

An Agenda for Comparative Social Media Studies: The Value of Understanding Practices From Cross-National, Cross-Media, and Cross-Platform Perspectives

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We argue the descriptive fit and heuristic power of social media scholarship is much increased when incorporating a comparative turn. To this end, we offer analytical categories for organizing research that has sought to (a) rely on multicountry data from nations worldwide; (b) place the use of social media in relation to other media; and (c) examine more than one platform at a time. Building on these three strands of comparative scholarship from communication and media studies, we propose future research trajectories in comparative social media studies highlighting cross-national, cross-media, and cross-platform dimensions of social media use. Specifically, we focus on two possible pathways that seem especially fruitful: histories and languages. We conclude by reflecting on the theory-building potential of exploring the intersections across the three types of comparative work.

Keywords: social media, comparative studies, theory building, cross-national, cross-media, cross-platform, history, language

There has been a remarkable growth in social media use in recent years, and also in scholarship about it (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011; Marwick & boyd, 2014). A subset of research has sought to (a) rely on multicountry data from nations worldwide; (b) place the use of social media in relation to other media; and (c) analyze more than one platform at a time. Such an approach is a key contribution to the field because it better represents how most people use social media. First, users resort to them not only in the Global North (where many social media studies are situated; Valenzuela, Halpern, Katz, & Miranda, 2019) but also globally. Second, they use platforms not in isolated ways (as approaches excluding other media signal; Nielsen & Schröder, 2014), but in relation to other media. Third, they often access not one platform at a time (as rather granular perspectives imply; Shane-Simpson,

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Manago, Gaggi, & Gillespie-Lynch, 2018), but several concurrently. What emerges from this scholarship is the role of comparisons in three dimensions: nations, media, and platforms.

This article claims the descriptive fit and heuristic power of social media research are much increased when incorporating a comparative turn. Following Bode and Vraga (2018), research focusing on one platform—and we might add, on one country—many times lacks recognition of the broader, and diverse, media system or environment. A comparative perspective fosters a denaturalization process whereby a case once thought to be unique is reconceptualized in light of other, similar or different, cases. In Hallin and Mancini's (2004) terms, "because it 'denaturalizes' a media system that is so familiar to us, comparison forces us to conceptualize more clearly what aspects of that system actually require explanation" (p. 2). In doing so, comparative research enhances conceptualizations, causal inference, and hypothesis testing.

To put forward our argument, we define "social media," and we then lay out a three-step strategy. First, we review comparative work in communication and media studies, and trace theories that have developed comparative lenses either across nations, media, or platforms. We then propose analytical categories for organizing and critically reviewing what has been learned from social media studies examining at least one of the comparisons identified above. Although these studies have provided the seeds of an alternative perspective, the majority has not integrated comparative work as part of a systematic comparative turn. Thus, our third step presents the building blocks of such turn by focusing on two especially fruitful pathways: histories and languages. We conclude by reflecting on the theory-building potential of exploring intersections and areas of overlap across the various modalities of comparative work.

Defining Social Media

Conceptualizations play an important role in comparative work (Büchi, 2016; Kohn, 1987; Livingstone, 2003). To ensure equivalence between units of analysis (Stegmueller, 2011), it is necessary for them to be comparable in the first place. The concept of "social media" has appeared as multifolded across areas of research and its consensus is only relative (McCay-Peet & Quan-Haase, 2017). To order our discussion, we propose a working definition of social media, as characterized by four constitutive dimensions: (a) digital technique, (b) user-generated symbolic forms, (c) networked publics, and (d) many-to-many communication.

First, "digital technique" signals that social media are constituted by technologies made by bits—in contrast to atoms. This dimension is informed by van Dijck and Poell's (2013) characterization of the "social media logic" (p. 2), by which platforms are fundamentally programmable and connective. Second, user-generated symbolic forms emphasize that users participate in creating and interacting with content (McCay-Peet & Quan-Haase, 2017). Third, and following boyd (2010), networked publics represent both the space and the "imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice" (p. 39). Fourth, social media are characterized by affording many-to-many communication, whereby messages can be broadcasted at the same time as discussed by many people concurrently (Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010). The proposed definition allows us to distinguish social media from other types of media. It includes platforms as disparate as Facebook, Tik Tok, or WhatsApp.

