

## A Weberian Analysis of Global Digital Divides

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Weber hardly wrote about media, but his comparative historical analysis of the social implications of technology can be used to understand how the relation between elites and people is shaped by media. To do this, we can examine four countries and their uses of traditional media and new or digital media—the United States, Sweden, India, and China—providing a wide range for comparison. A further distinction can be made, along Weberian lines, between the political and cultural uses of media—the first focusing on the relation between political and media elites and people and the second on how elites are drivers of a popular consumer culture. The essay examines both traditional media and new digital media, with the central question of whether—and, if so, how—new media have reshaped the relation between elites and people, perhaps in different ways across the four countries. The essay concludes by arguing that consumer culture is rather homogeneous across the four countries, even if this form of culture also contains a variety of plural contents. In terms of politics, on the other hand, elites continue to control content, even if this control has been somewhat reshaped by digital media, though asymmetries between elites and people in this respect are quite different in the four countries examined here.

*Keywords: Weber, media, new media, divides, globalization, United States, Sweden, India, China*

### Introduction

What is a Weberian approach to digital divides? Debates about the digital divide have so far focused on access and skills. Though recently access and skills have been widened to encompass broader issues (Hargittai & Hsieh, 2013; van Dijk, 2013), Weber has not played a role in these debates. What can Weber tell us, given that he hardly wrote about news media, much less digital technologies? In this article, I argue that a Weberian approach can ask about the role of technology in society from a comparative-historical perspective and focus on not only on the means and ability to use the Internet but its reach and who dominates its content. This entails asking broad questions about whether this reach and this control of content varies across the globe, and what the main divides are in this respect.

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Weber's sociology was devoted in large part to dominant beliefs, how these beliefs are carried by elites and legitimate their status, and their implications for society at large. Dominant beliefs in contemporary society, much more so than in Weber's day, are mediated by information and communication technologies, and recently increasingly by digital technologies. Hence, a Weberian approach can focus on this mediation and its social implications. When Weber analyzed dominant beliefs (or worldviews), he distinguished between how these operate in different "spheres of life" or "life orders" (1948, pp. 323–359). Weberian macrosociologists (Collins, 1986; Mann, 2013; Schroeder, 2013) have followed Weber in separating these spheres or sources of power or orders. Here we can concentrate on the role of media in the two most important life orders in contemporary societies: politics and culture (the third, the economic order of markets and production, is omitted here for reasons of space, but we will return to this limitation).

The cultural order can, in a Weberian vein, be seen as dominated by consumerism and, with traditional media and digital media, mainly convey entertainment. The mechanisms of consumer culture, whereby popular culture and elites are engaged in status differentiation, are well known (McCracken, 1988), though in the realm of media, a plurality of cultures also exists within this dominant culture. Within the political order, on the other hand, there is a dominant agenda in the media, conventionally labeled the "public sphere," that is gatekept by professional media elites and shaped by political elites (and economic elites inasmuch as they influence politics), with "people" providing input into this agenda in democratic or pluralist societies. Again, this is a Weberian approach insofar as Weber's political sociology, though lacking a notion of democratic legitimacy, nevertheless regarded the legitimacy of the ruling political elites of modern regimes as resting on popular support (Breuer, 1998).

A Weberian approach can thus seek to establish how beliefs in these two orders are "carried" by media systems, and how asymmetries between elites and people shape social life. Weber's sociology is comparative-historical, and, if we think about media with the same global scope as Weber's sociology, we can examine some of the (in some respects) most similar and (in others) most different cases that shed light on a range that provides us with a global picture. This can be done by examining four countries. Sweden and the United States represent the extremes among advanced societies in terms of politics and culture, but they share similar levels of technology adoption. In two quite different cases from among developing societies, China and India, technology adoption has been rapid but uneven. Such a large-scale comparative sweep will be Weberian in spirit, even if it deals with a topic—the sociology of the media—which Weber himself dealt with only fleetingly (1998). When carrying out this analysis, we therefore need to add to Weber's ideas an appreciation that media institutions have become autonomous institutions, playing a watchdog role and serving as a conduit for people's inputs—an idea that is well established in the comparative media systems approach (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), which will be built upon here.

