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Comparative Media Studies in the Digital Age: Taking Stock, Looking Ahead

Introduction

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This Special Section on "Comparative Media Studies in the Digital Age: Taking Stock, Looking Ahead" joins other initiatives to develop more refined comparative communication studies by expounding possible theoretical contemplation, elaborating methodological diversification, and exhibiting empirical interrogations. In this introductory article, we present the main discussions undertaken in the features and research articles, as well as some of their limitations. We further offer some thoughts on "context" in the digital age and promote contextual and context-aware approaches as one guide for comparative communication studies.

Keywords: comparative research, digital media, Internet, context, mobility, context-aware comparative communication studies

Over the past few years, our world has increasingly become inseparably and undeniably digital, in different senses and to different degrees (Castells, 2009a, 2009b; Kelly, 2017; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018; Zuckerman, 2013). Digital technologies—from mobile phones and social media platforms to artificial intelligence and emerging contact-tracing systems against the spread of COVID-19—make the everyday life we carry out somehow unrecognizable from even one year ago. A growing number of scholars have produced thorough works on the digital transformation of communities and

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societies in different domains and across the globe (e.g., Cortada, 2012; Gorham, Lunde, & Paulsen, 2014; Hong, 2017; Ling, 2008; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Srinivasan, 2018; Thomas, 2012). Nevertheless, there have been surprisingly few specifically comparative studies of digitalization across either spatial or temporal contexts (see the review article in this Special Section). This Special Section joins other initiatives (e.g., Esser & Hanitzsch, 2013), and, especially, continues the effort in *The International Journal of Communication* in 2015 on "Audiences Across Media" (Jensen & Helles, 2015) to develop more refined comparative communication studies by expounding possible theoretical contemplation, elaborating methodological diversification, and exhibiting empirical interrogations.

The Special Section is one of the outcomes of The Peoples' Internet (PIN) project (for more information, see https://comm.ku.dk/research/digital-information-and-communication/peoples-internet/). A collaborative study of global Internet use funded by the Carlsberg Foundation, the PIN project compares the current state and future potential of the Internet in three centers of the global economy and world politics—China, Europe, and the United States—focusing on the interplay of civil society with the other two key sectors of modern societies: market and state. The features and articles in the Special Section have been solicited and further developed from an international conference in Peking University, titled "Comparative Media Study in the Digital Age," co-organized by the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, and Peking University, China, in June 2019.

Embracing the Digital: Theories, Methodologies, and Empirical Analyses

Adding to the growing field of comparative communication studies (e.g., Blumler, McLeod, & Rosengren, 1992; Esser & Hanitzsch, 2013; Hallin & Mancini, 2004, 2012; Jensen & Helles, 2015; Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2018), the Special Section, with three features and four original research articles, interrogates the topic theoretically, methodologically, and empirically. This Special Section promotes reflection on classic comparative theories and perspectives for their redevelopment in the digital age, presents an overview of research trends and methodological strategies, and reports on recent empirical studies to advance the status and relevance of comparative study in the field. After presenting the main discussions undertaken in the articles, we also note some of their limitations.

The opening two features, "'Comparing Media Systems' and the Digital Age," by Paolo Mancini, and "Comparative Research, System Change, and the Complexity of Media Systems," by Daniel C. Hallin, reflectively center attention on digital media and changes in the wider media ecosystems for comparative analysis. Both authors do this by scrutinizing the theoretical underpinning of their seminal work (Hallin & Mancini, 2004)—the very idea of a "media system"—and its increased complexity and fluidity in the digital era. While assuming that the concept of media systems remains important and valid for comparative studies, both authors recommend a recognition of the path dependence of different media—more specifically, in Mancini's article, by considering digitalization as a "critical juncture" of decisive factors leading to the selection of one path of development over other possible paths (Capoccia, 2016)—so as to better conceptualize *both* change *and* complexity in media systems in the digital era (for a similar discussion, see McChesney, 2007).