Existing Comparative Research

Comparative research aims to identify general patterns and qualify their validity through contextualization while avoiding normalization and universalization (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012). This approach has gained currency in communication scholarship since the 1990s. It began with a macro-level focus and eventually expanded to meso and micro levels of analysis (Esser, 2019). Hanitzsch and Esser (2012) recommended future researchers in the field to consider “the multilevel nature of comparative inquiry” (p. 510).

Macro-level perspectives have compared countries or units associated with geopolitical regions. Hallin and Mancini (2004) showed that a comparative perspective yielded correlations between media systems and political systems. As a disclaimer, by “cross-national” comparative perspectives we refer to research that has not only incorporated more than one country, but that has made comparisons between analyzed countries. Meso-level approaches have often concentrated on intermedia dynamics and can be better understood at the level of media organizations. Niche theory (Dimmick, Chen, & Li, 2004) explores how different media survive, develop, and compete in a changing environment. Micro-level accounts have generally analyzed interplatform patterns. Comparative studies grounded in the notion of convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006) have examined the recurrent interconnections between platforms and media and the new hybrids these create (Madianou & Miller, 2013).

A subset of social media scholarship has undertaken these comparisons. In doing so, it has followed the macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis typical within the communication field—mapping largely onto the cross-national, cross-media, or cross-platform comparative perspectives. These perspectives can potentially overlap when considering that the unit of analysis of one might be the context of another one (Livingstone, 2003); for analytical purposes we will critically examine them separately and then integrate key ideas in the concluding section. We selected studies following not a logic of representativeness, but rather one of saturation (Small, 2009). Reviewed studies were the result of a narrative literature review (Bourhis, 2007) whereby the selection of books, book chapters, journal articles, and conference proceedings sought to reflect diversity by casting as much breadth of comparative research as possible.

We propose to focus on four analytical categories to organize the literature. We call these domains of inquiry, dimensions of comparison, approaches and methods, and trends in findings. “Domains of inquiry” points to the main academic disciplines and fields from which research stems, and reflects communication studies’ diversity (Waisbord, 2019). We pay special attention to scholarly traditions illustrated by the sites of publication—such as journals and conferences—and keywords—like political communication, human-computer interaction, or media psychology. “Dimensions of comparison” seeks to clarify equivalence. This analytical category focuses on identifying the main constructs being compared—like political systems, social media channels of news organizations, or platforms’ affordances. “Approaches and methods” points to the types of theories and research designs used in the studies under analysis. Finally, “trends in findings” identifies the key results and commonalities across reviewed research.

Following, we provide a broad overview of these three comparative strands of research: cross-national, cross-media, and cross-platform comparative perspectives. We recognize that proceeding with a

bird's-eye view could prevent our capacity to capture fine nuances across the literature. Nonetheless, it will serve the analytical purpose of organizing the bulk of studies that have treated social media comparatively, and will allow us to draw on them to outline future research trajectories.

Cross-National Scholarship

Domains of Inquiry

Various domains of inquiry have looked at social media from a comparative cross-national stance, from journalism to marketing to health communication (de Lenne, Vandenbosch, Eggermont, Karsay, & Trekels, 2020; Gil de Zúñiga & Liu, 2017). Two areas of inquiry have prevailed: social interactions and political behavior. The first one has examined topics such as self-presentation, privacy, and motivations for use (Katz & Crocker, 2015; Kim et al., 2011). Jackson and Wang (2013) compared how students in the United States and China used social media, and found that Americans prioritized quantity over closeness of contacts in contrast with their Chinese counterparts, suggesting differences in users' approaches to sociability within social media. The second has tended to include themes like democratic engagement, information exposure, and misinformation (Nielsen & Schrøder, 2014). Hellmueller, Lischka, and Humprecht (2020) analyzed the comments section of six news organizations' Facebook pages in the United States and Germany, and identified that although heavy commenters in the former posted relatively more frequently, they exhibited a rather nondiscursive culture which contrasted with the latter's "participatory liberal discourse culture" (p. 8).