This article will proceed in four steps: First, it sketches a Weberian analysis of media in contemporary society, focusing in particular on how the media landscape has been transformed by digital technologies. Next, using this framework, it compares the traditional media systems in four countries, in two steps, taking political communication and consumer culture in turn. Third, the article briefly examines new digital media in each country, finding both similarities and differences in how the media reshape political possibilities and patterns of media consumption. Finally, the article contrasts Weber's analysis

with other analyses of media and, again, theories of digital media in particular. It is argued that a Weberian approach is unlike neo-Marxist theories, whereby media serve economic interests; unlike constructivist theories, where cultural context disallows generalization across societies; and also unlike liberal or emancipatory theories, which champion the pluralist possibilities of digital media and their contribution to opening the public sphere.

Instead, a Weberian analysis regards politics and culture as operating separately from economic forces (again, Collins, 1986, provides a major example), engages in far-reaching comparisons, and enables us to notice the marginal extensions in how media systems are reshaped by digital media but also how they are constrained by a limited attention space and limited possibilities for opening consumerism to new strata. Weber would have emphasized the asymmetric relations of a media apparatus in which content is shaped by elite gatekeepers and how these elites also dominate new digital media, with openings restricted to where traditional media can be circumvented. Thus, a Weberian digital divide is defined as the differences in how various strata—here, various elites compared to people—use information and communication technologies in their everyday lives, enhancing their capabilities. Needless to say, a short essay can provide only a sketch of these Weberian ideas about digital divides and also point to some of the shortcomings of these ideas, to which I will turn in the conclusion.

### **A Weberian Comparative-Historical Analysis of Media Systems**

A Weberian analysis of media would comprise the following elements: The media would be conceptualized as “large technological systems” (Hughes, 1987), with all media part of a single whole. This is the side of technology whereby an expanding infrastructure plays an ever greater role in everyday life—even as this infrastructure also becomes invisible such that it is no longer noticed. On the social side, this technological system is a “media system,” which Hallin and Mancini (2004) have described in terms of three different types, shaped by their politics: The U.S. case falls into what Hallin and Mancini call the “liberal model,” Sweden into the “democratic corporatist model” (the third type, found in Southern Europe, is outside our scope here). Other non-Western variants have been analyzed along similar lines using their approach (Hallin & Mancini, 2012; for China, see Zhao, 2012; for India, Chakravarty, 2004). In Weberian terms, these media systems everywhere have become an ever more autonomous apparatus that mediates between elites and the mass of the population.

A final feature of media systems is that their content is limited. There is a limited attention space, since, if all media are seen in systemic terms (that is, without separating television and newspapers, for example, or between news and entertainment), then they are constrained by how much information audiences are able to consume (Webster, 2014, esp. p. 5). Hence, the role of gatekeepers, which has been applied to traditional media but is now increasingly networked as the notion of gatekeepers has been applied to the Internet (Barzilai-Nahon, 2012). This constraint is a given in modern societies: As Luhmann (2000) points out, “whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media” (p. 1). Yet even at their widest extent, the media provide only a limited window upon the social world; hence, gatekeeping or, in politics, agenda setting (McCombs, 2014). However, one feature of media that Luhmann did not anticipate is that, not only are digital media mass media, but users can select content, unlike with broadcast or other mass media (and they have more

choices than with print newspapers). Yet this selection is also from a limited menu, which is particularly important for political information: Carey (1989) states "reality is . . . a scarce resource" (p. 87), and Gans (2004) has labeled this constraint the "national newshole" (p. 319). Along these lines, a Weberian approach can concentrate on how dominant worldviews are produced by contending forces—in this case, the forces that exercise control over the content of media systems.

The idea that elites dominate political communication is in keeping with Weber's ideas, with one exception: Weber thought of democratic inputs by people into the political process in terms of a "plebiscitary democracy" (Breuer, 1998). People would give assent to a political leader in elections, and subsequently the worldview of a charismatic ruler, perhaps embodied in a party, would have exclusive legitimate force. This view, based on Weber's limited concept of democracy, must be modified to allow for inputs from people, within a contested space of democratic rule, transmitted to a large extent via media. Thus, although elites dominate media, they are also constrained by forces from below in democracies.

Similarly for the cultural sphere: Nowadays, culture is dominated by consumerism, and, in terms of media, primarily by entertainment. This view is nevertheless compatible with the idea that culture is plural, including a variety of popular cultures (Gans, 1974), as long as it is recognized that a dominant consumer culture can contain within itself a plurality of popular cultures (or "taste cultures," in Gans' terminology). Weber downplayed the role of popular culture; he is a theorist of the disenchantment of the world or of the rationalization of culture. But again, his views can be extended by recognizing that a consumer culture, even if it is propelled by elites, is also "enchanted" in the sense of providing a wealth of diverse content, even if the status of this content is also stratified.

