IJoC
Transnational Connections

Theorizing and Conducting Research of Glocal Phenomena

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This article[1] presents a series of reflections and propositions on the relationships between theory, context and empirical observations. It outlines some of the boundaries of this debate and offers insights, based on local and transnational experiences. We start by reflecting on the appropriateness of general paradigms, using political polarization to illustrate some of the difficulties, then we consider how theories and findings can be integrated, and finally, we reflect on how the consideration of media systems is essential for general theories that can be applied across contexts. However, fully summarizing a lively panel discussion that tackles these relationships is an impossible task. From a philosophical perspective it is impossible, as all our observations and theoretical propositions are already generated in a particular context, yet in validating them "they/we" seek to achieve transcontextuality. From a practical perspective,

this is also an impossible task, because we as a group do not fully agree on the level of these relationships and whether theories are context dependent or contexts are theory dependent. Nevertheless, our integrated perspectives can contribute to advance the theorizing and research of *glocal* phenomena.

Is It Appropriate to Develop Paradigms that Span Regions, or Do We Need Separate Theories for Separate Regions?

As social scientists we are trained to detect order and regularities in a complex world. We are socialized to prefer elegant and parsimonious theories to complex ones, and thus one could argue that an explanation that is context dependent would not be parsimonious. Some theories and findings fit this criterion well. For example, evidence of the agenda-setting functions of the press, media priming, or the third-person effect have been well-documented in a variety of cultural contexts, including culturally remote contexts, which suggests a level of generality well beyond the initial realm in which the theory was developed. Some would argue that these examples describe cognitive and perceptual processes that are, to a large extent, universal and that transcend contextual influences. However, other ideas, such as the notion of indexing (Bennet, 1990), according to which journalists tend to limit the range of voices expressed in mainstream media to those expressed within government debates, have been less applicable in other media/political systems (Cook, 1994).

In his classical work, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Robert K. Merton (1968) argues that theories in the social sciences should always be middle range, implying that they are limited by time and space. But does this mean that, as some have argued, we need to develop regional theories? And if this is the case, what is the appropriate regional unit —the national state or a geographic, cultural, linguistic, or economic area of influence?

Another, maybe more appropriate view might be integrating regions, countries, or cultures as context factors in theories and research designs. In doing so, differences between regions can be explained in several ways: by long-standing cultural differences (Nisbet, 2003), by value systems that are sometimes relevant for communication systems or by short-term contextual factors. All would lead to theory refinement.

Let's consider, for example, the issue of political polarization. Sunstein (2007) argued that certain emerging communication technologies (i.e., blogs) will exacerbate political polarization by placing political discussion in increasingly homogenous contexts. But does polarization manifest itself across contexts, and if so, does it manifest itself in similar ways?

In the United States, while public opinion on issues has remained relatively stable, there is an increasing psychological distance between Democrats and Republicans. "Thermometer" data from the National Electoral Study show this clearly as do a variety of other indicators: For instance, the percentage of partisans today who indicate displeasure at the prospect of their son or daughter marrying someone with a different party affiliation is now 23%, up from 3% in the 1950s, and party intermarriage has become more objectionable than is religious intermarriage.

One theoretical model treats this increase in polarization as a shifting of elite preferences from the center (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008) while another explanation (affective polarization) attributes the shift to greater choice in the media market, greater selectivity of exposure into friendlier audiences, and increasing negativity of media discourse (Iyengar, 2009).

The argument that connects media diversification and public polarization is an example of one that travels well across contexts: In the Israeli context, Katz (1996) had suggested a similar argument. According to Katz, Israel's transformation from a nation with a single national television channel—one that reflected the society's mainstream—to a multichannel society with a diversity of nonmainstream media outlets deprived democracy of its last common meeting ground and promoted social fragmentation and polarization.

It is unclear from available data whether the changes in the Israeli media market that Katz (1996) described have continued and intensified since the mid-1990s with the penetration of the Internet. The new technologies may facilitate the development of niche outlets geared to smaller ideological groups. Indeed, they have enabled the immense popularity of audience responses in online news outlets (locally called "talk-backs") containing extreme and potentially polarizing language. Moreover, explanations of political polarization in Israel must account for other variables, such as fluctuation in violence (Berrebi & Klor, 2008) and changes in the electoral system.

Investigations on polarization in Israel have taken place in the rather extreme context of right-wing settlers about to be evacuated from their homes (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). These studies asked if the settlers' extremism is explained in part not only by media effects but also by a perception that "biased media effects" influence public opinion. However, adding perceptions of media effects as predictors of media influence add yet another wrinkle to our conundrum: How do we study perceptions of media influence when both its direct effects and perceived effects are probably different from one context to another?

An even more extreme example of results that are potentially context specific comes from another investigation conducted in Israel on the influence of presumed media influence on strategic voting (Cohen & Tsfati, 2009). The finding—that people perceiving a large impact of the campaign and its coverage on others are more likely to vote strategically (that is, to vote for a party other than their preferred party)—is probably specific to Israel's multiparty parliamentary system. Still, we would not call this a "local theory" of political communication. This argument, of course, does not convert presumed media influence into a local theory, but instead points to its tentativeness until contextual conditions are systematically explored.