Dimensions of Comparison

While some studies juxtapose the treatment of a single issue in more than one country, others examine relationships across nations. The former comprises much of the reviewed research (Jackson & Wang, 2013; Lee, Lee, Choi, Kim, & Han, 2014). This scholarship has conceived of culture, broadly defined as a shared system of practices, beliefs, and norms, as a relatively fixed context influencing outcome variables such as time spent on social media or network size (Liang, Shen, & Fu, 2017). Trepte and associates (2017) contrasted privacy attitudes in China, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States, showing a significant intercultural difference in how gratifications in use and concerns about privacy were deemed relevant by users. The second kind of comparison has focused on patterns of influence across countries on a particular aspect of social media use (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2020). Qiu, Lin, and Leung (2013) examined how users of both Facebook and Renren switched their behaviors according to the online cultures emerging from each platform.

Approaches and Methods

The working definitions of culture in cross-national research have followed the trends present in the field of media studies more generally. The first type of scholarship has tended to use a definition of culture embedded in social psychology—understood as "what has worked in the past and has become incorporated in the cognitions of people who can communicate with each other" (Triandis & Trafimow, 2003, p. 368). These studies have frequently resorted to the seminal scholarship of E. T. Hall (1959) and G.

Hofstede (1998) to account for similarities and differences in individual and/or collective behaviors (Chu & Choi, 2010). In many of these studies there has been a tendency toward a “Western bias” (Stoycheff, Liu, Wibowo, & Nanni, 2017, p. 974), prioritizing the study of the United States (Valenzuela, Piña, & Ramírez, 2017).

The second kind of comparison has engaged a definition of culture with roots in sociology and anthropology—seen as “the categories and frameworks in thought and language through which different societies classif[y] out their conditions of existence” (S. Hall, 1980, p. 65). Miller and colleagues (2016) explored how meanings and practices are enacted through social media in everyday life across nine regions of the world. They found that in more conservative cultures, platforms like Facebook, considered “public-facing” (p. 7), tended to reproduce existing social norms, whereas platforms like WhatsApp, thought to be “private-facing” (p. 7), were emancipatory. Consistent with previous analyses (Rains & Brunner, 2015), quantitative methods like surveys have been dominant within behavioral studies. By contrast, ethnography (Mare, 2017) has been the main methodology in socio-cultural studies.

Trends in Findings

Three main findings cut across this scholarship. The first is that platform practices sometimes present major commonalities across different national contexts. Chu and Choi (2010) found no significant difference in Chinese and American respondents’ level of bridging social capital from social media use. The second insight problematizes the first by showing how the practices enacted vary across contexts. Kim and associates (2011) indicated that Korean and American students put different weights into the various motivations for use due to their respective national cultures—social support and entertainment goals, respectively. This, in turn, changed how they approached social media. The third main finding stems from conceiving of social media as cultures in themselves. Miller and colleagues (2016) considered platforms as places for sociality where symbolic content is produced, rather than as usable objects.

Cross-Media Scholarship

Domains of Inquiry

As expected from the historical link between political science and comparative scholarship in communication and media studies, most common domains of inquiry of cross-media research are situated within political communication and journalism studies. A special issue of *Political Communication* urged “toward doing the difficult work of studying politics across media” (Bode & Vraga, 2018, p. 2). Research in the former has examined issues such as political campaigns, public debates, and governmental communication (Skoric & Poor, 2013). Lin (2016) analyzed Taiwan’s 2012 presidential election and found that, from candidates’ perspectives, social media could operate as an intermediary of traditional media in strategic communication. Scholarship in journalism studies has addressed topics like editorial routines, reception practices, and intermedia agenda-setting (Harder, Sevenans, & Van Aelst, 2017; Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010). Von Nordheim, Boczek, Koppers, and Erdmann (2018) compared how a transnational issue was discussed across traditional and social media and observed that although both agendas were similar, sentiment on Twitter polarized more over time. Other common topics of cross-media studies have included

entertainment audiences and social media users (Epps & Dixon, 2017) and messages in crisis and science communication across traditional, social, and digital media (Shan et al., 2014).

