Comparing Political Communication

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Abstract: This chapter describes the maturation of comparative political communications as a sub-discipline and defines its conceptual core. It then lays out the concept of “political communication system”. At the macro-level, this model captures the patterns of interaction between media and politics as social systems; at the micro-level it captures the interactions between media and political actors as individuals or organizations. Comparative research in this tradition focuses on the structure of political communication systems, its culture, the construction and dissemination of messages, and the effects of those messages. A wealth of empirical studies is systematized according to the dimensions of this heuristic and evaluated in terms of their contribution to a better overall understanding of comparative political communication.
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It is hard to underestimate the role of communication in politics as "political life in any mass society is impossible without established methods of political communication" (Pye, 1937, p. 443). It is also self-evident that varying settings of political communication systems affect mass political behavior and the working of democracy differently. However, political communication systems are highly differentiated in themselves and conditional on contextual influences. Thus, the more we compare the various aspects of political communication, the more complex our view on political life becomes. Findings from comparative political communication research often reflect this complexity, and they can rarely be reduced to a simple denominator. At the same time comparisons often unveil contradictions and dilemmas of the communication of politics, which makes it hard to produce a smooth synthesis of comparative political communication research. In this chapter we aim to do three things. First, we discuss the implications of political communication and its relevance for democratic governance. This reflection is designed to demonstrate the usefulness of the comparative approach in this field. Second, we introduce a heuristic model of the political communication system that allows us to identify and contextualize the relevant dimensions, actors, and message flows. This model shall help us to lay out some of the important trajectories of comparative research and lines of scholarly debate. In particular, we scrutinize (a) structures, (b) cultures, (c) messages, and (d) effects in the comparative study of political communication research. Third, we close the chapter with a reflection of current challenges and future perspectives. Some of them are rooted in the general limits of comparative social research; others stem from changes in the wake of globalization and digitalization of political communication. They threaten not only the boundaries of the nation-state and the way the media interfere with democratic governance but also our search for meaningful concepts for understanding political communication.

DEFINING POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Before we can systematize the comparative literature we need to clarify the term "political communication." Pye (1993) defines political communication as "the flow of messages and information that gives structure and meaning to the political process" (p. 442). It refers to "processes of communication throughout society which affect politics in any manner," such as shaping public opinion, the political socializing of citizens, and the mobilizing of interests. Winfried Schulz (2008, p. 367) links the exchange of political messages to the actors, namely "all groups, organizations, and individuals who are participating in the process of collectively binding
decision making on the distribution of scarce resources in society." They all use communication
to further their political goals. Yet, of central importance is also the public to whom the messages
are directed. The public includes citizens, voters, and audiences which may act as consumers
but also senders of political messages. In this vein, citizens joining a political rally, discussing
politics with friends and family, or using political online platforms to inquire about party posi­
tions in electoral campaigns, are involved in political communication. At the same time, watching
television news or reading blogs must also be regarded as political communication. In fact there
is an even more passive function of the public that is important to recognize: For politicians, the
anticipated public will is an action-guiding projection that influences their framing of messages
and their interactions with the media. Citizens, journalists, and political decision-makers—be it
actively or passively—are equally dependent upon the communication function in order to be
able to relate to each other.

In its most general meaning, political communication involves interactive processes of in­
formation as well as formal and informal modes of message flow. While the informal processes
of political communication refer to arcane politics, backstage decision-making, or diplomatic
negotiations, communication research is primarily interested in the public mode of political com­
munication that is inevitably tied to the mass media. Front-stage messages in political life are
exchanged via the media (either "old" or "new") particularly in the form of news content. In fact,
political communication cannot be separated from the function and the logic of mass media as
well as their outcome and effects (Pye, 1993, p. 443). Therefore, Norris (2001a, p. 11631), in
her definition of political communication, refers particularly to the news media. She stresses that
political communication should be seen as "an interactive process concerning the transmission of
information among politicians, the news media, and the public." Of course, more recently other
forms of content than just news have been recognized as relevant for political communication
(infotainment, political comedy, daily talk) but will not be a focal point of this chapter.

The strong linkage to the media has an important implication. It emphasizes that political
communication is directly affected by the transformational changes currently observable in the
media landscape due to the advent of new information and communication technologies. The
internet has created new cyber-geographies that are no longer tied to the nation-state and are
much harder to regulate—also with respect to journalistic norms for online political communic­
ation like fairness, accuracy, completeness, pluralism, and so on. On the upside, the Internet has
opened up opportunities for new voices, new modes of interaction and engagement and for new
definitions of what constitutes politics. On the downside, critics point to a further fragmentation
of the public sphere, a cacophony that further undercuts political effectiveness and democratic
morality, and a further erosion of the distinction between journalistic news and non-news
(Dahlgren, 2005). This sea-change has triggered a new era for comparative political communica­
tion research (Norris, 2011a) where questions that were seemingly answered already need revis­
iting and where answers that were valid in the past deserve reviewing. The fact that the evolu­tion
of political communication in modern societies proceeded in distinct stages (see Blumler & Ka­
vaugh, 1999) underscores also the necessity of combining spatial with temporal comparisons
to capture longitudinal processes of change across and within political communication systems
(Blumler, McLeod, & Rosengren, 1992).

**NORMATIVE FOUNDATIONS**

The study of political communication has always been strongly entangled with the reasoning
about governance and democracy. Issues of political communication are held against the norma­
tive standards and the goals of political regimes and their consequences on people's thinking and
behavior. Already the early studies on the political effects of the mass media in the 1930s
(see Schmelt-Beck, Chapter 25, in this volume) were driven by the desire to learn about the im­
 pact of political propaganda on the citizens. And even more in the postwar period, the study of
political communication has been closely tied to the development of modern mass democracy.
Democratic standards have always been the undercurrents as regards normative roots of political
communication theories. Issues of political culture and democratic orientations as well as issues
of deliberation, discourse, and public debate have inherently been issues of political communica­
tion. The normative bias may also account for the fact that the body of political communication
research in non-democratic contexts and in phases of system transformation is rather scarce.