In Germany, on the other hand, the study of televised debates during the last decade shows a strong rhetorical convergence between parties and a clear success of ambiguous statements. While candidates using commonplace arguments are perceived as debate winners, those who polarize the audience are perceived as losers (Reinemann & Maurer, 2005). Plausible explanations for favoring nonpolarizing candidates may be found in long-standing cultural factors in the German party system or in

short-term political context factors, such as a candidate's personality or voter's wishes for a strong coalition of both major parties. In Colombia, despite heightened political tensions that result in serious democratic challenges (Rojas, Perez, & Gil de Zuñiga, 2010), the empirical evidence suggests moderate levels of affective polarization in a context of pronounced change on issue positions.

When different contexts are considered, as in our previous examples, it becomes clear that despite potential structural regularities of emerging communications technologies (i.e., blogs linking more often to similar blogs than they do to dissimilar blogs), these spheres are placed within media, political, and cultural subsystems, and it is only in the interaction with these subsystems where ultimately the outcome, that is increased polarization, can materialize. One could counter argue with Sunstein (2007) stating that in countries with a robust public media tradition, heterogeneous debates might actually be informed by these more homogeneous gatherings that new media make possible. Or one might contend that in countries with more governmental control over traditional media, it is plausible that it is in the new digital domain where contradictions can actually be resolved, thus a theorization of new media as an antecedent of political extremism seems unwarranted—unless one is able to demonstrate such an effect across different systems.

Given the significant variation in the relationship between political parties, news environments, and cultural characteristics, it would seem that theoretical advances on political polarization that do not employ cross-national research designs will likely suffer from confounding contextual empirical findings with theoretical development. This does not mean that "regional theories" are required; instead, it suggests that regional difference has to inform broader theoretical constructions, providing contours that refine general propositions in the light of contradictory information, but also, and maybe more importantly, requiring that the implicit assumptions of certain theoretical strands are made explicit and thus falsifiable. Developing cross-national research requires consideration on how to integrate findings across regions.

How Do We Integrate Theory and Findings Across Regions?

To begin answering this question, it seems appropriate to reflect on what is meant by integrating findings with theory. In our view, integration refers to the recognition, reviewing, and amalgamation of a variety of research that is relevant for a certain topic. It involves comparisons of findings and theories and is the very basis for theory building and scientific progress. Therefore, integration is also central to political communication research. Here, the integration of research from various countries and regions can, for example, contribute to our understanding of basic psychological phenomena in media selection, processing, and effects. But integration of international research can also shed light on the importance of contextual factors for the national or regional structures of political communication. Such contextual factors include culture, media, and political systems.

There are at least two ways in which integration can occur: at the level of reception and at the level of interaction. Integrating findings from various countries at the level of reception implies reviewing international research on the topic of inquiry. However, this task is made difficult not only because of the enormous quantity of research but also because of language issues. It could be argued that "international"

journals in a field, using English as a lingua franca, can serve as a good basis for reception-based integration and that which is not published in these journals could be regarded as irrelevant. However, this extreme position truly limits the potential of true international integration because relevant research, despite its high quality, is not always published in international venues. One of the reasons for this is also contextual variation: While in some countries it is a must to publish in international journals to start an academic career (e.g., United States, Netherlands, Israel), there are others in which this is not the only relevant forum (e.g., Germany); and there are even countries where publication in national languages is deemed as far more important (e.g., Spain, France).

As we mentioned, one way of avoiding this dilemma is to ignore all the research published in non-English languages; another would be to systematically encourage non-English scholars to publish in English. But there is also another way for integration, one that is based at the level of interaction: The idea is to have groups of scholars from diverse national backgrounds bring their academic and language expertise to the table as part of the research process. An example of this approach (and, of course, there are many others) can be illustrated with the work being done by the Network of European Political Communication Scholars (NEPOCS). To integrate research, NEPOCS brings a group of scholars from diverse nations together to first review different national literatures (going beyond the international journals), then summarizes them in a common language, and finally makes them available to all the group as an antecedent to cross-cultural or comparative designs.

For scholars with no experience in integrating theories and findings from other regions, we suggest a step-by-step approach that starts with them trying to systematically integrate the findings of "foreign" studies into their own conceptualizations. They could then move on to engage in some comparative research that might remain "ego-centric" (that is, based on established regional findings), but that also applies that same logic to different contexts to finally seek the types of interaction opportunities described previously to shape the questions and design of future research. This integration of findings requires a solid explanation of the contextual characteristics in which the empirical regularities were established. Thus, it would appear appropriate to require rich contextual descriptions not only of "foreign" findings but also of findings in general. Too often, contextual descriptions are only expected of non-U.S.-based research and when present they tend to be rather formulaic.