To add nuance and reflection on methodological issues, as advocated in Hallin's feature encouraging more contextualized case studies, John Downey's article, "Comparative Communication Research: Why We Really Need Some More Fuzzy Thinking," maps the trajectory of qualitative comparative approaches in the wider methodological landscape in communication studies, identifies key theoretical reasonings underpinning qualitative comparative analysis, and elaborates specific ways in which qualitative comparative research designs could complement blind spots in quantitative methods, notably by capturing processes of change that are notoriously difficult to observe through quantitative comparative analyses. With concrete examples, Downey makes a compelling argument that fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) would be helpful in supplementing most different systems design (MSSD), most similar systems design (MSSD), and case study, advancing multilevel analysis, and enabling comparison across time. In doing so, comparative communication studies will be able to situate themselves in an interdisciplinary dialogue with other comparative social sciences.

The next article, "Comparative Studies of Internet Use: A Review of SSCI-Indexed Journal Articles, 1969–2019," reviews journal articles with a focus on comparative studies of Internet use, as indexed in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) in the field of communication studies between 1969 and 2019. Relying on a four-dimensional framework, based on Esser and Vliegenthart (2017), the review by Hui Zhao and Jun Liu recognizes comparative studies of Internet use as an increasingly rich and diverse area of comparative communication studies. Meanwhile, the review also proposes three main avenues for moving forward in comparative studies of Internet use, and, more broadly, to render comparative communication study a mature field: justifications regarding particular objects as equivalent for comparative purposes, deliberations on the comparability of cases, and an exploration of diverse theoretical perspectives and associated methodological complexities, a point that resonates well with Downey's feature.

The next three articles present empirical findings about digital media use across the globe and from various comparative and analytical angles. The article "Does the Internet Erode Trust in Media? A Comparative Study of 46 Countries" considers one of the key challenges that follow from the ubiquitous use of digital media: Trust, or lack thereof, is widely associated the Internet as well as with legacy media as part of their interaction and competition with the Internet. With data from 46 countries in the World Values Survey, Xinchuan Liu and Jia Lu demonstrate that despite people's reliance on legacy media as a source of authoritative information, the institutional role of legacy media is being undermined by Internet use at the level of individual use. In line with the call in Hallin's article for more contextualized and historical-institutional comparative studies, the findings in this empirical article underscore the relevance of linking the macrolevel analysis of media ecosystem with the microlevel analysis of human perceptions.

The article by Chris Chao Su, Jun Liu, and Baohua Zhou, titled "Two Levels of Digitalization and Internet Usage Across Europe, China, and the U.S.," continues the call for combining the micro (individual) and macro (infrastructural) levels of analysis to address ambiguities of the term "digitalization." With cross-national survey data from the United States, the United Kingdom, four European countries, and the Chinese mainland, it reveals the importance of embracing, but also differentiating, the multifaceted meanings of digitalization: on the one hand, the macrolevel digitization of the material infrastructure as sociotechnical phenomena *and*, on the other hand, the microlevel transformation and accumulation of media usage habits as people's daily lives are digitalized. Moving beyond the most commonly adopted, monocountry research

designs, the article combines most similar countries (five European nations) and most different regions of the world (China and the West) in a research design that models country-level variances through infrastructural indicators, contextual variances of individual media use, and the interactions of these two levels for different degrees of digitalization.

The (comparative) analysis of digital media cannot do without an investigation on mobile technologies (e.g., Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qiu, & Sey, 2007; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). In "The Everything-ness and More-ness of the Internet: How Digital Is Different From Other Media," Lee Rainie develops conceptualizations (Jensen, 2013) of the "everything-ness" and "more-ness" of mobile connectivity in 11 emerging yet less-studied economies, including Colombia, Mexico, Venezuela, India, Philippines, Vietnam, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, Kenya, and South Africa. A comparison of the U.S. with these emerging economies reveals many details unavailable from earlier studies—not only pronounced differences in the technological ecologies of these countries but also striking similarities (e.g., about the ease and speed of access to information and the resulting benefits of connecting with others). Resonating with Mancini and Hallin's opening feature articles, Rainie's conclusion draws attention to technology-induced changes in social and cultural contexts where further comparative communication studies should be able to deliver a better understanding of the ongoing digital transformation in societies around the world.

