Editorial

Beware of International Comparative Research

In 2018, I was spending a month guest lecturing and consulting at the School of Journalism and Communication, Shanghai International Studies University, where I had taught in 2013–2015. I was asked on short notice to give a talk at a June 23 conference, which was about China’s image around the world. So I presented the short talk, “Coherent Theoretical Development of Comparative International Research.” The audience was almost entirely Chinese professors and journalists (http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1108744.shtml).

Obviously I was not the only one who still found the topic of problems in international comparative research to be compelling. For in August 2019, the Newspaper and Online News Division (publisher of this journal) and International Communication Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) presented at the Toronto convention a panel discussion titled “The Comparison Trap? Current Theoretical and Methodological Challenges in Comparative Journalism Research.” Moderated by Lea Hellmueller (University of Houston), its panelists were Tim Vos (Michigan State University), Stephen Reese (University of Texas at Austin), Magdalena Saldana (Pontificia Universidad Catolica de Chile), and Joy Jenkins (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford University). I was not able to attend that session, but the panelists have been kind enough to share with me slides, notes, or other materials from their presentations.

Vos said that his observations were based on his “experiences with the Worlds of Journalism Study, other studies, and a systematic analysis of comparative journalism studies scholarship, 2000-2015,” cautioning that such studies have practical, theoretical, and methodological challenges. He said comparative journalism research is “robust,” but also still “troubled” by “political economy favors the Global West,” studies still using the default of entire countries as units of analysis, being “still focused on elite, print publications,” and “women’s work is cited less than men’s.” Vos also pointed to the problems of small sample sizes and “findings as artifact of the method.”

Theory development is tied in comparative research to methodology because a “selection rationale needs to be provided,” studies must be “comparing a comparable phenomenon,” and researchers need to be “looking inward,” Vos pointed out.
Saldana spoke to “Comparative Journalism in Latin America: Challenges and Opportunities.” She said comparative journalism research allows for “understanding social entities” and “comparing and contrasting nations, cultures, societies, and institutions,” whereas problems include “indicators that fit well on one country at one time might not serve well across countries and over time” and, similar to Vos, “results might be the outcomes of conceptual/methodological inconsistencies instead of causes in the real world.” A problem with comparative research on Latin America, she said, is that it “is often considered a homogenous region, but it is not.” Second, “Theoretical models developed in the Global North do not necessarily apply to other contexts.”

Third, as Vos said, comparative research’s controllable methodological issues include instruments, sampling, and data collection, whereas uncontrollable ones include language barriers, cultural contexts, and political contexts. Saldana recommends “conceptualizations that work in all countries,” methods as “robust as possible,” “diverse research teams,” triangulating data, and turning the question “Why should we care about country X?” to “why shouldn’t we?” (Here at Newspaper Research Journal, we also want to publish research about newspapers and online news in any country, and not only when it is comparative research.)

Reese has been researching, writing, and speaking about comparative international research for a long time; for example, all the way back in 2001, he published “Understanding the Global Journalist: A Hierarchy-of-Influences Approach” in Journalism Studies. He mentioned this approach in Toronto, as well as in his chapter, “The New Geography of Journalism Research: Levels and Spaces,” in Stuart Allen et al.’s The Future of Journalism: Risks, Threats, Opportunities (Routledge, 2019). Among research issues that he discussed on the panel were the “problem of reducing comparative [research] to cross-national,” cross-national research “obscuring complexity of globalization phenomena,” national chauvinism (and lack of researchers being “self-reflective”), and characteristics of medium-sized quantitative studies (such as the Reuters Digital News Report co-authored by Jenkins), large quantitative studies (such as the Worlds of Journalism study), and qualitative studies (such as Case Studies in Collaborative Local Journalism also co-authored by Jenkins). He particularly noted two problems in multicountry studies: “large comparative designs often assume homogenous groups of journalists” and they take an “assumed definition of journalism as a starting point.” He concluded by emphasizing, among other points, needing to study relationships (networked public sphere, field theory, actor networks) and needing to “avoid groupism and place-ism.”

At its best, comparative international research has come a long way since, for example, J. G. Blumler’s comparative 1983 book, Communicating to Voters: Television in the First European Parliamentary Elections (SAGE). In addition to individual studies that, overall, continue to improve theoretically and methodologically, a book such as Martin Loffelholz and David Weaver’s (2008) Global Journalism Research: Theories, Methods, Findings, Future (Blackwell) still serves as an helpful primer for those in the novice to intermediate levels of training and experience in cross-national or comparative international research.

In the Loffelholz and Weaver volume, Chapter 8 “Comparing Journalism Across Cultural Boundaries,” by Thomas Hanitzsch, is a great starting point—although only that because points covered by Hanitzsch necessarily in only a phrase, sentence, or paragraph require much more elaboration for designing the most rigorous research. At
least for me, Hanitzsch’s points cannot be emphasized enough (because they are ignored so often in small-scale articles and papers):

First, when very different systems or time periods are being analyzed, the extent of the differences may overwhelm meaningful comparison. These differences may not only be large and multidimensional, but also vary by domain. What we treat as a similarity at one level of analysis may reveal myriad differences at more detailed levels of analysis. Second, researchers often understate heterogeneities within the cultures being compared when focusing on differences between units of analysis, but sometimes variances within cultures may be greater than variations across cultural boundaries. . . . Third, the so-called “Galton’s Problem” may arise because differences and similarities, for instance between Great Britain and the United States in terms of message content or professional values, can be thought of as “caused” by the respective national cultures or at the result of diffusion across cultures. (Hanitzsch, p. 96, citations omitted)

He continued, “One problem which arises in many cross-cultural studies is that they produce ‘measurement out of the context’ by assuming methodological and theoretical universalism. Furthermore, cultures are often evaluated through the lens of the researchers’ different cultural value systems” (Hanitzsch, p. 96, citation omitted).

