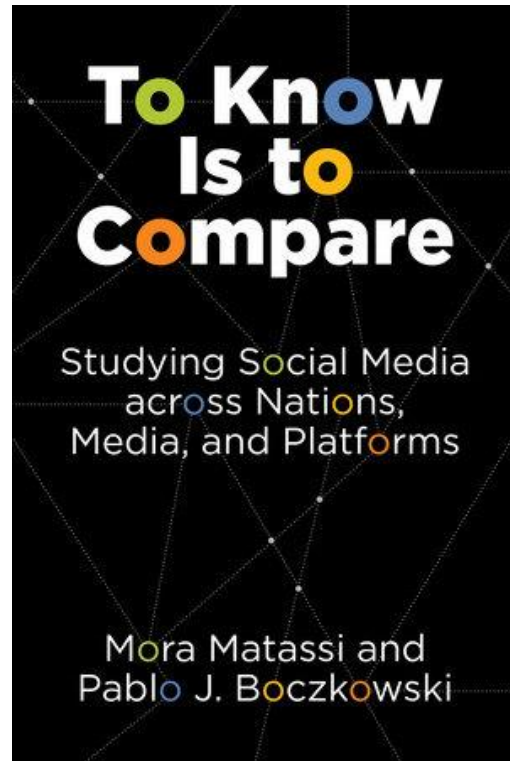


Mora Matassi and Pablo J. Boczkowski, **To Know Is to Compare: Studying Social Media Across Nations, Media, and Platforms**, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2023, 224 pp., \$40.00 (paperback).

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Most of what we think we know about social media rests on a surprisingly thin empirical base: one platform, one country, one moment in time. The field has rapidly expanded but has become narrow and parochial, distorting its claims, a concern many researchers privately acknowledge but seldom confront. I agree with Stallkamp and Schotter (2021) who highlight the fact that studies typically examine a single platform in a single country, with little attention to the broader media environment in which platforms operate. However, Mora Matassi and Pablo J. Boczkowski's ***To Know Is to Compare: Studying Social Media Across Nations, Media, and Platforms*** confronts that issue and proposes a framework to address it. Their argument, stated plainly in the title, is that knowledge is comparative by nature. Whatever we know about social media, we know through contrast. The book develops this epistemological claim across three comparative dimensions: nations and regions, media, and platforms and extends it through two analytical pathways: histories and languages. I find the core argument persuasive and the book genuinely insightful, though not without considerable limitations that deserve discussion.



The book is organized into two parts. Part I, Foundations, contains three chapters, each dedicated to one comparative dimension. Part II, Pathways, adds the historical and linguistic dimensions that cut across all three. Each chapter surveys a selection of existing studies to show what comparative work already yields and then maps out directions for future research. Boczkowski is among the most productive scholars working on digital media today, and Matassi, his doctoral advisee at Northwestern, brings a fresh perspective that is visible especially in the book's engagement with Latin American cases. Their collaboration produces a coherent and well-argued framework, though the project's ambition occasionally exceeds its execution.

What I find most valuable in Part I is chapter 2, "Cross-National and Regional Comparisons." Matassi and Boczkowski open it with a comparison that does real analytical work. The LASTESIS feminist performance originating in Valparaíso in 2019 spread to at least 52 countries within months (p. 20), while the social media response to the murder of Marielle Franco in Rio de Janeiro circulated primarily within Brazil and Latin America, even as the response to George Floyd's killing traveled globally. Establishing these cases side by side forces a question that no single-country study can even pose the question: Why do some

mobilizations cross borders and others do not? The authors locate part of the answer in prior asymmetries between the Global South and North that shape whose deaths circulate globally and whose remain regional (p. 23). The answer is not new, but the comparative framing makes it impossible to sidestep. The book establishes convincingly that the absence of comparison is not a neutral methodological choice; it produces a distorted picture.

