentation rests on a revised and abridged version of Pfetsch/Esser (2008).

approach and in particular with the comparative analysis of media systems? I shall argue here that fundamental social change like globalization must be addressed by re-focusing our angle of research. In particular, we need to adapt the research questions, levels of analyses and methods that are applied in media research. More than ever, we need to do comparative research.

2. Second, globalization leads to more transnationalized forms of governance. As a consequence, we also face new patterns and forms of legitimization and therefore political communication that transcend the nation state. At the same time media systems are bound to national political cultures and communication infrastructures. Thus, the fit between the national communication systems and factual supranational political decision making has become precarious. This dilemma can be illustrated with the example of the European Union. In the light of transnational governance we need to discuss how we can conceptualize transnational linkages between the media that develop beyond the national structures.

3. Thirdly, if global influences are to be incorporated into comparative research, we need to broaden our view and revisit theoretical concepts about communication flows within and across media systems. In a world of global communication and communication systems, theories that explain communication across societies must be reconsidered. This eventually means to systematically incorporate theories of international communication into our framework of political communication analysis.

II. Challenges of globalization for comparative research

It is beyond doubt among social scientists that globalization is one of the most powerful engines of social change (Babones 2006). Previous societies were contained by the limits of transportation and communication and governed by the institutional ideology of the nation state which produced and relied on nationally defined forms of collective identity. Globalized societies are confronted by new forces of social change that overcome international borders and operate on a global scale. Now, if we think of globalization in terms of media, the question appears how we can grasp this emerging "global" media system in empirical analysis.

There are two angles to this problem:

First, in a naïve way, one could refer to globalization in terms of a global media system which consists of all media systems with a target population including (ideally) all countries or all people of the world. This approach is a simple extension of the comparative research approach in terms of an inclusive world population or an enlargement of the

comparative media systems approach used so far. For instance, by using a data set of more than 100 countries, Norris (2004) and Norris and Inglehart (2009) have shown that there is a positive relationship between free media and indicators of good governance and human development. In a way, if this study included a maximum numbers of country cases, it would be conceived of as global. However, a closer look to the research question reveals that this kind of extension of cross-national research is not necessarily global. The relationship between free media and the level of good governance and human development, which is the core of the research, must not necessarily be treated as a correlation that works on a global level. It can also be treated as a problem of comparative policy research which is nationally framed and would not qualify as global media systems research. Thus, the example demonstrates that global research does not so much refer to the number of cases and the unit of analysis, but to the framing of the research problem in truly global terms. In fact globalization can be a cause or an effect of the development of media systems and their consequences on every level of society.

Second, the other way to go about the influence of globalization is to look at the global system as a level of analysis. Thus, the research design would treat the global system as one entity and address the research question (for instance regarding the flow and nature of information in the media) in terms of a single case study. It goes without saying this is also quite naïve since this approach would mean excluding a large number of truly global problems which can only be studied by comparisons that are settled on the national level. The relationship between national media policies and the degree to which they enhance global infotainment formats may serve as an example for such an investigation. The study would treat nations as components of larger international systems which reveal specific features or follow a specific logic. In our example the larger global development would be the inherent dynamic of amalgamation of information and entertainment in political news coverage. According to the typology of cross-national research by Melvin L. Kohn (1987: 715) such an approach incorporates larger systemic (global) factors, yet its research strategy stays within a traditional framework of comparing national cases. This approach comes closest to what we might perceive as global research, namely adding a level of analysis to cross-national research that transgresses the nation state and is bound to a larger system of its own qualities.

However, if we take into account the earlier argument that global research must address global problems or questions of global range, then it does not seem sufficient to just add a larger international or global category to the existing cross-national dimensions of research (although it is a surely necessary condition for global research). On the one hand, we see new social units appearing as a consequence of globalization, for instance supra-national communication networks and media institutions gaining power and transnational linkages being strengthened in particular regions of the world. On the other hand, we also

note that there are problems that are global in their reach and yet can only be studied on the individual level. For instance, the research on problems that apply to all humanity, like research on the global epidemics of AIDS cannot but be studied on the individual level.

This leads us to conclude that the study of global dimensions of media and communication systems must rest on a reformulation of the research question. As Babones' (2006: 17-23) argues, "even if the research question asked is global in scope, the units of analysis used in answering that question need not be. Units of analysis used in global social research can range from the smallest (individual human or sensor) to the largest (the world itself at different points in time)."

Consequentially, if we study globalization in communication research, we need to reconsider first of all the *level of analysis of the research question* and not question the level of analysis as such. As the globalization of media systems and the global flow of information affects phenomenon on all levels of society, it must be studied on all levels of society and with respect to *all levels of analysis*.

The most obvious example for a truly global desiderate is the internet. The internet is a primarily global medium, as there are no national border posts for information. Following our argument, global communication via the internet can be studied from various angles and at various levels: at the individual level of the internet's use and diffusion; at the level of new communication modes of social groups or social movements who meet in virtual chat rooms and design political action strategies; and at the level of internet governance at the national or transnational European level or with respect to UN policies to regulate the internet globally. Finally, we may also study the global digital divide, as some scholars have attempted. If we study these questions, we find that global social forces can be the *causes or effects* of the problem that we are studying, yet, the units of analysis can be manifold individual regions, countries, areas or the world as such.