Dimensions of Comparison

There are two trends in the dimensions most commonly compared. The first trend adopts a juxtaposition viewpoint that usually contrasts one or more traditional media with one or more social media on a particular area of interest (von Nordheim et al., 2018). Soroka, Daku, Hiaeshutter-Rice, Guggenheim, and Pasek (2018) compared the coverage tone of economic news from newspapers and Twitter and concluded that though newspapers presented a negativity bias, Twitter exhibited a positivity one. The second trend has implemented a relational strategy by focusing on linkages between traditional and social media, and highlighting either unidirectional or bidirectional patterns of influence. Some historical studies have treated traditional media as antecedents of social media (Rymarczuk, 2016). Dubrofsky (2011) found that practices of selfhood and surveillance on Facebook could be traced back to reality television. Other studies have adopted a contemporary cross-sectional stance (Kalsnes, Krumsvik, & Storsul, 2014; Stefanone, Lackaff, & Rosen, 2010). Valenzuela, Puente, and Flores (2017) examined news about Chile's 2010 earthquake across Twitter and broadcast news and determined that the latter influenced the former more than vice versa. Finally, a perspective on media repertoires (Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017) has helped understand how social media platforms take part in larger sets of media used by audiences. Swart, Peters, and Broersma (2017) analyzed the motivations behind different arrangements of news media repertoires in the Netherlands and identified combinations of platforms like Twitter and Facebook with legacy media such as television and newspapers.

Approaches and Methods

A central way of understanding ties across media has been the question about continuity or discontinuity. One stream of research has framed social media in a long line of prior technological developments and media logics (Chadwick, 2017; Hermida, 2014). The frame of continuity has been key to tracing the long history of platform affordances and practices (Humphreys, 2018). Hermida (2014) highlights the human motivation for sharing and learning information about one's surroundings that illuminates the roles of platforms. The opposite research stream has framed social media as an expression of a discontinuity from mass media, bringing considerable change to existing communication dynamics. This is either because platforms fill a niche that traditional media have been unable to occupy, or because social media strictly replace traditional media functions. Sayre, Bode, Shah, Wilcox, and Shah (2010) studied the coverage of Proposition 8 in California during 2008 and 2009 and concluded that YouTube brought attention to public issues that, according to users, lacked similar representation on mainstream media.

Quantitative treatments of data have dominated, with surveys and content analysis as the most typical options (Stefanone et al., 2010). Mixed-methods studies have been less frequent (Kalsnes et al., 2014), and qualitative studies even less so (Humphreys, 2018; Lin, 2016), as well as computational methods (Kwak et al., 2010). Regarding the provenance of the data, studies situated in countries of the Global North have prevailed.

Trends in Findings

Two main and contradictory patterns of results have emerged. The first has been the tendency of traditional media artifacts, practices, and institutions to remain relatively unchanged despite their encounters with social media (Rymarczuk, 2016). Abdenour (2017) showed that even while social media are increasingly used by reporters for newsgathering purposes, they do so by repeating traditional routines. The second has exhibited the opposite pattern by highlighting how social media have significantly affected the production, circulation, and consumption of traditional media (Freeman, Klapczynski, & Wood, 2012; Kalsnes et al., 2014). Belair-Gagnon (2015) examined how crisis reporting at the BBC changed after the incorporation of social media, pointing to the increasing relevance of “techies and ordinary citizens” in storytelling (p. 118).

Cross-Platform Scholarship

Domains of Inquiry

This scholarship has mostly concentrated on psychological, communication, and human-computer interaction issues through the exploration of topics like narcissism, privacy, and self-presentation (French & Bazarova, 2017; Papacharissi, 2009). Interested in how media affects eating disorders, Saunders and Eaton (2018) examined young female users of Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. They found that when it came to Instagram and Snapchat, there was a correlation between having a negative experience with these platforms and tending toward body surveillance and social comparison, whereas that was not the case for Facebook users—suggesting the latter is relatively less oriented to body appearances. Other common domains of inquiry have included journalism (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018), political communication (Bossetta, 2018), and social stratification (Blank & Lutz, 2017). Hargittai (2015) compared populations adopting platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn and found significant sociodemographic differences.

Dimensions of Comparison

We identify two main dimensions. The first has contrasted the impact of either an independent variable on two or more platforms, or the effect of two or more platforms on an outcome variable (Oz, Zheng, & Chen, 2018). Many of these studies have focused on the interaction of affordances with sociodemographic and psychological variables. Panek, Nardis, and Konrath (2013) examined whether narcissism predicted usage of Facebook versus Twitter. The second dimension has looked into relations across platforms (Karapanos, Teixeira, & Gouveia, 2016). Zhao, Lampe, and Ellison (2016) argued that “users experience the desire to both reinforce and dismantle boundaries between platforms” (p. 98).