The normative proposition in this research is the implication that political information is an
indispensable resource for politicians and citizens alike and that a viable democracy can only
survive if the people have the chance to get an enlightened understanding of political processes
(Dahl, 1989). This perspective is emphasized in the "mobilization perspective" that highlights
the media's positive impact on civic participation and engagement (Norris, 2001b). However, the
normative implications are also working in the other direction, as there are also critical and pes­
simistic accounts of the relationship between communication and democratic citizenship. In the
debate about "media malaise," eroding trust in public institutions, political cynicism, decline of
social capital, and decreasing levels of political efficacy have been traced back to the portrayal
of politics in the media (Putnam, 1995; Robinson, 1976). This has led, particularly in the 1990s,
to an intensified discussion about the quality of "mediated" democracies which had come under
stress by the growing intrusion of the media in many parts of the political process (for details see
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of the Anglo-American reading of modernization theory (Thussu, 2006). Perhaps it is no coincidence that the maturation of comparative political communication research dates after the end of the Cold War when fundamental processes of system transformation and communication were set into motion. This development also provoked more differentiated approaches to democratic media roles (Hallin & Mancini 2004) and stimulated new comparative angles of political communication research (Dobek-Ostrowska, Glowacki, Jakubowicz, & Sükös, 2010; Hallin & Mancini, 2012). In the meantime, scholars have become sensitive not only to the path dependency of democratic development but also to the role of the media in political development. Eventually it was well understood that the comparative approach is indispensable to analyzing political communication in different types of democracy and processes of democratization. Realization of the variations in democratic systems and cultures around the world was a major driving force for the comparative approach being applied earlier in political communication than some other areas within the communication discipline.

THE RATIONALE OF COMPARATIVE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

While political communication is closely tied to democratic governance, within this framework its manifestation depends on the contextual environment in which it takes place (McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 2002). Democratic political communication arrangements evolve differently under the influence of divergence contextual factors. This has led Mancini and Hallin (2012) to claim that “theorizing the role of context is precisely what comparative analysis is about.” Comparative analysis can take a spatial (cross-national) or temporal (longitudinal) perspective, and ideally both are combined to study over-time processes like convergence of media systems. For reasons of space, this chapter concentrates on spatial comparisons.

In this understanding, comparative political communication research is occupied with contrasting geographically defined units, usually comparing nation-states, but also local areas or world regions, at one or more points in time (Blumler et al., 1992). In our earlier work (Esser & Pfetsch, 2004, p. 385; Pfetsch & Esser, 2004, p. 9) we have defined comparative political communication research as comparisons between a minimum of two political systems or cultures (or their sub-elements) with respect to at least one object of investigation relevant to communication research. The approach differs from non-comparative studies in three points. It allows us to gain insight, which (a) is essentially of an international nature, (b) allows for conclusions about more than one system and more than one culture, and (c) explains differences and similarities between objects of analysis with the contextual conditions of the surrounding systems or cultures.

Comparative research guides our attention to the explanatory relevance of the macro-contextual environment for communication processes and outcomes. It aims to understand how the systemic context shapes communication phenomena differently in different settings (Blumler et al., 1999). The research is based on the assumption that different parameters of political and media systems differentially promote or constrain communication roles and behaviors of organizations or actors within these systems (Gurevitch & Blumler, 1990a). Thus, comparativists use factors at the macro-societal level as explanatory variables for differences found in lower-level communication phenomena embedded within the societies (Blumler et al., 1992). This explanatory approach aims to overcome more pedestrian comparisons of convenience that “use other countries merely as places to situate the same investigation that one would have conducted at home” (Gurevitch & Blumler, 2004, p. 327). Instead, the goal is to test hypotheses about the effects of system-level variables on actor-level processes of political communication and to use methodological sophistication to detect cross-level causal linkages.

While comparative communication research has clear aspirations beyond mere description, explanation is not the only goal. Another goal is the clarification of validation of concepts that can be used to build typologies for classifying cases (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 2). Classifications seek to reduce the complexity of the world by grouping cases into distinct categories with identifiable and shared characteristics. The concepts used to differentiate the cases need to be identified or constructed by the scholar. In sum, we see—in ascending importance—four scientific goals for the comparative study of political communication: (a) contextual description of similarities and differences; (b) formation and validation of concepts that can be used to systematically differentiate cases; (c) construction of complex typologies that use these concepts as multiple dimensions to classify a broader range of cases; (d) isolate variables in the dimensions and cases of these typologies, treat them as independent and dependent variables, posit relationships to exist between them, and illustrate these relationships comparatively in an effort to generate and build theories. Independent (explanatory) variables are usually at a higher analytical level than the dependent (outcome) variables. It is in this last step where causal inference, quasi-experimental logic, as well as most different or most similar systems designs, enter the picture (Przeworski & Teune, 1970; Landman, 2008).

The general logic of comparative inquiry applies not only to political communication as a whole but also to specific fields such as campaign communication, political journalism, or political effects. In fact, comparative research in these subfields is so rich and multifaceted that they are dealt with in separate chapters of this Handbook (see Chapter 16 by Hanitzsch & Donsbach, Chapters 18 and 19 by Esser & Strömback, and Chapter 25 by Schmitt-Beck, in this volume). This explains, for example, why readers will find only a few references to election communication in this chapter.

In all these subfields of political communication we are confronted with the micro-macro problem of social analysis. On the macro-level we postulate the existence of two societal systems—media and politics—and examine their patterns of interaction across national settings. At the same time, there are manifold interactions within the media and political system that involve the micro-level of individual behaviors as well as organizations and groups. The fact that political communication takes place at the interface between media and politics and encompasses features from both sides (to eventually constitute a “composite unity”; Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995, p. 26), and the fact that within both realms the micro-level and macro-level aspects interact, makes the comparative study of political communication fairly complicated. The complexity becomes manageable by concentrating on clearly stated, problem-oriented research questions that are derived from a broader theoretical framework developed explicitly for the comparative study of political communication processes. A framework model that fulfills these requirements is that of a “political communication system” (Pfetsch, 2008). It lends itself to testing hypotheses on selected aspects of political communication that also include macro/micro linkages and their contextual conditions.