Choices for comparative research strategies include, Hanitzsch pointed out, choosing “most similar systems designs” or “most different systems designs.” The former was chosen by Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini for their landmark 2004 book Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics (Cambridge University Press) and “keeps the number of experimental variables relatively small by neutralizing some differences and accentuating others, thus making it easier to determine the factors that account for the observed outcome” (Hanitzsch, p. 97). A second strategy, Hanitzsch wrote, is adopting Kohn’s fourfold typology of comparative studies: nations as objects of study versus nations as the context of study versus nations as units of analysis versus transnational research (where nations are components of larger international systems). A third strategy is choosing between the “safari approach” (study conducted in a cultural context different from researchers’ own), the “application approach” (replicating a study designed for another culture on one’s own culture), or the “assembly approach” (truly collaborative international work) (Hanitzsch, p. 97).

Hanitzsch then discussed specific methodological issues of the “equivalence of concepts” across cultures, the equivalence of methods and administration across cultures, and the equivalence of language and meaning between cultures (Hanitzsch, pp. 99–100). Together, these three issues are minefields for comparative research.

He concluded,

First, journalism researchers should always be ask themselves whether a cross-cultural comparison will extend the scope of their interpretations sufficiently to make the venture worthwhile . . . . Second, the research should be situated in a theoretical or conceptual perspective. In journalism studies, a large part of comparative researches are not based on sound theory . . . . Third, when a theoretical framework is absent, the formulation of research questions or
hypotheses becomes a matter of guesswork . . . Fourth, it goes without saying that researchers should not try to interpret data relating to a culture of which they know little or nothing . . . Fifth, “equivalence should be established and cannot be assumed” . . . (Hanitzsch, p. 101)

Overall, since Hanitzsch’s chapter was published, the quality of comparative international research has, as noted, improved, largely due to several large studies being conducted by large international teams of top scholars. However, problematic comparative media studies are still conducted and published, even if you accept the premise that entire countries can be compared.

For example, a pointless comparison (regardless of the merits of separate research on each country’s media) is Reporting Climate Change in the Global North and South: Journalism in Australia and Bangladesh, by Jahnnabi Das (Routledge, 2019). Das (research associate at the Climate Justice Research Centre, University of Technology, Sydney) compares and contrasts Australian journalism with Bangladeshi journalism on climate change, as if there aren’t a hundred other differences between those two countries’ news media that would need to be controlled for. Granted, Das apparently is not a mass communication scholar, but he surely could consult a wide variety of social scientists (including mass communication scholars), and Routledge publishes a large quantity of mass communication books.

To be sure, the best way to compare countries is to start with two very similar countries and map out their similarities and differences. Then systematically compare pairs of countries that are increasingly dissimilar, looking for differences where you hypothesized similarities, and similarities where you hypothesized differences. You do not start by comparing Australia and Bangladesh.

One issue that Hanitzsch did not explicitly address is the relative total lack of culturally specific social scientific mass communication theory around the world. Both statistics and experience show the problem. For the former, see (among other examples) Morton Demeter’s article, “The Winner Takes It All: International Inequality in Communication and Media Studies Today,” in the Spring 2019 Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly (JMCQ). Demeter counted what countries authors were from for 1975–2017 articles in communication and media studies journals indexed in Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI). For the period 1975–2012, U.S. authors composed 69% of all authors, whereas from 2013 to 2017, 55%. Second place went to England, with 5% and 6.5%, respectively. So mass communication theories largely have been developed, tested, and refined mostly in the United States and overwhelmingly in English-speaking countries (when one adds in England, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Scotland, Wales, South Africa, Ireland, and Northern Ireland).

But the problem is not only scholars in and of other countries not getting published much in SSCI journals with research about their own countries’ experiences with agenda-setting, gatekeeping, spiral of silence, framing, cultivation, media dependency, knowledge gap, uses and gratifications, and so on. The even bigger problem for the global field is that scholars are writing hypotheses and designing methodologies to study, say, agenda-setting or uses and gratifications in, say, China or South Korea or Singapore (or somewhere else in Europe, Asia, Latin America, or Africa) based on literature reviews citing studies exclusively or almost exclusively about the United States. This assumes and implies that the cause–effect relationships in these theories...
(including the independent and dependent variables) are the same in, say, the United States and China. Do we know that? No. In fact, we should assume they are not until we know they are. An old line of mine about the social sciences is that “they are more social than scientific.” This is not to say that social science isn’t scientific, only that even in this age of globalization, national and cultural differences still matter. To look at this another way, do U.S. media scholars ever conduct studies in the United States based on literature reviews citing only studies in, say, South Korea? No, and for sound social scientific reasons. So why are many South Korean studies based on literature reviews citing mostly or only studies in the United States and the United Kingdom? The author feels she has no choice and/or doesn’t know better.

An “Invited Forum” section also in the Spring 2019 JMCQ about the status and future of framing research could reasonably cause one to conclude that framing research hasn’t made much progress in 40 years, especially considering the thousands of framing articles and papers. But we know even less about whether, say, agenda-setting theories or spiral of silence theories (or any of the others) would be the same all over the world if anyone ever tried to find out.

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