Eventually, we may conclude that the study of global questions in media and information does not free us from comparative research designs and all the problems that are inherent in comparative empirical inquiry. One can hardly imagine the study of globalization of media systems, communications and politics other than with comparative designs on all level of empirical analysis.

III. The nation state and other levels as a meaningful unit of analysis in comparative media systems

the framework in which media systems are usually studied refers to nation states and political regimes or political cultures in the broadest sense. The classical example for this angle is the work by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956) which ties the media system closely to distinct political regimes, countries and their institutions. Hallin and Mancini

(2004) take up this perspective when they discuss political parallelism as a dimension of media systems and their functions. The advent of globalization has made the connection between political regimes and media systems more complicated. On the one hand, we see more transnationalized forms of governance, supranational institutions and forms of political decision making. At the same time, we face new forms of communication beyond the nation state and a fragmentation of media systems within nation states. This simultaneity of fragmentation and transnationalization can be illustrated with the example of the European Union (EU). On the one hand, political integration within the EU undermines the role of EU member states as independent units. Increasingly, powers of decision in vital matters are either integrated or transferred to the EU. On the other hand, we can also observe that within nation states, formal or effective powers are delegated to regional or local units. In this complex situation the traditional nation state is on the losing side. Thus, the "'national' power to control citizens, groups and enterprises becomes more dubious in a world of increased mobility and communication, affecting the status of individual 'states' as realistic units for comparative analysis" (Keman, 2002, p. 29). Again, supranational arrangements and transnational forms of governance as well as the weakening political power of the nation state brings back the question about the adequate unit of analysis in media systems analysis. For instance, in the media industry, there is considerable market regulation by the EU that has a direct influence not only on the mergers and acquisitions in the media market but also on the regulation of advertising and content production. Furthermore, EU directives influence large parts of the national legislative decisions in integrated policy areas. A large number of domestic policies are highly influenced by decisions of supranational institutions.

Although transnational structures of communication, governance and professional practices challenge our understanding of the relevant context of media performance (Livingstone 2008), the end of the nation state as a meaningful category for comparative media systems research has not yet come. At the same time it is clear that the nation state is no longer the only relevant category. In order to capture the empirical development of media systems, additional units of analyses – either above or below the level of the nation state – must be incorporated into the research design, depending on the research question of inquiry.

Studies at the supra-state level can be found in the recent development of analytical area studies. One example is research into democratization processes in different world regions. It focuses on the relationship between democratic political culture and media systems in societies in transformation. Given the idiosyncratic settings and political histories of the so-called new democracies, simple nation-based comparisons hardly reveal systematic insights to the relationship between democratic development and media functions. Thus, it has turned out most useful to go beyond the nation state and apply concepts of path dependent development. Voltmer (2008a, 2008b) works along this trajectory when

she compares political communication in regions like Eastern Europe, South America and Africa and develops a set of hypotheses about the path-dependent development of media systems in developing democracies. Another strand of comparative analysis of media systems argues that the cultural, historical or political experiences of countries may provide a common background which distinguishes them from others and provides the setting for the development of a specific type of communication infrastructure and relationship with politics. Francis Castles (1993; Castles & Obinger, 2008), uses the term "family of nations" to pool together a group of countries that can be compared with another group regarding their social policies. Similarly, Hallin and Mancini (2004) distinguish a typology of countries with particular media systems which rests on a particular cultural, historical and political heritage. In their investigation into media systems, the type of relationship between the most important qualifications of modern democratic media systems and politics builds the units of comparison at the level above the nation state.

Research into the level below the state can be found in analyses of social or political sub-cultures or partial segments of society. One example to compare media systems on this level is the investigation into social, political or ethnic communities and their media. In studies about the communication infrastructure and the media behavior of particular sub-cultures of society, it is necessary to choose a unit of analysis which is not defined in terms of national spaces but relates to social or cultural spaces. For instance, in the study of Adoni, Caspi and Cohen (2006) the media of Arab and Russian ethnic communities in Israel were compared and discussed against the background of Israeli majority media. The project makes an excellent case for the argument that the study of comparative media systems must not be restricted to national spaces but must also be open for comparisons between social spaces. The same is true for political sub-cultures which might be investigated with respect to political communication and interaction of politicians with the media. For instance, comparative studies of political communication cultures (e.g., Pfetsch 2004, 2008a, 2008b), which seek to explore and typify the orientations of political communication actors as a subset of a national political culture are located at a sub-national-state level. Thus, categories of political spaces can also form a meaningful category for comparative communication systems. In the case of political communication systems the comparative logic at the national level may be applied when particular patterns of the interaction between media and politics that can be identified as typical political communication cultures are systematically linked to specific types of media systems (Pfetsch & Maurer, 2008).