Approaches and Methods

This scholarship has frequently been informed by behavioral frameworks—in particular, by uses and gratifications theory (Saunders & Eaton, 2018; Tandoc, Lou, & Min, 2018). Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) compared the uses and gratifications of MySpace and Facebook among college students and found that in some cases gender differences affected the number of contacts. Furthermore, quantitative

methodologies have been common—in particular, online surveys with college students (Shane-Simpson et al., 2018). There have also been instances of mixed-methods studies combining surveys with focus groups or interviews (Haimson & Tang, 2017). Sociocultural analyses have often relied on qualitative methods (Marwick & boyd, 2014). Van Dijck (2013) used discourse analysis to interrogate interfaces, identifying that Facebook and LinkedIn converged in presenting a uniformed self that conflated self-promotion and self-expression needs.

Trends in Findings

Three main trends have emerged. First, social media platforms have different affordances that can produce divergent effects (Papacharissi, 2009). French and Bazarova (2017) determined that expectations around responses and imagined audiences varied across social media platforms. Second, although some affordances are similar across platforms, meaning making and use practices contribute to producing divergence in their uptake. Karapanos and associates (2016) compared uses and gratifications across WhatsApp and Facebook. They found that whereas the search for relatedness defined how intensely WhatsApp was used, for Facebook the defining need being gratified was self-esteem. Third, some studies argue for the need to treat social media as belonging to a platform ecosystem or repertoire (Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017). Through a cross-national and cross-platform analysis, Madianou and Miller (2013) concluded that “users conceive of each medium in relation to an integrated structure of different media” (p. 174).

We have thus far reviewed and organized existing comparative scholarship on social media, distinguishing among cross-national, cross-media, or cross-platform dimensions. Building on this knowledge, we now lay out the building blocks of future trajectories of comparative research, by focusing on two pathways especially fruitful toward this end: histories and languages.

Two Pathways for Future Trajectories of Research

An aspect cutting across many of the research reviewed in the previous section is that comparisons are sometimes “used demonstratively in papers whose focus is elsewhere” (Bourdon, 2018, p. 90)—the rationale behind their choice being outweighed by that of research topics (Livingstone, 2003). That is, comparison often occurs almost as a by-product of the main research goal, perhaps even as a result of sample convenience, instead of being considered an epistemological tool to better grasp social media dynamics. In this section, we present steps toward turning comparative research into an epistemological, and not solely a methodological, approach. We do so by focusing on two potentially fruitful pathways: histories and languages. We call them pathways because they illuminate topics and approaches of research trajectories that can serve as broad guides to specific studies. They are naturally not the only pathways to be taken, and neither do they constitute a radical novelty in the field. However, focusing on them from a three-layered comparative approach can yield fruitful future research trajectories in social media studies.

Histories

History is chosen because it is a particularly generative space for comparative insights with explanation power. In recent years, many books have been devoted to exploring the historical development of

separate platforms (Burgess & Baym, 2020). Applying a comparative lens to the histories within social media can enhance research's capacity to conceptualize and assess causal inferences. So far, a common trait of the reviewed scholarship is the secondary role attributed to historical matters. Thus, a critical incorporation of histories as a path of inquiry could provide a valuable lens for comparative social media studies.

Domains of Inquiry

Various domains could be explored historically. To start with, social media should be seen as part of long and dynamic histories of media development. One possible line of inquiry could consider how trajectories of traditional media have contributed to shaping social media. As seen with relational accounts, traditional media formats like reality television have served as antecedents of interfaces and practices developed within social media (Dubrofsky, 2011). Scholars could study how prior artifacts like fashion magazines, hand-colored daguerreotypes, and television programs devoted to celebrity news have informed Instagram's influencer culture, and how cultures of self-branding, in turn, extend to territories like intellectual labor (Duffy & Pooley, 2019).