Why, if there is no single dominant ideology, should we maintain a Weberian focus on the role of elites in media systems, in view of the fact that the political agenda and space for consumer culture are shaped by an existing congealed media system, new technologies, and popular forces? The reason is twofold: First, without a structural analysis of these several factors and of which groups dominate their shaping, the analysis becomes an agglomeration of meso-level or microanalyses of different contexts without a macro frame; second, it is unrealistic to posit that elites do not perpetuate cultural status distinctions or that they do not contribute the vast bulk of political input into media systems. As Schudson (2011), among others, has pointed out, the vast bulk of sources of news are political officials. Put differently, political elites dominate the attention space, and this has continued to be the case with new media, even if new media also reshape this system at the margins. This is why media are not just transmission belts, but a Weberian analysis must also show how the media's attention space, or visibility (Thompson, 1995), is contested.

Weber's sociology thus centers on dominant worldviews without reducing these to the economic logic of capitalism or, given the global scope here, to U.S. or Western imperialism (Tomlinson, 1999, 79–97). Dominant worldviews are carried by elites, and nowadays by media systems that were barely on the horizon in Weber's day, and they need to be added to his analysis of culture and politics. These media systems sustain a popular consumer culture and, in relation to politics, shape media agendas. New digital technologies add to this (as has often been pointed out) by providing a means of reaching publics that potentially fall outside of elite control. Yet these digital extensions of media continue to be dominated by

elites (Hindman, 2008; see also Schlozman, Verba, & Brady 2010). Also overlooked is the fact that the overall attention space is dominated by existing media, and there is limited scope for new technologies to reshape it. The public sphere of media is therefore not, *pace* Habermas (1982), a sphere of open-ended deliberation about the direction of society; rather, it conforms more to Luhmann's (2000) idea of a mechanism for ongoing societal input. Similarly, new media do not *per se*, *contra* Benkler (2007), enlarge the space for creating a more a pluralist society; instead, they primarily provide more scope for leisure within a consumer culture.

Against this background, we can turn first to politics. There are no single dominant political ideologies in Weber's sociology; only the various ideologies carried by political and other politically relevant elites. These ideologies have become ever more mediated, though an age of mass media propaganda with its heyday in the middle of the 20th century (Ward, 1989) has given way, in democracies, to a "marketplace of ideas" (Åsard & Bennett, 1997) promoted by political parties and leaders, which is increasingly professionally managed. There are national (and, to some extent, transnational; the two are not zero-sum) marketplaces of political ideas in the field of competition between political and other elites and people, with an autonomous media system interpolating between them.

The role of the media system in the political sphere can thus be seen mainly, though not exclusively, as a transmission belt between elites and people. It also can be seen to play an indirect role: Political elites (and economic elites, insofar as they exercise political power) orient themselves toward "governing with the news" (Cook, 2005), increasingly supported by media professionals. News media, however, are also increasingly autonomous and professionalized and provide a means for inputs from people, thus representing input from society at large. In this way, the media system partly acts as a counterweight to politically powerful elites, which is why Hallin and Mancini (2004) correctly draw our attention to the professionalization and at least partial autonomy of media from the state and from market pressures—or differentiation—in various media systems. This three-way process (between political and other elites, media professionals, and people) of mediation has become highly routinized.

What digital media add to traditional media is a mode of input that allows for selection of content and of more diverse sources by audiences, and also for people to contribute content ("self-selected" and "self-generated" content, to use Castells' terminology [2009, p. 70]), which on occasion circumvents gatekeepers. As several studies have demonstrated, however, only a small and mainly elite part of the population contributes political online content that has large audiences (we shall see how this varies), and moreover this content must compete for attention within a limited attention space dominated by a few outlets. New digital media are thus also becoming part of a routinized media system.

In the political sphere, the autonomy of the media system provides a vehicle for the input of popular opinion, over and above specific issue-based politics, but these inputs from people have arguably waned (compared with the period up to the mid-1970s) in recent decades in Western democracies (Mann, 2013, esp. pp. 412–415). This lends added importance to the question of whether digital media are able to bypass the traditional gatekeeping of mass media, even though this added input must share the attention space of and compete with traditional media. The examination here of how digital media add to

and extend traditional media in four countries therefore pays particular attention to who uses these digital media and whether they extend the scope of traditional media by competing with or adding to them.