A MODEL OF THE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

In order to apply the logic of comparative research to political communication within and across nations we are proposing a heuristic that builds on earlier work by Blumler and Gurevitch (1995). It conceives processes of political communication as an ordered system, and this system is composed of actors and structures which can be related to each other and its environment in systematic terms (Pfetsch, 2008). It stipulates relationships between varying macro-level contexts and lower-level communication phenomena embedded within them. The nature of the political
communication system is conceived as a two-dimensional structure of producing, processing, and communicating political messages. First, it implies a horizontal dimension which depicts the interaction between media and political actors to produce messages for a mass audience. This interaction involves individual-level interactions between political actors and journalists and is directly influenced by the institutional conditions of the media and political system of a country. Second, the political communication system includes a vertical dimension which refers to the message flow that is produced at the interface between media and politics, on the one hand, and the public, on the other. This vertical dimension involves processes and consequences of the use and effects of mediated political messages on the citizen’s level. As Figure 2.1 illustrates, the flow of messages operates top-down from political and media actors to the public, horizontally through linkages among political actors through the media, and also bottom-up from public opinion toward government authorities and legacy media organizations (Norris, 2001a, p. 11631). Eventually the model implements the idea of a triangle-relationship between political actors, the media, and the audience (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; see also Bruns & Volmer, 2011).

On the horizontal level, representatives of the media and political system act together at times collaboratively (by mutually benefiting from the exchange of publicity against authoritative information) and at times competitively (by trying to keep the upper hand in the joint production of political messages and frames). The competitive, conflictual relationship between media and political actors has been studied extensively in comparative studies on election communication (and is addressed in Chapters 18 and 19 by Esser & Strömback, in this volume). The common reference point of media and political actors is the public to which their message flow is directed. The public includes citizens (in their political role) and consumers (in their audience role); citizens can act individually or collectively; collective civic society actors include associations, interest groups, and movements. The wishes of the public relate to information needs, but also political preferences and demands. These needs and demands converge into “public opinion” that is monitored closely by media and political actors alike. There is high anticipatory pressure on both camps to be responsive to public sentiments and “market” their messages accordingly. In this sense, the social construction of public opinion can be understood as an input variable to the political communication system. The output variable includes the composition of political messages and their effect on the public. Here we can discern persuasive effects on attitudes, affective responses to emotional appeals, and cognitive effects on awareness, perceptions, and knowledge.

The essential value of this theoretical framework lies in its potential to inform the comparative study of political communication. If the political communication system is conceptualized as interplay between communication actor roles and outcome, the comparative approach is most valuable to study the conditions under which these processes and outcomes of interaction operate and vary (Pfetsch & Esser, 2004). Within the framework of political communication systems—like in all social science inquiry—different levels of analysis must be discerned, and social interaction must be thought as a constellation of micro and macro links (McLeod et al., 2012; McLeod & Lee, Chapter 27, in this volume). Moreover, political communication systems can emerge at sub-national, national, and transnational levels.

If we review the state of the art of political communication research in the light of our model, comparative research has been done about (a) the structure of the political communication system, namely how political communication is organized across countries, and (b) the culture of political communication, namely how political communication is engraved in the aggregate orientations and behaviors of the actors like politicians and journalists. Moreover, we find comparative research (c) on the construction and dissemination of political messages under the influence of specific structural and cultural conditions and (d) on the consequences of these messages on individuals and publics, namely effects on political orientations, knowledge, and behaviors.

In all four areas, the differentiation between macro- or micro-analytical perspectives of social inquiry is of eminent importance. In a macro-analytical perspective, we usually compare structures or cultures of communication on the country or group level. Here we usually work with aggregate data or system level data and compare the units of analysis on this level. In micro-analytical studies, the country or group variable is usually tackled as a context variable of political communication. It is assumed that the national environment impacts on individual level linkages. This research usually works with nested designs within which correlations or causal relations are established. However, contextual effects are relevant for both micro- and macro-level relationships in political communication.
Our model of the political communication system is useful because it highlights the most important dimensions and actors which would have to be included in a comparative study of the overall system. Thus, its value lies in its contribution to the theoretical understanding of political communication. However, as a concept for empirical research, it is rather abstract and needs further substantiation. It includes many dimensions that must be accounted for if a theory or hypothesis is to be translated into comprehensive empirical designs. It comes without surprise that hardly any study brings together all areas and all levels of analysis. Usually macro-analytical or micro-analytical empirical studies address only selected aspects, remain unconnected, and their findings are seldom viewed in one picture.

Thus the state of the art in comparative political communication research is that multilevel studies which systematically include data on political and media institutions, the interaction of political and media elites and their messages, as well as reactions of the public to these outcomes, remain a theoretical vision that is rarely translated into comprehensive empirical designs. Besides uncertainty about multilevel theorizing an important limitation often lies in the unavailability of reliable data. Where the data can be collected in a large-scale study and can be organized in a multilevel data set, the methodological and statistical challenge of analyzing the data adequately must be met. We will return to these points in our conclusion.

Any attempt to synthesize the wealth of isolated studies that each turn to individual aspects is not an easy task. We will use our model as a guiding structure and concentrate on those studies that contribute to the four areas of emphasis as outlined above: (a) the structure of political communication systems, (b) its culture, (c) its message flows, and (d) its message effects.

Comparing Structures of Political Communication

Investigating the structures of the political communication system requires looking at the macro-level relationships between media institutions and political institutions and how this relationship is organized within a specific country. A first influential yet imperfect attempt came from Siebert et al. (1956). Much more relevant in our context is an early conceptualization by Blumler and Gurevitch (1975) which argues that political communication systems can be compared along four dimensions: (1) degree of state control over mass media organization, (2) degree of mass media partisanship, (3) degree of media-political elite integration, and (4) the nature of the legitimating creed of media institutions.

