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Erstveröffentlichung / Primary Publication

Arbeitspapier / working paper

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Cazzamatta, R. (2025). *Comparative Studies: Epistemological and Pedagogical Reflections*. (Political Communication Report, 31). <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-103948-7>

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Political Communication Report
Summer 2025 - Issue 31
“Teaching Political Communication”

Comparative Studies: Epistemological and Pedagogical Reflections¹

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Current developments have profoundly reshaped the communication of political issues in the public sphere, with significant implications for democratic quality (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). These developments include the convergence of media systems (Hallin, 2020), the erosion of journalism’s gatekeeping role (Vos, 2019), the symbiosis between populist politics and disinformation (Waisbord, 2018), and other consequences of digitalization. In light of these transformations, a key objective in the classroom is to equip students with a robust methodological toolkit for gathering empirical evidence on the scope and significance of these shifts. In this article, I reflect on specific challenges inherent in conducting comparative research, with particular emphasis on effectively communicating these complexities to students. Considering that the interplay between legacy and digital media, as well as politics, is deeply shaped by macro-level contextual variables, such as regulatory frameworks, political systems, and the rule of law, comparative research remains a critical strategy for advancing our understanding (Canel & Voltmer, 2014).

Esser and Hanitzsch (2012) define comparative research as the analysis of at least two macro-level entities—such as systems, cultures, or markets, or their components—in relation to a specific phenomenon relevant to communication studies. However, this approach entails a range of conceptual, epistemological, methodological, and practical-organizational challenges that must be critically addressed in the classroom (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012). Within the Master’s program in ‘Global Media: Politics and Society’ at the University of Erfurt, comparative inquiry is central to the curriculum. Drawing on my previous teaching experience in this Master’s course and a methodological postgraduate course for Master’s and PhD students at São Paulo State University (UNESP), and informed by key literature on comparative studies (Canel & Voltmer, 2014; Esser et al., 2004; Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012; Hallin & Mancini, 2012; Labio-Bernal et al., 2024; Matassi & Boczkowski, 2023), I reflect how these challenges are addressed. Particular emphasis is placed on the limitations of the

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media systems framework in the digital age and the field's persistent lack of cosmopolitanism (Richter et al., 2025).

Addressing contemporary conceptual and theoretical challenges

In earlier scholarship, Norris (2009) noted that the vast majority of political communication studies focused on the United States, which represents a relatively atypical media and political system. Comparative research was often confined to examining whether 'fuzzy' concepts were converging with or diverging from the U.S. as a reference point, without producing a systematic body of knowledge that would allow for broader comparisons beyond the specific case. Norris (2009) therefore called for a more robust "theoretical map and conceptual compass." Hallin and Mancini's seminal book—*Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*—marked a turning point in the study of media and politics, providing scholars with a much-needed and well-established conceptual framework—despite its well-known and widely discussed criticisms (Hallin & Mancini, 2010). These include, for instance, debates over the scope and nature of state intervention, as well as the absence of non-Western variables influencing political parallelism, such as religious, ethnic, and regional identities and clientelist loyalties (Hallin & Mancini, 2010; Voltmer, 2012). Although these typologies are difficult to apply beyond the Western world, it is undeniable that the four dimensions—media markets, political parallelism, journalistic professionalism, and the role of the state—have constituted a crucial starting point for many comparative studies. Accordingly, the first two sessions of my comparative seminars—whether focused on media change, journalism, or media systems—consistently begin with a review of these foundational elements and the critiques they have received. Before engaging with efforts to de-Westernize the theoretical framework, examine media systems in the digital age, or explore their connections to pressing issues such as disinformation or AI regulation, students must first develop a solid understanding of this foundational theoretical entry point.