Consumer culture is different. A Weberian, or Bourdieusian, view might be that there are bounded status groups that distinguish themselves (among other things) by reference to their media consumption. However, although distinct media consumption patterns exist (otherwise, there would be little use for marketing firms that target advertising at different groups), the sociological relevance of these distinctions is mainly as a motor of consumption. Further, a Weberian approach to consumer culture is not that lower groups emulate or try to catch up with elite groups, but rather that there is a constant push by higher-status groups to consume more or differently to maintain their distinction (McCracken, 1988).

Here, too, new gatekeepers have emerged, such as search engines or websites that seek to attract the largest audience share and dominate the attention space. Digital media have extended the offerings of media content, and, in this case, the competition for limited attention space is driven by consumer markets. Media systems have thus become a transmission belt for a culture of consumerism just as they are a transmission belt for political communication. But in consumer culture, there are many inputs and plural audiences for different types of cultural content within a larger culture of consumption—unlike in political communication, where certain worldviews dominate. Nevertheless, the attention space in both cases is limited, though in different ways: At a given time, a political issue has only a certain time to surface for groups for which the issue has salience (agenda setting), whereas cultural products seeking attention may have a greater scope in time—and in space—since markets are often transnational.

There is another difference between political communication and consumer culture: Consumer culture enjoys widespread legitimacy in contemporary society, but it is also diffuse. Elites and other groups set themselves apart with distinctive patterns of consumption, including online consumption, whereas the prestige or status of “high” and “popular” cultural tastes is open-ended and subject to fine-grained and adjustable distinctions. The maintenance of elite political legitimacy via media, on the other hand, is not diffuse but concentrated. Politically and culturally dominant beliefs, therefore, also do not reinforce each other, except insofar as the promotion of constant economic growth, which is also open-ended and which aims to maintain high levels of growth for consumption, is everywhere a central tenet of political ideology (except, perhaps, within environmental movements).

Media are increasingly digital, and it will become less and less possible to distinguish traditional (broadcast) media from digital media. Still, digital media can make it possible to circumvent gatekeepers, and they allow people to influence politics and exercise control more directly, and we will need to examine the extent which they do so. The argument here, which is in keeping with Weber’s ideas, is that there is limited scope for this circumvention, and this circumvention matters most wherever it reshapes the asymmetry between media control by dominant elites and toward media giving greater expression to people. Although Weber would have been pessimistic about this possibility because he saw increasingly rationalized institutions as “cages,” it is not necessary to follow him in this respect since we can seek possibilities as well as constraints in the advent of digital media.

### **The Trajectories of Digital Media Systems**

Digital divides cannot be understood outside the longer-term trajectories of media in the four countries examined here. As Meyrowitz (1985) has argued, there was a major shift with electronic mass media whereby what was previously the backstage of a small elite became the front stage of a wider society. But for our purposes, a contrast also can be made between the era before and after digital technologies—in other words, a quarter of a century or so. This was a technological shift, but a social shift also took place during roughly the same period in all four countries—namely, the marketization of media. This marketization took place even while it is clear, again for all four countries, that during this same period, the reduction of economic inequalities that was characteristic of the postwar period has been reversed or stalled. Similarly, the extension of social citizenship (rights to health, education, and welfare) has stalled or been reversed—again, both products of a wider marketization in society at large (Mann, 2013; Schroeder, 2013). These broader processes are mentioned mainly to point out that marketization has taken place at a time when larger asymmetries in societies have not been removed; if anything, the reverse has occurred, at least in the global North. And marketization has, as we shall see, affected all four media systems, while the differences highlighted between them by media systems theory also remain.

Even if digital media have extended beyond traditional broadcast and print media, these augmented media systems have quickly become routinized in advanced societies. The role of the media in developing societies has been more protean or fluid because newer media have been adopted more quickly, and major changes in the adoption of digital media are still in the process of reaching large parts of the population. This is unlike the case in the United States and Sweden, where saturation has been reached. One more large-scale change is that digital technology now also has the capacity (at least potentially) to tie media together into a single system. In this respect, though, too, media systems, once they have become frozen or ossified, as with all large technological systems, entail that new gatekeepers come into place.