Chapter 3, "Cross-Media Comparisons," makes a case that I broadly agree with. Examining platforms in isolation from the surrounding media landscape misrepresents both their history and their present. The argument about remediation, drawn from Bolter and Grusin (2000), is known, but Matassi and Boczkowski apply it with precision. Reality television shaped the confessional aesthetics of early Facebook; the conventions of print and broadcast journalism shaped (Twitter) X's preference for immediacy and strong opinion; and the carnivalesque traditions of variety entertainment have obvious resonance in TikTok (pp. 100–101). These connections matter not as curiosity but because they constrain what platforms can be and how users relate to them. The authors are right that the field has systematically underweighted these continuities, partly because the dominant narrative of digital disruption makes discontinuity seem more interesting, a tendency also noted, from a different angle, by Lock et al. (2025).

Chapter 4, "Cross-Platform Comparisons," is where I expect the book to have the most direct impact on research design. The basic point, supported by several studies the authors surveyed, is that platforms derive meaning relationally. What a user does on Instagram is shaped by what Instagram means relative to WhatsApp, TikTok, and Facebook. The authors note that the typical user actively engages with an average of 7.5 different social media platforms each month (p. 4), yet most scholarship has studied platforms one at a time. Studying anyone in isolation removes the relational context that gives it meaning. This argument also leads to the book's most useful methodological claim: Cross-platform comparisons generate more variance in findings, which disrupts the tendency toward technologically determinist explanations. If platform effects look different depending on which platforms are included in the study, then attributing strong causal power to algorithmic design becomes harder to defend. That is a point worth pressing.

Part II is less immediately actionable than Part I, though not without value and impact. Chapter 5, "Histories," challenges what the authors identify as present-day bias in social media research, a tendency to frame inquiry within what Hartley (2018) calls an "endless present tense" (p. 109), as though platforms emerged without history and their current form were the only possible outcome. The discussion of dead and dying platforms is the sharpest part of this chapter. Fotolog, a platform that dominated social media in Argentina and Uruguay in the mid-2000s before disappearing almost without scholarly trace, is set against MySpace, which attracted sustained academic attention despite a broadly similar arc of rise and decline (p. 107). The difference is geography, not significance. The field studies what is visible from its dominant institutional location, the English-speaking Global North, and treats that as representative. Recovering the histories of platforms that did not survive, or that flourished outside North America and Western Europe, would not just fill a gap; it would change the questions.

Chapter 6, "Languages," challenges a bias that is arguably even more fundamental. The assumption that English is the default language of social media and scholarship shapes not just coverage but

epistemology: What counts as data, which signifying practices require explanation, and which are simply taken for granted. This is a genuine problem, and I agree with Anderau et al. (2024) that technology is not inherently determining that, through collective effort, platforms can be reshaped into better epistemic environments. The discussion of Bad Bunny's deliberate refusal to sing or post in English, which Matassi and Boczkowski read as postcolonial resistance against the expectations of the global music industry and platform companies (pp. 114–115), is the most analytically precise vignette in the book. The Pope Francis material, centered on the semiotic ambiguity of the papal like on Instagram across linguistic and cultural communities (pp. 116–117), raises productive questions about whether computational approaches to platform language aggregating words and frequencies are measuring what they claim to measure.

My main concern is structural. Matassi and Boczkowski are proposing a framework, not reporting the results of research conducted within it. They are transparent about this, and the decision is valid. But the organizational logic of both parts, each chapter surveying antecedents and projecting future directions, becomes repetitive by the middle of chapter 6. More seriously, the concluding chapter's invocation of Galison (1997) trading zones as a model for coordination across what Waisbord (2019) has characterized as the field's growing "intellectual fragmentation" (p. 148) is underdeveloped. Galison's account was not optimistic about the ease of coordination; it emphasized that researchers from different traditions can work side by side without ever resolving the incommensurability between their conceptual vocabularies. Matassi and Boczkowski treat the analogy as a solution when it is, if read carefully, a precise description of the difficulty. How comparative social media research integrating cross-national, cross-media, and cross-platform dimensions gets done, given real differences in training, methods, and theoretical commitments across subfields, is the question the book raises most clearly and answers least satisfactorily.

The claim that *to know is to compare* is not a methodological prescription; it is an invitation to reconsider what we take to be the object of study. Platforms do not exist as isolated, nationally bounded, historically thin, or exclusively English-language phenomena. Scholarship that has treated them as such has not been inaccurate, exactly; it has been partial in ways that now require correction. Matassi and Boczkowski make that case convincingly. The research program they envision remains to be developed.

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