This framework served as the foundation for Hallin and Mancini's (2004) typology of media-politics relationships which has become a central reference point for comparative political communication research. It distinguishes three models—a North Atlantic "liberal" model, a northern European "democratic corporatist" model, and a southern European "polared pluralist" model. These types differ along four crucial dimensions. Hallin and Mancini left Blumler and Gurevitch's first dimension largely intact which captures the degree and form of state intervention in the media, mainly with regard to regulation, ownership, finance, and subsidies, as well as formal controls and informal influence. Blumler and Gurevitch's second and third dimensions are treated by Hallin and Mancini as related components of political parallelism. This category refers to the extent to which media content reflects distinct political orientations or allegiances; the extent to which role perceptions and professional practices of journalists reflect neutrality or partisanship; the extent to which media have organizational connections to political parties, churches, trade unions, or civil society associations; the extent to which career advancement of media personnel is conditional on political affiliations; and the extent of partisanship in the audience of a media organization. Blumler and Gurevitch's fourth dimension essentially coincides with Hallin and Mancini's professionalization dimension. Professionalization captures, for example, the degree to which journalists can enjoy autonomy in exercising their functions; the degree to which journalism has developed as a differentiated social field; the degree to which journalists see themselves and are seen by society as serving the public as a whole rather than particular sectors or actors; and finally the kind of shared norms and standards of journalistic practice. To this, Hallin and Mancini added commercialization as a further dimension (specifically the historical development of mass-oriented press), and—equally important—they added five dimensions related directly to political system factors.

The framework by Hallin and Mancini has triggered a lively debate on how to further improve it. Besides its confinement to the West as a result of its most similar systems approach, the framework was mainly criticized for not being comprehensive enough. According to critics (Hardy, 2008; Humphreys, 2011; Norris, 2011a), systems of media-politics relationships should be compared along additional dimensions that have direct implications for the state's regulatory style toward the media, for the public's preferences and demands vis-à-vis the media, and for the quality of the communication output. These dimensions include the diffusion and use of new information and communication technologies; the geographical size, economic weight, and transnational penetration of media markets; the ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity of media audiences; and the extent to which media policy jurisdiction and market competition are centralized. It has further been argued that the influence of legal provisions and media policy styles on aspects like press freedom and journalistic independence deserve greater attention; the same was said for media concentration and its impact on diversity of editorial content. Systems of media-politics relationships may also be categorized according to the degree to which the news media are capable of fulfilling democratic functions such as enhancing a free flow of information, providing a diverse forum for public debate, mobilizing participation, and acting as a watchdog against the abuse of power. Humphreys (2011) and Norris (2011a) provide ample evidence of cross-national findings that speak to these additional dimensions and would potentially enrich future comparisons of political communication systems. A dimension that certainly deserves more explicit attention is the integration of the Internet into the structures of political communication systems—and in how far it contributes to their destabilization, refiguration, or enhancement. Of the many sectors where the Internet has become integrated in political communication systems already (for details see Dahlgren, 2005), only few have become the object of cross-national comparisons—for instance on how national audiences (Norris, 2011a), parliamentarians (Zittel, 2004), or election campaigns (Klüver, Janikowski, Foot, & Schneider, 2007; Ward, Tans, & Owen, 2008; Lifleke & Jackson, 2011) make use of the Internet. The last point is essential since great attention is currently devoted to comparing e-campaigns (see also Esser & Strömbäck, Chapter 18, in this volume).

Norris (2011a) further argues that the comparative study of political communication may follow the "Hallin and Mancini approach" as a starting point but must go significantly beyond it and combine it with alternative approaches. For this, she argues, the specific processes within political communication systems must be studied with easy-to-measure, clearly operationalized criteria. This, in her view, is even more important than getting caught up in refining categorial typologies of national communication systems that run the risk of reproducing outdated understandings of "mass" communication, media "systems," and "nation-state"-bound communication flows which no longer fit the realities of today's globalized, multimedia world. Norris (2011a) proposes a procedural instead of a systemic approach and suggests that comparativists should focus on six components of the political communication process: (a) the communications infrastructure, (b) the regulatory environment, (c) the structure of media ownership, (d) the skills and capacities of the journalism profession, (e) the contents of political communications, and (f) the effects of communications. Even though we do not share the critique of structure-based categorizations,...
of media–politics systems in the tradition of Hallin and Mancini (for details of her criticism see Norris, 2011a), we do agree that structural dimensions must be supplemented with dimensions that represent the inner workings of the political communication system and dimensions that cover the actors, professional cultures, messages, and effects of political communication across all levels of analysis. This fully concurs with our understanding of the political communication system as developed above and depicted in Figure 2.1.

Comparing Cultures of Political Communication

Comparisons of political communication systems must be complemented by studying the attitudinal underpinnings of the media–politics relationship. For a fuller picture of the working of political communication, one has to understand the milieu of the interaction between politicians and media actors and its cultural foundation. This refers to the orientations that guide the roles of actors and their practices. In particular, it relates to the degree of media–political elite integration in Blumler and Gurevitch’s (1975) initial comparative framework. These orientations are at the core of concepts that use the term “culture.” In the social-scientific perspective, culture in the most general sense captures “a set of ideas (values, attitudes, and beliefs), practices (of cultural production), and artifacts (cultural products, texts)” (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 369). In political communication research, it refers basically to two large strands of comparative research on values and attitudes: Studies on journalism culture examine the professional orientations of media personnel and explore whether these attitudes converge across cultures and countries; second, studies on political communication culture focus on orientations of both politicians and journalists and investigate the interaction norms underlying their mutual exchange. Both lines of research complement studies on political elites orientations which have been an established branch of comparative empirical research in political science since the 1970s (Engelstad & Gulbrandsen, 2006; Masamichi, 2008; Putnam, 1976).