Dimensions of Comparison

Historical matters could be compared across nations, media, and platforms. Social media based in the United States are deeply intertwined with the Silicon Valley region and its libertarian value system, entrepreneurship ethos, and close connection to elite university research (Turner, 2006). Their history is treated as default in most scholarship, and their cultural configurations are taken for granted. Thus, it would be fruitful to problematize, from a postcolonial perspective, attempts to conceive of Silicon Valley as a sociotechnical benchmark for other regions—such as characterizing Zhongguancun as the “the Silicon Valley of China,” or Bangalore as “the Silicon Valley of India.” What continuities and discontinuities do these hubs foster in relation to the American imaginary? How does their geopolitical distribution translate into the workings of platforms for users in different parts of the world? This would allow future research to understand how platforms' histories shape communication and cultural norms, which may shape social media use in return.

Approaches and Methods

A historical lens could also foster relatively unexplored approaches and methods in the field. The contributions in Sloan and Quan-Haase (2017) present a series of methods for researching social media, among which techniques for historical data collection within platforms are included. These can be key to understanding the development of social media over time (Helmond, Nieborg, & van der Vlist, 2019). As an example, in 2016, Instagram altered its platform to incentivize the contribution of ephemeral content under the label of “stories.” It was presumably the result of imitation of Snapchat's functionality, in light of its perceived appeal especially among young users. Thus, to understand the development of a platform—Instagram—it is crucial to examine its historical relationship to another one—Snapchat. Also, archival research in corporate and public institutions could trace patterns of innovation over time in the transformation of different platforms in various parts of the world. Social media and, more broadly, media technologies change at a rapid pace (Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010). Some can reach global levels of popularity and ultimately disappear from the digital environment (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, forthcoming).

How to ensure that studies on social media do not become obsolete in their findings and implications when focusing on platforms that will not necessarily remain in use after some years (Larsson, 2015)? Finally, mainstream platforms like TikTok are adopted by billions of users worldwide, whereas niche platforms express clearly delimited ideological perspectives. How do they build such distinct audiences over time? The pathway of histories calls forth trajectories of research populated by longitudinal studies in social media comparative research.

Trends in Findings

Findings of existing scholarship in cross-national, cross-media, and cross-platform perspectives could be potentially advanced with the incorporation of histories as a pathway. Within cross-national research, Kim and colleagues (2011) found significant differences in the weights attributed to the different motivations for using social media across between South Korea and the United States. These were ultimately associated with collectivistic versus individualistic cultures. But looking into the longer histories of media production and consumption in both countries might reveal that perhaps some larger trends in the political economy of each country have helped shaped social media consumption. This would, in turn, relativize the place of culture, in collectivist versus individualistic terms, as an explanatory variable. Within cross-media research, Sayre and associates (2010) analyzed how a piece of legislation was covered throughout different traditional and social media, and noted how users found on YouTube a space for political expression and participation. Inserting such claim within a historical pathway could help illuminate how those potential opportunities to drive public discourse from mainstream to niche outlets have transformed over time. Finally, within cross-platform research, in their examination of how users create boundaries in sharing practices across social media, Zhao and colleagues (2016) engage the conceptual tensions of "Separation-Permeation and Stability-Change" to make sense of users' experiences (p. 97). It would be fruitful to trace the extent to which those tensions compare with prior arrangements and distinctions between public and private life in the Midwest of the United States.

Languages

Little existing social media scholarship has explored the issue of languages. We propose language as a pathway because it is molded, at the same time, by local and global dynamics, for which different angles of comparison might be particularly germane. Here, we consider a broad definition of language as a site for the production of conventional meaning that can be expressed through visual and written signs. Although English has been framed as the lingua franca of the Internet (Poppi, 2012), it is not necessarily the default language or the benchmark for how people communicate across platforms (Martínez-Arbelaiz, Areizaga, & Camps, 2017). At large, issues concerned with visual language (Russmann & Svensson, 2017), reflected for instance on how images and videos in one platform might relate to their counterparts in other platforms or media, have remained relatively less explored in social media studies. Comparative work might help counter this tendency—if included, language could gain capacity to be seen as a generative site of variation.