IV. Theoretical implications

the fact that comparative communication research needs to take the transformative changes within and across national media systems into account more seriously has far reaching theoretical consequences. It implies to incorporate theories of transnationalization and social change into comparative frameworks of media system analysis. Such theories can be found in the neighboring discipline of International Communication (Anokwa, Lin, & Salwen, 2003; Kleinstauber, 2004; Thussu, 2001). Important concepts to this effect are transformation, dependency, diffusion and modernization, imperialism and Americanization as well as hybridization.

Proponents of incorporating *transformation* research into comparative designs include Gurevitch and Blumler (2004) who complain that previous media systems research has put too much emphasis on comparing the status quo, and, by doing so, neglected the rapid changes in the conditions determining mass communication which demand dynamic explanations and longitudinal designs. Cross-cultural research needs to be combined with cross-temporal research.

Another pertinent theory is *dependency*. In today's understanding, dependencies are less the result of colonial ties but more often a direct outcome of international treaties (e.g. GATS) from membership in supranational intergovernmental institutions (e.g. the European Union) or international organizations (e.g. the United Nations). Legislative acts of the European Union, for instance, account for approximately 60 percent of the national legislation passed in EU member states. National contexts no longer suffice to explain common phenomena; we must include the supranational level, too.

The relevance of *diffusion and modernization research* is closely related to the Galton's Problem in comparative research: Can we explain similar phenomena occurring in different societies as a functional differentiation caused by domestic factors or as the imitation of foreign models caused by foreign factors? In the first case, a phenomenon is interpreted according to modernization theory: The phenomenon exists because it performs indispensable functions for its social-political environment; similar environmental conditions require similar solutions and produce similar structures without foreign intervention. In the latter case, a phenomenon is explained by diffusion theory: It exists because national elites decided to adopt a foreign model. This decision is based on the conviction that the foreign model is worth imitating and that it can be modified to fit into traditional national regulatory and institutional structures; phenomena can therefore emerge within different contexts.

Less fruitful, but nevertheless influential, is the concept of (*cultural*) *imperialism* which is associated with the thesis of *Americanization*. In comparative communication research, Americanization means a directional, one-way process of convergence between the political communication practices of the United States and other countries. The Americanization concept, however, has proved too simple to be scientifically meaningful. More applicable

and to the point is the concept of *hybridization*. It has quickly gained currency in many areas, including the international comparison of electoral campaign communication. In this context, it means the implementation of selected components of a cross-national and cross-cultural style of campaigning in order to supplement country-specific and culture-specific traditional styles of campaigning and campaign coverage. Hybrid styles constitute a combination of modern techniques – influenced by the American standard model – with country-specific traditions of indigenous political and media cultures. The results of recent comparative studies do not support the notion of a directional Americanization process (see, for example, Swanson & Mancini, 1996; Plasser & Plasser, 2002). Instead, autonomous adaptation processes take place. They are the elements of a structural change of the political and media systems. In many mass democracies, this change occurs in the form of an intrinsically motivated process which gradually modifies traditional styles, practices, and routines, and which varies in different countries depending on their system-specific and culture-specific arrangements (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001; Plasser & Plasser, 2002).

The empirical findings concerning hybridization are highly compatible with the concept of globalization based on complex connectivity and the concept of modernization based on endogenous changes. Furthermore, the hybridization concept underlines that it is too early to speculate about the irrelevance of the nation-state and national culture as points of reference in comparative research. It seems that national actors are still key institutions that translate international trends into policies, and these policies do vary among nations. Globalization does not simply do away with traditional institutions in politics and the media. Consequently, we can conclude that with regard to the basic principle of comparing separate cases, there is currently no reason to dismiss proven strategies of comparative studies as long as these strategies are completed by including the modifications suggested herein.

The main challenge lies in how to combine these theories of international communication with comparative designs and yet to remain consistent. The obvious advantage of each of these theories lies in their potential to help us understand and explain that the cases we compare are often interconnected. Moreover, these theories allow us to account for the fact that the countries we compare are not stable blocks frozen in time but dynamic, evolving social systems. Eventually, depending on which of these theories of international communication we work with, change is explained in terms of internal or external influences or a combination of both. Thus, we hope that by supplementing comparative research with the theoretical repertoire of international communication we will have a better tool and be better equipped to extend the intellectual frontiers of comparative research in media systems and be able to grasp the complexities of macro-analytical changes in a world of global communication.

V. Conclusion

Global processes of diffusion do not spell the end of the comparative research of media systems. They however demand for comparative designs that account for the fact that national media systems are becoming increasingly interconnected. My first suggestion would be to include additional levels of analysis below and above the nation state level, as shown in the examples presented. My second suggestion is to break down the barriers between the disciplines Comparative Communication Research and International Communications and to acknowledge that both fields have become increasingly interlinked in their theoretical foundations. My third suggestion refers to tendencies of de-nationalization: One should take them seriously, but should be cautious not to overrate their impact. Careful analyses time and again show that the national level is still relevant and meaningful and that media systems can be characterized and compared along these lines. Thus, we are not standing at the end of comparative media systems research, but carefully advancing it further in the light of globalization and transnational communication.

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