The comparative study of political elites, which is nevertheless a longstanding field, has not been updated recently by systematic new data. It mainly relies on overviews of country studies (Engelstad & Gulbrandsen, 2006; Masamichi, 2008). In the area of journalism culture, despite a vast array of approaches and empirical studies, until recently convincing theoretical concepts were missing and the debate was heavily biased towards the Anglo-American ideal which did not work as a proper measure across diverse cultural contexts (Hanitzsch, 2009). However, the comparative study of journalism cultures has gathered pace recently. There is not only a lively theoretical debate about global journalism and its attitudinal correlates (Reese, 2008), but also the endeavor to capture role perceptions and occupational ideologies empirically (Donsbach & Patterson, 2004; Weaver & Willnat, 2012). Hanitzsch developed a framework for investigating the principal differences in journalists’ professional roles and identities around the world. Since he aims at a universal theory of journalism culture he strives at abstract and functionally equivalent general categories that allow the identifying of commonalities of journalism in various national and cultural settings. Hanitzsch’s (2007) concept of journalism culture denotes three dimensions: orientations towards (a) institutional roles, (b) epistemologies, and (c) ethical ideologies. All of them are relevant to political communication, since they determine how journalists approach political actors and treat their information. Particularly the dimension of institutional roles, which includes (i) beliefs about an active, advocate vs. passive role definition of a journalist, (ii) the attitude towards political and economic power, and (iii) whether the audience is treated as citizens or as consumers, is highly valuable for the comparative study of political communication. The dimension of epistemologies denotes orientations about the search for truth like (iv) objectivism and (v) empiricism. Finally the concept also includes ethical dimensions referring to moral values like (vi) relativism and (vii) idealism. The empirical results show that truth, factuality, and reliability of information are not beyond national idiosyncrasies, whereas interventionism, proximity, distance, and objectivity are culturally driven orientations that set Western societies apart from developmental and transformation countries (Hanitzsch et al., 2011; see also Hanitzsch & Donsbach, Chapter 16, in this volume).

While research on journalism culture focuses on the orientations of media actors, the concept of political communication culture captures orientations, attitudes, and norms of both media actors and political actors. It assumes that under differing structural conditions specific cultures of interaction between political actors and journalists will develop. The essential value of political communication culture lies in its capacity to provide an analytical framework for assessing norms and values of political communication actors in a comparative design. It allows for applying research designs in which the cultural dimensions of political communication actors (or subgroups) can be related to national contexts (or context below the nation-state).

There are basically two varieties of the concept. First, Gurevitch and Blumler (2004) embrace the impact of political culture on forms and expressions of political communication. Their main concern is to identify key dimensions along which political cultures differ and translate into specific forms of political communication. This concept helps entangle the cultural roots of various forms of political expression, which come to the fore in the construction and appreciation of political messages, the vocabulary of politics, the culture of journalism, the interactional relations between media and politics, and the relations between political communication elites and citizens. These forms of political expression are influenced by the political system, the media system, and citizenry. Gurevitch and Blumler (2004, pp. 467–468) propose to measure the relationship between the media and political systems on a continuum of autonomy vs. subordination. The media system comes into play by the norms that define the roles and functions of media for society. Here the measures range between an essentially critical watchdog function vs. a nation-building or state-supporting role for the media. The expressions of political culture may vary with respect to the relationship between citizens and their political system which is expressed in the notion of citizenship. Here the roles are alienation or apathy, on the one end, and political engagement, on the other. The framework of Gurevitch and Blumler (2004) is instructive because it captures how political norms are translated into political communication norms. However, it does not help us understand the milieu of interaction between political actors and journalists empirically.

Here the second approach by Pfetsch (2004) enters the picture. Her aim is to provide a tool for the empirical measurement and comparison of actor’s orientations in political communication across countries. In this approach political communication culture is defined as attitudes towards specific objects of political communication, which determine the manner in which political actors and the media communicate vis-à-vis the general public. Following this definition, the attitudinal objects refer to (a) the institutions of exchange relations between politics and the media; (b) the input side of political communication such as public opinion; (c) the output side of political communication such as the agenda-setting processes; and (d) the role allocations and norms of professional behavior. The normative basis of national political communication systems can be described and compared along these orientation patterns. It is important to note that the self-image of politicians and their spokespersons, on the one hand, and journalists, on the other, are characterized by tensions resulting from conflicting interests of their institutions of origin. Thus, politicians view communication as an instrument to gain or retain political power while journalists see communication as a duty (and a business) to inform the public about what is at stake. This is clearly demonstrated by a first empirical assessment of orientations that guide the relationship between politicians and journalists (Pfetsch, Mayerhoefer, & Maurer, 2009).
Current research into political communication culture focuses on Western democracies. One trajectory is to classify the interface between media and politics according to four types. In this typology (see Pfetsch, 2004) a media-oriented political communication culture is to be distinguished from a party-oriented political communication culture. Whereas in the former the milieu between media and politics is dominated by the media logic, political power-calculations determine communication relationships in the latter. The third type, a public-relations-oriented political communication culture depends primarily on the close relationship between journalism and political public relations. Finally the type of a strategic political communication culture is defined by the dominance of the political logic which is deployed by the strategic use of political public relations to anticipate the media logic (Manheim, 1998).

In the future, the link between the structural conditions of political communication and the given dominant constellations of actor attitudes needs to be explored further with more rigorous designs. It would also be intriguing to connect the types of political communication culture to Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) types of media-systems relations (for a first attempt see Pfetsch & Maurer, 2008). Finally, the methodological challenges of aggregating individual-level orientations of actors to macro-level manifestations of cultures need to be solved.