Domains of Inquiry

Several domains could be explored. One of them could focus on decoupling and recoupling processes whereby content from traditional outlets is consumed in one language and then commented in a different one on social media. This could be tied to social media practices in situations of diaspora and resettlements (Madianou, 2019). How do users manage switching languages when communicating through platforms with those in their homeland, their diasporic communities, and in a new environment? Another potential topic could be how visual content transforms into textual content, and vice versa, across platforms. Consider, for instance, the use of a YouTube video turned into a meme and circulated as a text on Twitter. Are these units of content received differently in their travel from visual to and from textual modalities across social and traditional media?

Dimensions of Comparison

There is vast linguistic diversity in platform access and use. Attending to this diversity could help counter the portrayal of Global North countries—and their cultural formations—as benchmarks against which comparisons should be assessed. Whereas Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat were developed in English-speaking countries, they also offer translations into other languages and automatic translation of some content. Why do translation capabilities vary by platform? How does this affect users' experience? This opens relevant questions concerning why and how different platforms remain multi- or single language, and how this shapes access and use.

Approaches and Methods

Provided that they are not reified (boyd & Crawford, 2012), computational techniques can provide a useful set of tools to examine the role of language across platforms and cultures—with the advantage that they can probe big data. As an example, machine learning could assist in exploring the use of interactive chatbots across traditional and social media channels. From a sociocultural approach, future research could explore how users belonging to subnational groups where a vernacular is spoken, like Guaraní among Paraguayan migrants settled in Argentina (Wagner & Fernández-Ardèvol, 2019), engage in coupling and decoupling dynamics of language use. What do the practices of those who mix vernacular and national languages on social media say about dynamics of identity and integration?

Trends in Findings

Findings of existing scholarship in cross-national, cross-media, and cross-platform perspectives could be potentially advanced with the incorporation of languages as a pathway. Within cross-national research, commenting on the results of their study on how users in Singapore adapt differently to the online cultures of Facebook and Renren, Qiu and colleagues (2013) point to the relevance of language in platforms' online cultures. They hypothesize that perhaps the adaptation to each online culture can be partially explained by the fact that Facebook is a platform used in English whereas Renren is used in Chinese—with each language triggering either “Western” or “Chinese” cultural systems (p. 117). Although language is not a central aspect of these authors' analysis, pursuing an in-depth exploration of language as used across

nations, and enacted differently on social media, could increase explanatory power for their argument. Within cross-media research, von Nordheim and associates (2018) compared how the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership was debated across traditional and social media. They note that only some kinds of "activism-related hashtags or information streams could overcome language barriers on Twitter" (p. 552). As suggested by Bastos, Puschmann, and Travitzki (2013), there could be an important correlation between a narrow political participation and potential language barriers in social media. Finally, within cross-platform research, in their examination of the relation among eating disorders across Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat, Saunders and Eaton (2018) note that prior literature indicates an association between specific uses of language on Facebook and conveying varying levels of body dissatisfaction. Although this linguistic aspect is not further incorporated, a more granular observation of the uses of written and visual language across platforms could increase the explanatory power of their model.

Concluding Remarks

In this article, we identified three strands of comparative research in communication and media studies, reviewed how these perspectives have mapped onto social media scholarship, and proposed the development of future trajectories of research for comparative social media studies. For analytical and expository purposes, we have addressed cross-national, cross-media, and cross-platform matters separately. However, at least two reasons urge us to consider their interactions. First, certain questions might be better answered at the intersection of more than one type of comparison. Second, in everyday life most probably some dynamics at work in one form of comparison affect one or more of the others. For instance, the ties between reality television and the display of the self on social media manifest differently across platforms and nations. This has potentially important heuristic implications, as accounts of cross-media processes might be affected by cross-national and/or cross-platform dynamics as well.

In a schematic fashion, Zone A of Figure 1 reflects the intersection between cross-media and cross-national matters. Efforts at this intersection could yield studies probing how Twitter users interact with the audiences of reality TV shows in two countries with divergent histories of television programming, or how newspapers from separatist regions balance the tension between vernacular and national languages on their Facebook accounts. Zone B maps the overlap between cross-media and cross-platform research. Such intersection could be fruitfully explored in projects comparing how radio and newspapers journalists use WhatsApp and Instagram differently as sources of information, or how Snapchat and Instagram designers produce filters based on news from television and newspapers, and how users subsequently appropriate these features.