The marketization of recent decades has been ongoing in all four countries, but not in the same way. In the United States, which had negligible public-service broadcasting to begin with, this change is less dramatic (but see Curran, Iyengar, Brink Lund, & Salovaara-Moring, 2009, for the importance of the absence of public broadcasting in the United States). In the other three countries, where the public-service broadcasting sector was strong, this sector has become only one among a number of outlets since the 1980s. In Sweden, this happened as part of a decline in how newspapers were tied to political organizations (parties and unions) and with the introduction of competition of satellite and other forms of commercial television. In India, state-dominated television and radio have become eclipsed by private-sector offerings since the 1980s. And in China, media have shifted, particularly dramatically from the 1990s and early 2000s onward, from a propaganda function in the direction of increasing commercialization subject to state control (Stockmann, 2013). These shifts have meant that these four media systems have moved toward the U.S. “liberal” model in Hallin and Mancini’s (2012) schema, which is “centered around commercial media in which market forces are dominant, as well as around more individualized forms of political communication rooted in the culture of marketing” (p. 284).

A common feature of marketization is thus the relative decline of the public broadcast part of media systems in the four countries examined here. (But this is not true everywhere. The BBC, with a worldwide reach, particularly of online news, is an example that falls partly outside of state-led public and marketized media. Many other examples exist outside of the four countries examined here.) This highlights why the Internet and digital media are interesting; it is not yet settled to what extent the Internet is dominated by markets, states, or neither. Hence, too, China's attempts to contain the Internet have broader implications: Inasmuch as the Internet contributes to widening the limited attention space of traditional media (however limited this widening may be), the efforts to contain this additional space are signposts about how sustainable such a containment may—or may not—be.

In the United States and in Sweden, digital networks are extending information and communication technology infrastructures that were well established, and so, in Weber's terminology, they have become "frozen." These two infrastructures are well known (Bimber, 2003; Kajser, 1994; Schroeder, 2007), so we can concentrate here on the two less well-known ones: The contrast between India and China is that India has a weaker technological infrastructure, which is at the same time politically and culturally more open; in China, it is the other way around. This applies to the infrastructure of mass communication or to the public sphere and not to private communication and the solidarism of increasingly mediated *interpersonal* relations (which fall outside the scope of this essay).

India had a more well-established newspaper-reading culture operating within a competitive media system (Jeffrey, 2000, 2002), while Chinese media were, for much of the 20th century, dominated by public political declarations (posters) and later by propaganda during the communist era (Yongming, 2006). More recently, the Chinese media system has changed rapidly and become much more commercialized (Zhao, 2012). In India, access to diverse types of digital media is so far limited to an urban middle class (Athique, 2012); in China, access is more widespread (see Jaffrelot & van der Veer, 2008, for a comparison of India and China). But in China, content critical of the regime, at least if it calls for collective action, is heavily censored (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). The censorship of media in India is restricted to sensitive topics (such as national security), and in China media commercialization has led to greater efforts to maintain social stability via the management of media. Hence, if the yardstick for media systems is the extent to which they foster democratic politics and a culturally pluralist society, then India is further advanced, even though, as we shall see, media input is limited in India, too.

In all four countries, information and communication technologies have become part of everyday life. But there is a divide in India and China in the adoption particularly of new media between an urban or middle class and rural and poorer populations—a divide that is hardly discernible in the United States and Sweden. As shown in Table 1, information and communication technologies have become the norm among all social strata in Sweden and the United States, but this does not apply to computers, the Internet, or mobile phones in India and China, where, despite the rapid uptake of mobile phones, the marketization of recent decades has skewed mass and digital media toward catering particularly to urban middle-class audiences.



**Table 1. Comparison of Information and Communication Technology Uses in Four Countries.**

	Number of fixed telephones per 100 inhabitants, 2012	Proportion of households with a computer	Percentage of individuals using the Internet, 2012	Number of fixed (wired)-broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants, 2012	Number of mobile-cellular telephone subscriptions per 100 inhabitants, 2012	Twitter in top site Alexa ranking
United States	44.41	75.6 (2011)	87.02	28.35	95.45	9
Sweden	43.83	92.00 (2012)	94.00	32.28	124.57	17
India	2.51	9.5 (2011)	12.58	1.21	69.92	11
China	20.20	35.4 (2010)	42.30	12.72	80.76	6 (weibo.com)

*Sources.* International Telecommunication Union (2015); Alexa (2015).

However, for a Weberian analysis, it is not inequality in access to devices but rather asymmetries in control over media systems and which strata dominate worldviews that are decisive. Hence, we must trace how these asymmetries came about.