Comparing Messages of Political Communication

A central feature of political communication systems is the exchange of messages. Within our systemic model as depicted in Figure 2.1, we can distinguish an input flow (into the media-politics system) and an output flow (back to the public) of political messages. The input flow starts with representatives of the public and their expectations and demands. These aspects are often captured in the representation of public opinion expressed in survey data or polls. A core function of the mass media in any democratic system is to "transform" these expectations and demands into "issues." Most research thus focuses on "news" which serves important political functions for democratic political communication systems. In addition to recording the events of the day, political news is expected to reflect public opinion, act as a watchdog to disclose political misbehavior, facilitate public discourse, and foster citizens’ political participation (Schulz, 2008). Of interest are those factors that can explain cross-national differences at the selection, evaluation and framing of news issues. The "selection" of issues is often skewed to those who have social status or political power, who have professional public relations expertise at their disposal, or who resort to radical public relations tactics such as spectacular protests or violent pseudo-events. However, Krcési (2004) demonstrates his analysis that civil society actors also employ strategic communication to generate media attention and winning public support. The "evaluation and framing" of political issues is influenced by criteria of newsworthiness—like negativity, intensity, unexpectedness, elite nations, cultural proximity—as identified by Galtung and Ruge’s (1965) yearly news value theory and Shoemaker and Cohen’s (2006) deviance theory.

With respect to international news the media also tend to "domesticate" global events by evaluating and framing them according to national ideologies and national reception frames (Clausen, 2003; Lee, Chun, Pau, & So, 2002; see also Shoemaker, Cohen, Sec, & Johnson, Chapter 21, in this volume). The same domestication process was found to take place in the construction of news about the European Union where "evaluation and framing" follows the adaptation process at the national level within each EU member state (de Vreese, Banducci, Semetko, & Boomgaard, 2006. Pfetsch, Adam, & Escher, 2008). Further nation-specific framing mechanisms were explored in studies that compared how the same global event or transnational issue (like the Iraq war, genetic engineering, climate change, or introduction of the euro currency) is covered differently across political communication systems (Dardis, 2006; Brossard, Shanahan, & McComas, 2004; de Vreese, Peter, & Semetko, 2001; Kohring & Goerke, 2000).

Political messages are also the key output of the political communication system. Here we distinguish three types of messages (see Paletz, 2002, ch. 10). First, messages that originate in the media without politicians having any control over content—like in endorsements, commentary, news analysis and interpretation; second, messages that originate in the political system and are conveyed to the public directly without any journalistic involvement or alterations—as is the case with political advertising, mass emails, politicians’ own blogs, party websites, or campaigning via social networking sites. Then there is a third track: messages that originate in the political system but are picked up by journalists for constructing stories or programs. Here, communication control is either shared (as in interview programs or talk shows) or negotiated (as in news stories where reporting and news management efforts coalesce). Comparative political communication research has aimed to differentiate news cultures according to how interventionist journalists are and how forcefully politicians try to manage the message flow in an effort to regain control. Exemplary studies that compared levels of media intrusion or journalistic interference across political communication systems were conducted mainly in the context of election research (for a summary see Esser & Strömback, Chapter 19, in this volume). One result is a mapping of national news cultures along dimensions of interventionism (Esser, 2008). An alternative approach is favored by Lance Bennett, who calls for more comparative investigations into "indexing" processes. He suggests producing a map of news systems with regard to their dependence of, and submission to, political power structures, elite consensus, and government viewpoints in their coverage of politics (Bennett, 2009; also advocated by Curran, 2011).

Existing comparative studies that focus on news output investigated, for example, how far news messages serve democratic news standards and requirements of public discourse (see Ferré et al., 2002; Bennett, 2011; Wessels, 2008) or how they meet professional standards like objectivity (Donsbach & Klett, 1993; Thomson, White, & Kitley, 2008), pluralism (Benson, 2009; La Porte, Medina, & Sádaba, 2007), balance (Semetko, 1996), or bias (van Kempen, 2007) across systems. Another important question in international and comparative agenda-setting research has been to identify those conditions that influence the power of the media to influence the public agenda (Peter, 2003; McCombs, Ghanem, Lennon, Blood, & Chen, 2011; Weaver, McCombs, & Shaw, 2004) or the policy agenda (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011). Comparative studies that focused on mediated messages by politicians, on the other hand, compared styles of campaign communication (Plasser & Plasser, 2002; Swanson & Mancini, 1996), e-campaigning (Ward, Owen, Davis, & Taras, 2008), government communication (Pfetsch, 2007), political marketing (Lee, Marshman, Strömback, & Rud, 2010), or political advertising (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2006). One intention of comparative studies has been to rank election communication systems according to how "postmodern" or "marketing-oriented" their campaign communication styles are (for a detailed overview see Esser & Strömback, Chapter 18, in this volume).

In light of the previous sections it is important to emphasize that the flow and shape of political messages is conditioned on the structural dimensions of political communication systems (like the degree and form of media regulation by the state, the degree of press-party parallelism, the degree of autonomy for the journalistic profession, the degree of commercialization and market competition and the penetration of multi-channel technology and trans-border communication) and cultural dimensions (like the role perceptions and professional norms of journalists, politicians, spokespeople, and their campaign managers), and that political communication systems can be differentiated and compared along these dimensions.
Comparing Effects of Political Communication

From the citizen perspective, the exposure to political messages impacts their capacity to perform their political roles, for instance keeping abreast of political issues and making informed voting decisions. Also, according to theories of public opinion (Zaller, 1992), political orientations of citizens are largely shaped by exposure to elite discourse via the mass media. The crucial link between the producers and the recipients of political messages is research that focuses on people's political cognitions and orientations. One central question here relates to whether the media contribute to political learning and democratic orientations of the people. Even though there has been a long tradition of exploring persuasive and cognitive media effects, most studies were restricted to individual-level investigations within one country. Often the findings were interpreted with regard to larger political implications (such as emerging media malaise or political disintegration) although scholars did not account systematically for macro-level contexts (such as the media environment, the media culture, or political institutional aspects). Comparative research pursues macro-level effects by investigating the implications of systemic factors for populations of recipients embedded in settings that differ with regard to the assumed macro-level causal factor. This allows not only for explanations of macro-level communication effects but also for differentiated conclusions about the context-dependency and generalizability of our effects theories. Contextualizing theories is important because often times the interpretation of the size and meaning of media effects depends on the research paradigms currently popular or dominant in a given scientific community. An influential essay on the history of media effects research recently complained that "the growing disjuncture between the prevailing research strategies and the socio-technological context of political communication" has been a major obstacle to progress in adequate theory-building (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008, p. 707). We would argue that comparative research, with its clear emphasis on context-sensitive explanations, offers a fruitful strategy that will help advance effects research.