It would also seem appropriate that panels at international conferences go beyond the practice of lumping together presentations by origin and instead focus on the substantive issues being considered as a way of promoting burgeoning interaction. While geospatial commonality may seem an obvious choice for conference programmers, it also suggests a lack of theoretical clarity that results in privileging origin instead of area of contribution. It is also plausible that increasing translation services at international conferences would generate broader exchanges of research experiences. We contend that achieving greater levels of theoretical coherence is not simply an issue of the diffusion of ideas, but rather one of cross-cultural interaction on research endeavors as well.

Cross-cultural research helps to understand the role of any kind of context factors in political communication. Whether there is, for example, more polarization in two-party systems than there is in multiparty systems can only be found out by cross-cultural research. All over the world, scholars are

dealing with similar questions. Seeing political communication as a transnational phenomenon might help to integrate their thoughts and findings.

Evolving Media Systems: Information Quality and Public Opinion

Changes in media systems have significant implications for the way mass media provide information for citizens and influence public opinion. To understand the implications, above all we need a much better theoretical understanding of how existing differences between media systems impact information flows and how information environment characteristics interact with citizens' motivation and ability in generating political learning and engagement. It is the interactive nature of these processes that makes it essential to employ a general theory that can be applied across contexts, but in which contextual variation is a fundamental part of the theory (see also Schmitt-Beck, 1998). What is called for is a theory of similar scope to, say, Arend Lijphart's (1999) theory of how political institutions impact representation and policy outcomes or John Zaller's (1992) theory of public opinion formation.

Building on a general theory, comparative analyses can contribute to integrating theories and findings across contexts by looking at how the interactions between individual attributes and the media environment can explain both varied findings and patterns that can be further explored in case studies.

It is well-established that the extent to which citizens manage to make sense of politics and engage with it depends on their motivation, ability, and opportunity (Jerit, Barabas, & Bolsen, 2006; Luskin, 1990). The opportunity structure is defined primarily by the media system as an influence on information supply. The menu of media choices differs significantly across contexts with respect to the amount, accessibility, accuracy, range, depth, and argument quality, as well as political balance and diversity in political coverage. Depending on these aspects of information quality and their own interest and ability, citizens encounter different information flows that impact their odds of learning about and engaging with politics.

For instance, studies in the United States observed that the proliferation of media outlets on some platforms make the information-rich get richer yet, while the information underdogs switch off from politics even more due to selective exposure and individual motivations. Yet this process is likely to occur to a different extent as some media systems, while also experiencing similar fragmentation processes, nevertheless allow for quality information to be produced even in economically difficult situations and provide more chances for the uninterested to acquire quality information. This is the case, for instance, in much of northwestern Europe where public service broadcasting retains both a distinct programming content and brand image and also reaches a politically heterogeneous audience (see Iyengar et al., 2010; Popescu & Toka, 2009). This also can occur in countries where newspapers still attract a large audience both online and offline (see the various contributions in Levy & Nielsen, 2010).

The contemporary trends toward the widening of political knowledge and involvement gaps are counteracted in a striking way when those with above-average motivation and skills are prevented from learning even more about politics. This can occur in a media context where public affairs media outlets of high quality and a generalist bent remain in very short supply, as is the case in some postcommunist

countries like Romania. This problem may be enhanced and extended to wide groups with medium interest in politics where media fragmentation leads to product differentiation in political alignment, and where a particularly strong media partisanship, one that undermines information quality, will probably promote political engagement among otherwise less interested citizens.

Therefore, just as it has been argued in the case of persuasive media influences from Klapper (1960) to Zaller (1992), citizen knowledge and engagement are also shaped by media system differences as they interact with the individual's level of political awareness. Similar changes in technology and media economics can produce different effects on citizens of varying motivation, but also on citizens with similar motivation who find themselves in different media systems. Disentangling the interacting individual and contextual factors at the level of content and content production, as well as that of media systems level, is by now possible with the data and techniques becoming available in cross-national research. Such studies can provide ideas for media policy and journalism aimed at sustaining information quality and thus strengthen the democratic contribution of mass media in contemporary societies.

Finally, it is important to consider that most of the references that we have considered in this article are limited to a comparative analysis of Western-style nation states. Additional thought and conceptualization needs to be given to political communication in other areas of the world in which the nation-state has limited reach. It is apparent that political communication is not coterminous with communication within a nation-state. Therefore, the comparative approach being advocated here would most serve to advance theory when it considers locations outside more traditional comparisons. Although we are aware that the task of comparative research becomes more challenging as the variation across the cases being considered increases, it is also from those accepting these broader challenges where the most fruitful theoretical advancements will occur.

Thus, we argue that theoretical advances in a globalized world will hinge upon multilocal, cross-culture research designs that are informed by local specificity, yet are broad enough to capture the potentially homogenizing forces that the global increasingly imposes on the local. To further develop cross-cultural research and integrate findings across regions, we advocate an interactive approach that decentralizes research teams, questions and designs by including scholars from diverse backgrounds who bring their academic, language, and local expertise to the research process.

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