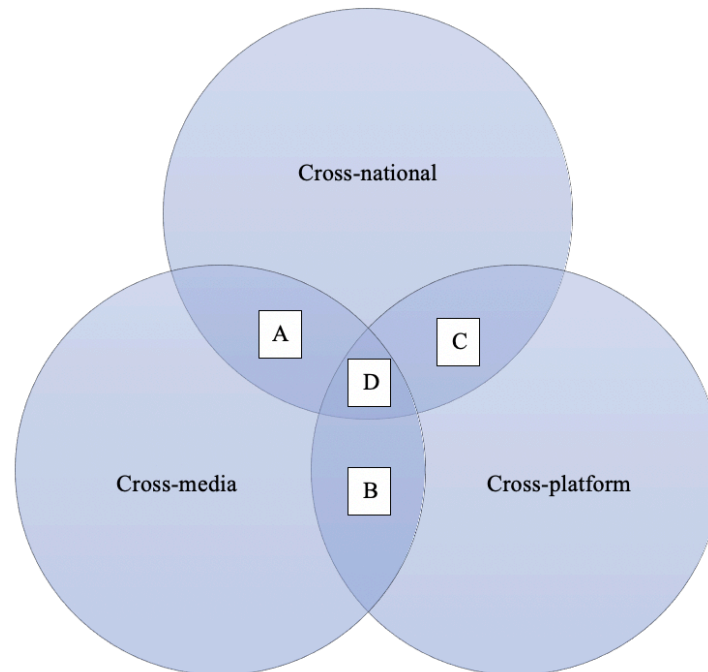


Figure 1. Studies emerging at the overlap of cross-media, cross-national, and cross-platform perspectives.

Zone C indicates a potential overlap between cross-national and cross-platform accounts. This could be relevant to examine processes of family communication among concurrent WhatsApp and WeChat users in communities located in multiple countries, or the use of Facebook and Snapchat among bilingual students pursuing a degree abroad. Finally, Zone D shows how studies could even combine the three types of comparisons, guided by the pathways of histories and languages. Although the combination of all layers might present complications at epistemological and methodological levels, we nonetheless provide examples to show their heuristic potential. As an illustration, this combination could lead to inquire how different traditional media outlets talk about Facebook, VK, and Sina Weibo when referring to discussions about media and democracy across geographic regions. Scholars might ask how multilingualism in global media events leads to different production strategies across traditional and social media. It might also inquire into the extent to which measurement practices, institutions, and technologies central to the development of traditional media, like radio and later television—such as time diaries and rating systems—have contributed to shaping both the interface and algorithmic design of platforms across cultures.

The vast array of research opportunities emerging from the combination of cross-national, cross-media, and cross-platform scholarship points to the intellectual potential of comparative social media studies. It signals its possibility for strengthening conceptualizations and enhancing causal inference across social media use's complexity. This is not linearly done. The making of comparative research presents theoretical,

epistemological, and practical challenges (Hanitzsch & Esser, 2012), potentially increased as layers of analysis are added. Following Bode and Vraga (2018), difficulties include accessing social media data, divergent privacy policies across platforms, the degree of dissimilarity between social media, and financial barriers. This article moved away from the tendency toward comparing as a by-product research goal, and proposed instead a step toward conducting comparative research by building on insights from communication and media scholarship, and research that has undertaken comparisons in social media studies.

Finally, considering histories and languages brings at least two timely theoretical implications for communication and media studies. First, in a moment when dystopic discourses about social media abound, producing comparative research with a historical lens allows to counter the "Sisyphian cycle of technology panics" (Orben, 2020, p. 1), by which a focus on differences between new and old technologies outweighs the recognition of their many commonalities. Second, a perspective on languages constitutes a step forward amidst recent calls to contextualize research (Rojas & Valenzuela, 2019) as well as to amplify the number of contexts where research is conducted in the first place. As Suzina (2020) claims when referring to the predominance of English-speaking cases, "we will know everything about the use of Twitter in the UK or the USA but will ignore even more how these processes occur in Poland, Bolivia or Senegal" (p. 4). Because social media are complex and multifaceted objects calling for descriptions and explanations at the integration of various levels of analyses, we suggest that a comparative social media studies perspective could enhance the descriptive fit and heuristic power of the scholarship on the development and uptake of platforms. We hope this article offers a generative step in this direction.

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