In recent years quite convincing comparative studies have been conducted that systematically link political attitudes or behaviors with structural variables of the political communication system. They all find consistent empirical evidence that citizens' orientations and actions are closely associated with the media and political environment. The media environment in these studies stands for the capacity of a political communication system to produce and disseminate political information in hard or soft news formats. The theoretical classification of larger types of national communication systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) is broken down to the function of the media being effective in contributing to citizens' knowledge and understanding of politics as well as their participation.

Regarding the power of media environment to contribute to political knowledge, Curran, Iyengar, Lund, and Salovaara-Moring (2009) find that European media systems and particularly those that give preference to public service functions of the media clearly foster awareness of public affairs. Thus media environments that devote more attention to public affairs and institutional news encourage not only higher level of news consumption but also contribute to people's knowledge about public life. In contrast, the purely commercial media environment of the United States supplies less political information, particularly less hard news, and contributes ultimately to higher levels of public ignorance and cognitive disintegration of society (see also Aalberg, Van Aelst, & Curran, 2010).

Political communication structures can not only be linked to levels of news supply and public knowledge but also to political participation. In a comparative study of 74 countries Baek (2009) finds convincing evidence that institutional factors of the broadcasting system (for instance, degree of regulation of election communication) are related to voter turnout. Public broadcasting systems not only promote higher levels of turnout but also modify the effect of paid party advertising on mobilization. Again, the crucial variable that impacts political behavior is ownership and regulation of television. Comparing different systems of broadcasting demonstrates strong macro-analytical effects on democratic behavior.

The conclusion that media systems essentially penetrate the social fabric of society is also corroborated with respect to social capital and democratic orientations. Schmitt-Beck and Wörgötter (2010) analyze media effects in 25 European countries and find—based on multilevel statistical analysis—that society-wide patterns of TV use have strong implications for levels of social trust in these countries. Norris (2011b, eh. 9) examines media effects on democratic orientations in 42 countries and finds—also by way of multilevel statistical analysis—that high levels of TV use can strengthen democratic satisfaction independently of other micro-level and other macro-level influences.

A final noteworthy study is "Cosmopolitan communications" by Norris and Inglehart (2009; see also Norris, Chapter 22, in this volume), which sets out to see whether media use within certain political communication environments contributes to the spread of economic, moral, and social values. A comparison of over a hundred countries finds evidence that global news flows contribute to the spread of tolerance against foreigners, equality of gender roles, and liberal capitalist values. The most different systems design employed in this large-scale study allows for the conclusion that this relationship is stable across very diverse media environments.

In sum, comparative research has established strong relationships between macro-structural variables of the political communication system and individual-level variables like orientations and values, political participation, or civic knowledge. The near future more multilevel studies are necessary that make use of the quasi-experimental logic of comparative analysis. Efforts to advance media effects research should concentrate on particular in the explanatory mechanism between the broader media environment and individual effects.

CHALLENGES AND OUTLOOK

In a series of essays spanning almost three decades, Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch have described the progress in the field of comparative political communication. Initially, in 1975, they labeled it as one in its infancy (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1975). Twenty years later they described the field as having progressed to adolescence (Gurevitch & Blumler, 1990b). Then in 2004 they saw it on a potholed path to maturation (Gurevitch & Blumler, 2004). Although the comparative study of political communication has become fairly fashionable lately, we agree with other observers (Mancini & Hallin, 2012; Norris, 2011a) that it has not reached mature adulthood yet. It is a relatively young area where scholars still display some uncertainty about its conceptual and methodological foundations and its level of achievements. Benyon (2010), for example, celebrates the recent flood of comparative studies for successfully challenging the "American-centric narrative" (p. 614) in much of the political communication literature. A more pessimistic outlook comes from Norris (2009), who claims that "it still remains difficult, if not impossible, to compare political communication systems systematically across national borders" (p. 323), because the field "has not yet developed an extensive body of literature establishing a range of theoretically sophisticated analytical frameworks, buttressed by rigorously tested scientific generalizations, common concepts, standardized instruments, and shared archival datasets, with the capacity to identify common regularities which prove robust across widely varied contexts" (p. 322). While our own view is less bleak than Norris', we certainly acknowledge the many challenges that comparative political communication research still faces. We would like to address the following five tasks for the future.

1. We need more data. We need more empirical studies that go beyond the Western hemisphere that still dominates much of the comparative literature. For an expanded understanding
of political communication we need to embrace non-Western systems and perhaps switch more often from most similar to most different cases designs. Unfortunately, these larger, more global studies are ridden with problems. The reasons for these are the broader insider knowledge required to develop more sensitive instruments and to interpret findings appropriately. The networks of collaborators and viable structures of coordination and funding required, and the agreement required within these heterogeneous networks on concepts and frameworks that offer more than just a least-common denominator. Overcoming these challenges would help us build databases and resource centers comparable to those established in Comparative Politics (like Polity IV, Freedom House, World Value Survey, etc.). Problems in developing consistent methodologies and data gathering techniques across countries have hampered progress in our field for long enough.

(2) We need to make better use of existing data. For those interested in secondary data there is a growing range of country-level indices available that allow for partial comparisons of political communication systems and should be used more. For example, Norris (2011) shows that global data on access to television, to newspapers, mobile phones, and the Internet are obtainable from ITU, World Bank, and UNESCO and may be used fruitfully for measuring differences in the "communication infrastructure" of political communication systems around the world. Data on communication freedoms are available from Reporters without Borders, Freedom House, and the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) and may be used as a measure to gauge differences in the "regulatory environment" of political communication systems around the world. Norris (2011), and also Engesser and Franzetti (2011), provide several more examples of how disaggregated indices can enhance systematic comparisons. Yet both of them admit that more complex components of the political communication process evade comparative statistical analysis because of lack of quantifiable data. As a consequence, Norris (2011) calls for orchestrated efforts to field global surveys and content analyses to measure "professionalism of political journalism" and the "content of political messages." Some initiatives in our field show modest movement into this direction (see Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Weaver & Willnat, 2012; Esser, de Vreese, & Strömback, 2012). Irrespective of whether scholars prefer quantitative or qualitative data, scholars also may want to familiarize themselves with more elaborate techniques of data analysis—in particular methods that do justice to the multilevel structure of comparative designs (see McLeod & Lee, Chapter 27; Vliegenthart, Chapter 31, in this volume).