To begin this task, it can be noted that, among the four countries examined here, only in China do political elites exercise direct control over media, shaping the political agenda (Brady, 2008). In the other three democracies, the agenda is set by elites; but elites, and particularly news and media elites, are also responsive to people. This is also the case in China, but whereas media in democracies have become an autonomous institution, this does not apply to authoritarian regimes like China, where they remain de-differentiated for political purposes. The lack of autonomy or state control of the media system in China has important consequences for politics, though media are also less autonomous from economic and political elites in India than in Sweden and the United States, as per media systems theory (applied to India by Chakravarty, 2004). In this respect, convergence is not a foregone conclusion, which highlights the usefulness of a Weberian comparative approach.

However, we also encounter a paradox: Whereas the degree of pluralism in Chinese society, or input from people, is low, the degree of engagement via media for political purposes, within the limits set by the state, is comparatively high, particularly at a local level. The central government maintains tight control over media at the national level, but it also uses media to put pressure on local government, and it monitors and measures public opinion, particularly concerning societal issues. The counterintuitively greater role of media in China arises from the fact that it is precisely in a repressive society that the media provide a potential outlet for political discontent (though we should avoid the “myth of the social volcano” [Whyte, 2010]). Discontent is not necessarily protest, but it can be a means of urging the regime to adjust its course or implement different policies when these aims cannot be expressed by democratic means. Stockmann (2013) has argued along these lines that the Chinese government has used media

marketization to exercise greater control over public opinion. And while this applies to print media and television, according to Bolsover, Dutton, Law, and Dutta (2014), Internet technology “has become an integral part, not just of the nation’s economy, but of the everyday lives of the majority of Chinese internet users in a way that surpasses that of any of the nations that we surveyed” (p. 126), including the United States, Scandinavian countries, and India.

This is a broad-brush comparison between the four cases, but it highlights some major differences: In China, the main media divide—including digital media—lies in the political control by party elites, including how they have shaped the marketization of media. On the flip side of this divide are the comparatively strong possibilities for using new technologies that have not yet been bounded by government control—though they are increasingly subject to market pressures—and which compete for media audiences in newly opened political and cultural spaces. India’s main divide is technological, though widespread mobile phone adoption (Doron & Jeffrey, 2013) points to a future in which mobile phones or smart phones rather than a computing-based Internet may provide the main means to overcome digital divides. Sweden’s absence of a major divide is a sign of media saturation, as in the United States. Yet in both countries, major divides still exist in the uses of digital media for political purposes.

### **New Media, New Divides**

Having laid the groundwork by establishing the similarities and differences between the four countries in terms of everyday uses of traditional information and communication technologies, we examine where and how new digital media add to and complement these technologies. To this end, we briefly examine microblogging and mobile phones. In the United States, microblogging is dominated by Twitter. Twitter is used among 16% of the adult population in the United States; it is disproportionately used by people who are younger and better educated and accessed on mobile devices (Mitchell & Guskin, 2013). In Sweden, Twitter is used by 11% of Internet users at least on occasion and by 2% daily (Findahl, 2012, p. 15, though it is not known which part of the population uses Twitter). China has much higher proportions using microblogging sites, with 54.7% Internet users and 65.6% of these using their mobile phones to access sites (China Internet Network Information Center, 2013, p. 5). SinaWeibo and WeChat dominate in China (Twitter, which has been blocked, is used by only a tiny proportion—less than 1%, according to Sullivan, 2012, p. 773). In India, there is little use of Twitter, though, as in the United States and Sweden, it is among the top 10 sites (see Table 1). In a population where Internet penetration is much lower and less than 5% of mobiles are smart phones (Parthasarathi et al., 2013, p. 16), even if Twitter is among the top 10 sites, this is a tiny proportion (the author is not aware of country-level microblogging statistics for India).

The first and most obvious point to make is that the vast bulk of microblogging content falls into the rubric of consumerism—that is, entertainment and celebrity news (Gao, Abel, Houben, & Yu, 2012; Sullivan, 2012; Yu, Asur, & Huberman, 2011). Even if smart phones and microblogs are used for news—which is the case among a steadily rising proportion of people in the United States and Sweden—this type of newsgathering takes place in a news attention space that is already crowded with other news sources (Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2011; Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011, for comparisons; Westlund & Weibull, 2013, for Sweden; Bimber, 2014, for the United States). We can also examine the issue for a specific

event: In Sweden, for example, for coverage of the 2010 election, Larsson and Moe (2012) found that the 10 most active Twitter accounts were responsible for the vast majority of more than 100,000 tweets; tweets were mostly unidirectional (not conversations); and Twitter was used mainly by journalists and politicians. Twitter provides an alternative to mainstream news media, and it allows for somewhat different content (for example, politicians' self-promotion; see also Larsson, 2013), but this is mainly confined to professional elites communicating with one another.