Though rich and diverse, the contributions to this Special Section go only some way in moving forward the discussion about comparative communication studies. Qualitative comparative studies, despite their complementary significance, are still limited in number, and the Special Section does not include empirical studies relying on a qualitative methodology. Several years ago, Hallin and Mancini (2017) reminded the field that comparative research is "heavily dominated by quantitative methods" (p. 165), suggesting a continued need for well-designed exploratory and other qualitative comparative communication studies, as elaborated in Downey's feature. Nevertheless, we believe that, collectively, the seven features and original research articles—through their arguments as well as their recognized limitations—shed new light on future directions for the comparative study not only of digital media, but also across the field of communication studies and in dialogue with other social sciences.

Toward Contextual and Context-Aware Comparative Communication Studies

Among several propositions emerging from the features and articles in the Special Section, the importance of contextual and context-aware approaches stands out. By way of conclusion, we offer some preliminary thoughts on "context" in the digital age as one guide for comparative communication studies.

Existing comparative communication studies commonly refer to context as a theoretically and methodologically central consideration. For Hallin and Mancini, "theorizing the role of context is precisely what comparative analysis is about" (Mancini & Hallin, 2012, p. 515). Similarly, Esser and Vliegenthart (2017) underline "the explanatory relevance of the contextual environment for communication outcomes and . . . how the systemic context shapes communication phenomena differently in different settings" (p. 3). Yet, paradoxically, context—one of the most widely used terms in social sciences—itself arguably suffers from ambiguity or vagueness. As Dervin (2003) noted, "There is no term that is more often used, less often defined, and when defined so variously as context" (p. 112). Is context "unlimited" (Kovala, 2014, p. 165),

given that the environments of communication encompass a vast array of different elements? If so, how could we operationalize the concept in comparative communication analysis beyond the (over)simplified, postmodernist answer, "it depends" (Tilly & Goodin, 2006)? If not, what should be considered the (elements of) contexts that allow us to compare and, in this specific sense, to raise contextual, comparative questions: When, where, in what settings, on which premises of comparison, with what understandings of the digitally mediated processes under investigation?

Among digital media, mobile media in particular have highlighted the importance of context as part of what has been referred to as contextual mobility (Kakihara & Sørensen, 2002). What is mobile in mobile communication is not so much the information, the user, or the technology, but the context in which all of these come together in communication. In mobile communication, entire configurations of social relations—present and absent—move about. A case in point is the use of cell or mobile telephones in organizing social protests: Text messages invite embodied individuals to take to the streets to communicate both among themselves and to the powers that be, while continuing the dialogue with absent friends via their similarly mobile media. Communication in and across contexts involves an ongoing negotiation and coordination of selves and places, maintaining and modifying social and cultural ties.

Adopting a contextual, comparative approach enables resesarch to avoid two common pitfalls when it comes to the development of digital media. First, a context-aware analysis avoids variants of technology-centrism or media-centrism that may lead into technological determinism. A recognition of the contextual conditions of communication avoids the proposition that digital technologies are what matters "in the final instance" (Jensen, 2010, p. 62). Second, comparative studies sensitize research to the complementarity of quantitative and qualitative approaches. One strength of qualitative methodologies for comparative communication studies is that they make manifest contextual nuances that may disappear in quantitative modelling or from explanations assuming abstract, general, universal laws of human behavior (Tilly & Goodin, 2006). To compare different contexts of communication, research is well advised to also compare different methodologies and forms of evidence.

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