(3) We need standardized measures. Important goals in comparative work are cumulativeness and generalizability. Both are being achieved by replicating equivalent studies in different settings that use core concepts in consistent, standardized ways. However, many dimensions that have been introduced for differentiating political communication systems (see Siebert et al., 1956; Blumler & Gurevitch, 1975; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Humphreys, 2011) are complex and thus difficult to translate into easy-to-measure indices. Current studies often operationalize them differently, which hampers their generalizability and their contribution to collaborative theory-building. Also the usefulness of cases in comparative content analyses and the use of questions in surveys often suffer from a lack of consistency. This has compromised our knowledge of the topic and framing architecture of political messages, of people's media use habits, and of the professional attitudes of communicators across diverse political communication systems (see Holtz-Bacha & Kaid, 2011; Kaid & Strömback, 2008; Norris, 2011a). Heightened sensitivity for the goals of comparative research should alleviate these problems over time.

(4) We need better theories. Decisions on which data to gather and how to operationalize and analyze them appropriately requires specifically designed frameworks that can meaningfully guide a comparative project. In the absence of a standard theoretical model we took the liberty in this chapter of proposing a heuristic that seems capable of integrating relevant strands of comparative political communication research (see Figure 2.1). It is firmly rooted in the work of Blumler and Gurevitch (1975, 1995), who are rightfully considered the founding fathers of this area. Our decision to organize this chapter around the framework of political communication system was prompted by the insight that theoretical models of comparative political communication scholars are stranded in Babel (see Holtz-Bacha & Kaid, 2011; Mancini & Hallin, 2012; Norris 2009, 2011a). Our model by no means claims exclusiveness but we are glad to see that it can be easily related to alternative heuristics suggested in this Handbook (see Chapter 16 by Hanitzsch & Donsbach; Chapter 19 by Esser & Strömback; Chapter 24 by Hasebrink). We would like to reiterate Gurevitch and Blumler's (2004) call for more theory-guided work in the field of comparative political communication research.

(5) We need a better understanding of the effects of globalization and the Internet on political communication systems. The logic of comparative research as outlined in this chapter obviously presumes the continuing importance of the nation-state. There are good reasons to include additional levels of analysis below and above the nation-state, but there is also strong evidence that national political communication systems remain relevant units of analysis for comparative research (see Benson, 2010; Hallin, 2008; Humphreys, 2011; Pfetsch & Esser, 2008). We certainly acknowledge that there are powerful technological and economic forces pushing for a convergence of political communication systems, but the degree to which differences between nationally bound systems will reside is still a subject of empirical study, not belief. And the available empirical evidence suggests little in the way of complete homogenization. In fact, despite—or rather because of—globalized influences we observe a return of the importance of national institutional and cultural settings. Several studies in the field of comparative political communication (discussed in Humphreys, 2011) recently highlighted the striking resilience of national media policy styles, legal traditions, and communication cultures to eroding influences by either the European Union or the globalization of media markets. Humphreys (2011) explains this by referencing Kleinsteuber's (1993) argument that while economic and technological developments point generally towards convergence of media systems, nation-specific political, social, and cultural factors will continue to explain much of the divergence. Within the framework of historical institutionalism the concept of path dependency posits that institutionalized political communication arrangements are fairly persistent and resistant to change. When change does occur under the influence of globalization or technological forces, these transformations usually show structurally and culturally distinctive patterns which are determined by national contexts. Put differently, they follow characteristic national "paths" (Humphreys, 2011). This demands a more complex reconceptualization of the national context and its interplay with macro-processes of social change, not its abandonment (see Pfetsch & Esser, 2008). In addition to a more complex understanding of the "national" it is important to recognize new landscapes at the supranational level in which political communication systems are more and more integrated. Straubhaar (2007) has termed these new landscapes large-scale "geo-cultural" and "cultural-linguistic" media markets, and Tuntial (2008) divided them up into four "major transnational media regions." These supranational entities constitute new units for comparative analysis which need to be incorporated in our designs. This adds a new layer of complexity but makes comparative research all the while more exciting.

NOTES

1 Ferree et al.'s (2002) four models are usefully summarized by Benson (2008) to whom we refer for the following description: Representative liberal theory proposes that democracy works best with highly educated elites and specialized technicians in charge. The primary duties for the news media are to accurately compare the range of competing elite perspectives, to examine the character and
behavior of elected officials, and to monitor closely their activities for corruption or incompetence. In democratic participatory theory, journalism is called upon to promote actively the political involve­
manship of citizens. The theory emphasizes principles such as popular inclusion, empowerment, and full expression through a range of communicative styles. The deliberative or discursive ideal places the greatest emphasis on quality; the media should create a domination-free environment where the better argument can prevail in a quest for social consensus; the public sphere should be free from the state as well as the market. Constructivist theory, like participatory theories, is more tolerant of diverse styles and forms of discourse that journalists mediate, especially those emerging from the margins of society. It privileges personal narratives and emotion over abstract reason, celebrating grassroots media that facilitate the playful search for identity or the articulation of counter-hegemonic interests.

With regard to the latter, Voltmer (2008, 2012) is able to identify different pathways to democracy in eastern Europe, Latin America and eastern and western Europe, with the mass media playing distinct yet dissimilar roles in the respective transformation processes.

The five political system variables refer to (1) an active versus restricted role of the state regarding media policy and regulation, (2) majoritarian versus consensus systems, (3) individualized pluralism and lobbyism versus organized pluralism and corporatism, (4) moderate vs. polarized pluralism, and (5) rational-legal authority versus clientelism (for details see Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

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