In the United States, several studies have examined microblogging and politics. One finding is that agenda setting still works in the networked context. When this was examined in the 2012 presidential elections, for example, it was found that different audiences (for example, supporters of Romney and Obama) had distinctive ways of using mixes of media sources to spread different agendas (Vargo, Guo, McCombs, & Shaw, 2014). Another study that compared Twitter and other new media with traditional media in setting the agenda for political issues in the United States over a longer period in 2012 (Neuman, Guggenheim, Mo Jang, & Bae, 2014, p. 19) found that they "respond dynamically" to each other and that

social media spend a lot more time discussing social issues such as birth control, abortion and same-sex marriage and public order issues such as drugs and guns than the traditional media. And they are less likely to address issues of economics (especially economic policy) and government functioning. (p. 18)

In other words, again, microblogging may shift media messages somewhat in a crowded news space (and we need to remember that Twitter is used among a particular part of the population).

In China, prior to microblogging services, bulletin board services were very popular, and Luo (2014) has demonstrated that, although bulletin board services mainly follow the agenda of official political outlets, such as the *People's Daily* newspaper, here, as in the United States, they also focus more on social issues (as opposed to what Luo classifies as "political" issues). Thus, they both promote a set of competing agendas and alert the political establishment and journalists to public opinion and concerns. So again, we find that social media have somewhat different agendas that may accord more with what people, rather than political and media elites, focus on, though this also may be related to their avoidance of sensitive topics that relate to the policy of the national government (and it needs to be added that we know far less about the true workings of media in China, for obvious reasons). But a sign of change may be that, according to a recent report, "in 2010 Weibo gradually developed into the most influential digital media in public affairs" (Yong et al., 2013, p. 64).

Meanwhile, although China has more Internet users than any other country (see Table 1), there are large divides. Still, these are rapidly being bridged, especially by smart phones. In urban China, as Qiu (2009), for example has documented, mobile phones among what he calls the "have-less" use them to share information about work, health, housing, and the like. The Chinese government is also actively promoting the uses of information and communication technologies among the rural population, even if this is done more for administrative efficiency and economic (especially agricultural) development than for services such as health and education (Murphy, 2010).

In India, as mentioned, microblogging is not used widely enough to warrant discussion. Does that mean that new media play no role in India? Clearly they do, and since mobile phones are widespread, they expand possibilities within a restricted scope. For example, Doron and Jeffrey (2013) argue that mobile phones have been an important tool during elections, particularly in mobilizing parts of the population that are difficult to reach via mainstream media. New media can expand political possibilities, with smart phones being used to access Internet services, so China may present a better model for how, despite an infrastructure that is currently weak in India, there is nevertheless scope for rapid change via the use of small technologies in everyday life—a pattern that has been documented more broadly for modern Indian history (Arnold, 2013). Of course in India, too, mobile Internet uses are mainly for consumerism. For example, young people in India's slums use the mobile Internet to learn skills, but mainly to express their aspirations in how they present themselves to friends on Facebook (Rangaswamy, Challagulla, Young, & Cuttrell, 2013; Rangaswamy & Cuttrell, 2012).

In all four countries, then, there is a technologically expanded space, though it complements and adds to—but does not supersede or replace—existing forms of mediation. This space is now augmented by digital technologies, but this augmentation is limited because the overall attention space has not increased (or only marginally, at least in the political order), and elite gatekeeping has been extended to these new openings even while the use of new media for circumvention has also produced new possibilities. The point is that a Weberian analysis allows us to pinpoint how these new constraints and possibilities are being shaped: It is primarily elites that are in the vanguard of new possibilities. They can mobilize new media to circumvent traditional media to some extent, and popular pressures and the expanded skills and uses among parts of the wider population that is coming online also may play a role in promoting new agendas in addition to the old. This circumvention matters most in the political order, though new media are also used in all four countries to deepen and widen a culture of consumerism, expanding its scope.