Furthermore, whether developing a Master's thesis framework or preparing a simple class presentation, students should be confronted with two crucial questions: What and why do they want to compare? What is their unit of analysis, and which variables affect it? However, we quickly realized that classical media systems variables are somewhat outdated, as scholars and students increasingly focus on global phenomena—such as disinformation, platform partnerships, social media, and other digital dynamics—that are difficult to address using the traditional toolkit. Some students do not even remember a time when Facebook, WhatsApp, X, LinkedIn, TikTok, or Snapchat were not so intricately embedded in daily life. While classical media systems theory remains a foundational reference for many comparative studies, it is inadequate for addressing the complexities and side effects introduced by digitalization and hybrid media environments (Chadwick, 2017; Hardy, 2021). Although the ongoing relevance of the media systems approach and the nation-state's central role in media governance are widely acknowledged (Flew & Waisbord, 2015; Hallin, 2020), a growing body of research calls for revising and expanding existing frameworks. This includes integrating

new variables and indicators related to information and communication technologies to better capture ongoing transformations (Hallin, 2020; Humprecht et al., 2020; Mancini, 2020; Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2018). However, a key limitation is that such indicators are often unavailable in non-WEIRD countries. This highlights a second major challenge in comparative analysis: the implicit assumption of methodological and theoretical universalism (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012)

Epistemological Violence and the (still) westernized nature of scholarship

Despite later improvements, the vast majority of comparative studies published in English in high-impact journals remains heavily focused on the Global North, representing only 14% of the world's population (Matassi & Boczkowski, 2023). This reflects the enduring dominance of Anglo-Saxon perspectives and the tendency to treat region-specific developments as universally applicable. The field of political communication has long carried a distinctly Western flair, particularly shaped by Anglo-American traditions. Since the early 2000s—especially following the publication of *De-Westernizing Media Studies* by Park and Curran (2000)—scholars have advocated for the serious inclusion of non-Western perspectives in media and communication research. Efforts have been made to integrate these perspectives into university curricula and pedagogical frameworks, although the number of permanent international faculty members remains limited, particularly in Germany (Badr et al., 2020; Richter et al., 2023). This is a structural issue that affects students more broadly, as they are primarily taught by faculty members from the country where they study, thereby limiting their exposure to diverse academic cultures and epistemologies. While invited lecturers or guest scholars may broaden perspectives to some extent, they do not resolve the underlying problem. Moreover, it is not farfetched to say that de-westernization is likely taken more seriously in research fields that tend to engage more directly with cosmopolitanism, such as intercultural or international communication (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014). Recent and critical academic evaluations of the issue continue to highlight the dominance of Western perspectives—even within comparative studies—in leading communication journals (Richter et al., 2025).

Waisbord (2015) characterizes cosmopolitanism as a “sensitivity to comparative and global questions and approaches and engagement in globalized debates” (2015, p. 180). In the classroom, this ethos can be operationalized by adopting the same strategies Waisbord proposes for de-westernizing research: encouraging students to critically examine their unit of analysis, empirical foundations, and theoretical frameworks through a de-westernized lens (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014). In practice, this means motivating students to select case studies from outside the Western world—often overlooked in mainstream research—for term papers, presentations, or Master's theses, and to test established analytical frameworks in these contexts. Promoting comparative research is another strategy for fostering cosmopolitanism and expanding the empirical base, thereby avoiding universalist assumptions. Finally, students should be encouraged to address global problems and transnational phenomena not merely by

adding international perspectives, but by posing questions that are inherently relevant across national boundaries.

I must acknowledge that it is considerably easier to explore cosmopolitan strategies in classrooms primarily composed of international students, who bring diverse scholarly traditions and foster opportunities for academic exchange within the process of knowledge production (Richter et al., 2025). While it is crucial to empower international students to engage with issues pertinent to their home countries and introduce theoretical perspectives often overlooked in Western scholarship, we must be cautious not to confine them to regional or area studies, thereby “reinforcing scholarly insularity and fragmentation” (Waisbord, 2015, p. 184). How long must an early-career scholar or student reside in the West before being considered capable of contributing to broader theoretical debates, rather than being consistently asked to speak—or present in class—solely from the perspective of their national or regional expertise? As Waisbord (2015) warns in his critique of area studies, merely leveraging multicultural classrooms or incorporating diverse regional concerns does not, in itself, foster cosmopolitanism—especially when Western analytical frameworks or methodological nationalism remain unchallenged. A more meaningful approach involves encouraging students to critically engage with global phenomena that transcend national boundaries—such as the rise of right-wing populism, disinformation, fact-checking, platformization, cross-border media flows, and transnational social movements—while recognizing that it is no longer tenable to examine issues within a single national context without at least asking whether and how they manifest elsewhere (Livingstone, 2012).

