

Editorial

Introduction to the thematic section:

Contexts and their consequences: approaches, challenges and results of comparative communication and media research.

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The most recent boom of comparative approaches in communication and media research is occurring in a time characterised by keywords such as globalisation, transnationalisation, Europeanisation, and Americanisation, which structure scientific as well as public discourses. Collectively, these phenomena refer to the growing tendency of political, social, economic, and cultural developments no longer taking place within clearly defined territorial borders. They also imply that communication processes evolve across cultural and political boundaries. To trace these changes and study the strength of their reciprocal effects requires us to take on a comparative perspective: only a comparative approach allows us to understand the extent to which flows of communication are shaped by transnational, national and subnational contexts.

Comparing different causes, cases and contexts helps us to assess which factors are able to explain significant differences between countries, federal units, and larger cultural and language regions, but also between organisations and institutions, and it allows us to determine under what conditions similarities emerge. From this perspective, a comparative approach is not merely an option in the selection of the appropriate research design, but rather has increasingly become an essential prerequisite for any research that aims to understand its object domain: “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” (Livingstone, 2012, p. 417).

Charting the development of comparative communication and media research against this background, we can see that the field has matured significantly in recent decades (Gurevitch & Blumler, 2004) to become one of the most productive and promising areas of the discipline (see also Frank Esser’s remarks about the current state of research in comparative communication and media research in his contribution to this thematic section).

In its current orientation, comparative communication and media research examines mainly macro contexts—that is, countries and their regions, cultures, or markets (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012). It displays three distinct characteristics: first, comparative communication and media research takes on a cross-border perspective; second, it aims at assessing the theoretical reach of our empirical findings; and third, it helps us to understand how systemic and cultural contexts can explain the differences and similarities of communication processes and the effects they generate (Pfetsch & Esser, 2004).

Consistent with these lines of reasoning, the annual conference of the Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research (SACM) 2015 put the comparative approaches to communication and media studies at its centre. The aim of the conference was to explore the consequences of transnational, national, and subnational contexts on communication processes. Switzerland, in particular, presents itself as an ideal candidate for comparative research if we want to understand the communication processes that shape society and political institutions, the multi-layered nature of its public sphere, media organisations and the media system, etc. For here we can clearly see that it is not only the above-mentioned transnational and national contexts that are relevant, since society as a communicative context is equally shaped by federal entities, language regions and cultural areas.

The contributions to this special section represent only a small selection of those who participated in discussing the merits, results and challenges of comparative communication and media research at the SACM 2015 and are engaged in further advancing our knowledge in the field. They are nevertheless representative of the rigour, spirit and creativity with which comparative research is being undertaken and give an idea of the diversity of current scholarly activity. The articles discuss the orientation and development of comparative research as a field, they focus on methodological aspects and present findings of empirical analyses.

In his contribution, *Frank Esser* reflects on the status and the development of comparative approaches in communication research. Contrasting them at times with the role they occupy in political science, he argues that although comparative communication research is well beyond the stage of its infancy, it still lacks a comparable degree of institutionalisation in terms of academic journals, curricula, etc. At the same time, he sketches the field as an active discipline that is continuously branching out into ever new areas and finds itself in a constant process of innovation due to the nature of the field, which requires the development of theories, methods and measures that facilitate the relating of different contexts to one another.

Picking up the point of methodological innovation, *Moritz Büchi* examines the concept of measurement invariance that is a central precondition to any comparative approach. The article develops, in great detail, a rigorous step-by-step procedure that assesses the degree to which the data meets the requirements posed by configural, metric and scalar levels of invariance, which are ordered hierarchically and become increasingly restrictive. Using data on Internet use in five different countries, Büchi first assesses the appropriate level of invariance by way of a cross-national comparison and then builds a structural model that tests how individuals' age and Internet experience—two factors associated with second-level digital divides—relate to different types of Internet usage.

In a comparison of 11 countries, *Elad Segev* examines the relationship between the degree of press freedom and economic development of a country on the one hand, and its status in international economic news coverage on the other. As the article demonstrates, coverage differs significantly according to the degree of press freedom of the countries examined. Whereas economic news about countries with state-controlled media largely echo the output of the existing propaganda systems, economic news about countries with a free press function as a warning system for possible economic downturns. Specifically, international news anticipates negative economic developments in countries with a free press, whereas coverage trails the economic slumps of countries with state-controlled media.

In their contribution, *Janine Greyer, Ada Fehr, Daniel Grässer* and *Anne Beier* examine the effect of different macro-structural factors on political television coverage by comparing Switzerland and Germany. Although both countries have a structurally similar media system, previous comparative research has tended to overlook the size disparity between the countries as a possible explanatory variable. Considering the “small state character” of Switzerland and the presence of the “Giant Next-Door Neighbour Germany” (Trappel, 1991), the authors examine how these factors affect political coverage on television. For their analysis, the authors use data on the television programme structure of Switzerland and Germany’s public broadcasters. The findings suggest that the specifics of media markets in small states with a Giant Next-Door Neighbour can indeed contribute to arriving at a better understanding of the differences in political media coverage between these two countries.

Daniel Vogler, Mario Schranz and *Mark Eisenegger* examine the factors responsible for multinational corporations’ reputation in the media. Focussing on companies from the banking and pharmaceutical industries in Switzerland and the US, the authors assess the influence of the media system and the companies’ country of origin on the resonance, tonality and topical focus of the media coverage. A comparative content analysis of leading Swiss and US media reveals that these predictors help to explain the existing differences in terms of the

companies' media reputation. Interestingly enough, however, while the media system and the companies' country of origin significantly affect the extent and tonality of coverage, they do so, above all, with regard to social rather than economic topics.

Finally, *Tom Häussler, Hannah Schmid-Petri, Silke Adam, Ueli Reber and Dorothee Arlt* shift the focus to the question of how institutional configurations affect the discursive structure of legislative debates in different countries. Although communication theories and empirical findings repeatedly attest to the media's orientation towards political elites, we know little about their discursive interaction in political institutions. Comparing legislative discourses in Switzerland, Germany, the UK and the US on the issue of climate change, the article reveals systematic differences that relate to the distinctive configurations of the political systems in these countries. The contribution thus illuminates some of the antecedents of political coverage that have so far been neglected.

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