### **Contrasting Weber With Other Theorists**

The main counterpoint to Weber is Marx, because Durkheim focuses mainly on the solidaristic and ritual aspects of media, as in the analysis (by Ling & Schroeder, 2014) of interpersonal communication. The problem with contemporary neo-Marxist ideas like those of Castells (2009), who argues that global corporate multimedia networks in capitalist societies exercise control over media due to their economic power, which, in turn shapes politics, is that: First, the dominance of these corporate networks applies mainly to a consumer culture of entertainment and less so to politics (indeed, this dominance extends to non- or less-capitalist societies). Second, the media conglomerates whose concentration Castells analyzes are primarily concerned with profit rather than politics. Outside of an economic interest in favorable regulation or deregulation, these conglomerates are less interested in politics and more interested in competing in a market for attention. Put differently, Castells assumes that economic power translates into political power, and hence his ideas about resistance, too, are confined to challenges to this dominant economic power, without a theory of power in and through the state.

According to a Weberian analysis, in contrast, the political agenda is set, on the one hand, by the interaction between media and political elites and, on the other, by interaction between media and populist forces from below or input from people. Together, these determine how beliefs shape policy, and

the “selection” of content nowadays takes place in a media system that has expanded, even if it is still subject to gatekeeping and a limited attention space for agenda setting. The flip side of selection via new media is competition for limited attention in a dominant political agenda that is still set by or skewed toward (or, in China, controlled by) elites, which is why it is so important to identify new possibilities for inputs from people and for circumventing gatekeeping.

Unlike other theories, then, Weberian analysis focuses on how media technologies have reshaped everyday life, though in limited ways. Castells and other theorists hypostatize the role of technology as creating a whole new society (Castells’ “network society”). The main theoretical rivals are constructivist theories, which insist that the role of technology is inevitably socially shaped and evade the question of how technology does any shaping (for example, van Dijck, 2013, though she combines constructivism with a neo-Marxist political economy approach). A Weberian analysis is thus perhaps closest to medium theory (more recently labeled “mediatization” theory; Couldry, 2012, pp. 134–137), which takes the long-term everyday changes brought about by technology seriously. Second, a Weberian comparative approach is close to media systems theory (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), with its focus on media in their overall social context. And although this approach has concentrated on Western democracies, we have seen that it can be extended beyond them.

A Weberian position thus sits uneasily between two other—and opposite—positions: The first is that elites use the media to exercise political and cultural power, and the other is that media are merely a passive reflection of elites’ power. (A third position, that pluralism reigns, implicit in Benkler’s work [2007], is one that Weber would not have entertained, but one that has been endorsed here for popular cultures—at least where these are not restricted, as in China, or skewed toward affluent urban groups, as in both China and India.) The reason that a Weberian position differs from both of these is that Weber would emphasize the way in which an ever more extensive media apparatus exercises an increasingly autonomous role at the behest of elites. Because Weber did not have a pluralist conception of democracy, he would have focused on this domination by elites rather than, as has been done here, seeing elite media control as balanced, via an autonomous system, by populist forces or people insofar as they provide inputs into social transformations.

Weber’s approach was comparative-historical, and his central question concerned the distinctiveness of modern capitalism. Here a narrower Weberian question has been addressed, about the distinctiveness of digital media and how these reinforce or reshape the asymmetries between elites and people. We have seen that uses of digital media are shaped by a dominant consumer culture, which is homogenizing across the four countries, with a self-perpetuating system of status differentiation that encompasses a wide range of popular cultures but that is also highly diffuse. Put differently, while elites’ media uses may promote status emulation, consumer culture or popular cultures are also plural, so in the realm of culture it is difficult to regard media uses as contributing to how domination is exercised by elites (as Marxist and constructivist media theories claim).

It is different for the political role of the media. In terms of digital media, the comparison here has emphasized that the conventional debates about digital media—whether they democratize politics or create a more open or closed society—are too dichotomous. Instead, in all four societies under discussion

in this article, the central issue is to what extent digital media extend or reinforce divides. In two countries, they add mainly elite content to an already crowded attention space. In the other two societies, where elite control of media systems is more skewed, there is also more scope for new technology to add alternative content outside of traditionally controlled media—even if, in this context, popular groups must also push against a much greater skew or asymmetry favoring elite domination of attention. Weberian comparison thus also suggests a single yardstick whereby elites are made responsive, or people force them to become so, via media, for both traditional and new digital media. In this regard, digital media effect some change within the limits of four different media systems—and their digital extensions. This is a complex picture of similarities and differences across the globe, but this complexity, too, is in keeping with Weber's social thought.

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