Nonetheless, the expectation to analyze a broad spectrum of phenomena across diverse countries, regions, and cultures introduces an inherent methodological and theoretical universalism that often overlooks contextual factors, potentially resulting in “out-of-context measurements” (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012). Effective contextualization requires a deep socio-political understanding and linguistic expertise, which can challenge established typologies (as discussed in the section on media systems above). Without adequate contextualization, the comprehensive understanding of specific phenomena becomes compromised and may contribute to “epistemic violence”, defined as the marginalization, silencing, or devaluation of other forms of knowledge by dominant academic frameworks (Richter et al., 2025), reinforcing normative concepts like objectivity in journalism (Ward, 2020) and uncritically reproducing power relations in knowledge production. This problem stems from disparities in the production and transfer of knowledge, which lead to significant methodological and practical challenges.

Methodological Problems and other Practicalities

Traditional research methods often fail to capture the complexities of non-Western countries, as they do not address the unique challenges involved in conducting research in these regions. These methods, primarily developed in Western contexts, assume that accurate and

comprehensive data—such as statistics on media reach, social media usage, circulation, populist discourse, and media ownership—are readily accessible (Richter et al., 2025). For example, although the Reuters Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2024) covers numerous countries, it does not include data on Cuba or Venezuela, likely due to difficulties in data collection rather than a lack of interest from the research groups. Such data are often difficult to obtain, unreliable, or incomplete, owing to systemic challenges such as limited resources for data gathering, weak institutional frameworks, and political constraints. As a result, some researchers (Richter et al., 2025) advocate for an inductive approach to research, which is better suited to understanding these unique contexts.

It is easy to overlook, in large-scale quantitative comparative research, the underlying processes that shape the observed patterns. Furthermore, broad generalizations that fail to consider the cultural significance and historical context of institutions and individual decisions can lead to misinterpretations and erroneous conclusions (Canel & Voltmer, 2014; Esser et al., 2004; Richter et al., 2025). Identifying appropriate equivalents (Rössler, 2011) is especially challenging in comparative designs, where respondents and coders may interpret questions and concepts differently. Therefore, from a methodological standpoint, it is crucial to emphasize the careful selection of comparison units, the establishment of functional equivalence, and the appropriate choice of research instruments.

There is no way to circumvent these challenges except by raising students' awareness of them. Research seminars—especially those integrated into applied methodology courses—provide valuable opportunities to engage students from diverse methodological and scholarly traditions in collaborative research designs. Nonetheless, teaching in this context involves practical constraints, notably these students' varied methodological training and broader issues tied to the political economy of academia. For example, in courses taught in English, I am limited in my selection of literature when designing a comprehensive and inclusive syllabus. To mitigate this limitation, I encourage students to present alternative methodological and theoretical perspectives from their native languages, while avoiding confining them to regional expertise, as discussed above. Although I acknowledge and highlight important scholarship in Portuguese, Spanish, and German during class, inclusion in the syllabus is generally restricted to works published in English, which constrains the scope of knowledge assessment. One strategy I have adopted is inviting students to critically engage with the syllabus, as some may be familiar with key authors worldwide who publish in English but remain outside my current awareness. Another essential strategy is to promote collaborative projects and group works that enable dialogue among students with diverse academic backgrounds. Finally, to effectively teach comparative studies, it is essential to foster an environment that is safe, collaborative, and intellectually open. This environment should welcome critique in order to address the challenges inherent in comparative research.

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