Comparing Political Communication: An Update

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ABSTRACT
Political communication is about the creation, shaping, dissemination, processing and effects of information among actors from the political system, the media and the public. For studying political communication comparatively, the heuristic of the political communication system has proved particularly valuable. The chapter sets forth the dimensions of this system and discusses relevant models of relationship between media and political institutions and differences in political communication cultures among media and political elites. It further presents findings on country-specific reporting styles in political news coverage and identifies divergent approaches in government communication and election communication. On the side of the citizens, the chapter delineates cross-national differences in the consumption of political news, and it highlights the positive contribution of public service broadcasters for informed and enlightened citizenship.

KEYWORDS
Political communication, cross-national comparative research

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INTRODUCTION

Political communication refers to the flow of information and the exchange of messages among political actors, citizens and the media. All three participants contribute to the creation of political public spheres. In the past, political communication scholarship focused its attention somewhat narrowly on publicly visible forms of mass communication featuring organized actors who are addressing core political issues in the setting of liberal democratic nation-states. These conditions are no longer tenable. Today, political communication is in many ways characterized by a mix of public and personalized communication, mass media and social media, established and non-established communicators, blurred boundaries between political seriousness and entertainment, a frontier that extends to non-western political systems, and increasing globalization, all of which affect the status of the nation-state as a default variable in comparative research.

Although the days of clear-cut boundaries and narrow conceptualizations are clearly over, previous theorizing about political communication has not become obsolete. Rather, the current conditions of political communication offer opportunities to update existing approaches in innovative ways (Vowe and Henn 2016). In this context, it is also important to note that political communication arrangements in the various countries are exposed to simultaneous forces of stability and change. The co-existence of stable patterns and path-dependent change is best understood if we apply a systemic perspective. What has remained consistent is that political communication is always about the creation, shaping, dissemination, processing and effects of information among actors from the political system, the media and the public. The new Oxford Handbook of Political Communication thus defines political communication as “making sense of symbolic exchanges about the shared exercise of power” and “the presentation and interpretation of information … with potential consequences for the exercise of shared power” (Jamieson and Kenski 2016: 2). While many aspects of this definition hold up, the particular emphasis on the power aspect of politics is quite narrow. As Blumler (2016a) rightly notes, political communication is not only concerned with activities aimed at attaining or retaining power but also inextricably intertwined with many other elements of politics – such as the transmission of interests and demands of citizens, the symbolic legitimation of authority, and the clarification of alternative options in policy making.

It is also self-evident that varying settings of political communication affect political behaviour and the workings of democracy differently. National arrangements of political communication are highly differentiated in themselves and are conditional on contextual influences. Thus, the more we compare the various aspects of political communication, the more complex our understanding of political life becomes. Findings from comparative political communication research often reflect this complexity, and they can rarely be reduced to a simple formula. While we seek generalizable knowledge and systematic patterns in the communication of politics through comparisons, we often unveil contradictions, dilemmas and idiosyncratic cases. These circumstances make the review of comparative political communication research an intricate task.
In this chapter, we first discuss the meaning and relevance of political communication to demonstrate the usefulness of comparative research in this field. Second, we introduce a heuristic model of the political communication system that allows us to identify and contextualize the relevant actors, relationships and information flows. This model will help us to delineate some of the important trajectories of comparative research and lines of scholarly debate. In particular, we scrutinize structures, cultures, messages, and the consumption and effects of political information from a comparative perspective. We close the chapter with a reflection on achievements and normative implications.

In sum:

- Political communication is about the creation, shaping, dissemination, processing and effects of information among actors from the political system, the media and the public.
- Political communication refers to the presentation and sense-making of messages that have potential consequences for the exercise of power, the transmission of citizens’ interests, the symbolic legitimation of authority, and the clarification of alternative options in policy making.

STUDYING POLITICAL COMMUNICATION COMPARATIVELY

The Rationale

Although the comparative study of political communication has become fairly commonplace, many observers agree that it is still undergoing a process of growth and maturation (Gurevitch and Blumler 2004; Mancini and Hallin 2012). It is a relatively young research field in which scholars still display some uncertainty about its conceptual and methodological foundations and its level of achievements. Benson (2010: 614), for example, celebrates the increase in comparative studies for successfully challenging the “American-centric narrative” in much of the political communication literature. A more pessimistic outlook comes from Norris (2009: 322-323), who claims that “it still remains difficult, if not impossible, to compare political communications systematically across national borders” 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”. These assessments of the state of the art demonstrate that depending on the point of view, the available research has either advanced considerably or still suffers from deficits. However, it can nonetheless be concluded that during the last ten years, political communication studies have become more diverse, employed more complex designs and yielded more sophisticated findings.

The comparative approach pays special attention to the fact that democratic political communication arrangements evolve differently under the influence of divergent contextual factors. In light of this understanding, comparative political communication research is occupied with contrasting geographically defined units, whether they are defined as nation-states or other entities, at one or more points in time (Blumler, McLeod and Rosengren 1992). In our earlier work (Esser and Pfetsch 2004; Pfetsch and Esser 2012) we 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 comparative units are assumed to provide characteristic contextual conditions for the object under investigation. Different conditions constitute factors of influence that are used to explain different outcomes of the object that is embedded in these contexts and that is thus affected by them. In our field, comparative research is based on the assumption that different parameters of political systems and communication conditions differentially promote or constrain the communication roles and behaviours of organizations or actors. Comparative scholarship often uses factors at the macro-societal level as explanatory variables for differences found in lower level communication phenomena, and recognizing the (causal) significance of contextual conditions is what makes comparative research exceptionally valuable. In the words of Mancini and Hallin, “theorizing the role of context is precisely what comparative analysis is about” (2012: 515).

However, not all research in the field of comparative political communication is explanatory in nature. Many studies have become influential by providing a classification of cases. Typologies have proven to be of high heuristic value because they use theoretically based dimensions to set up distinct categories with identifiable and shared characteristics and to group cases in a meaningful way, such as Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) typology of media systems, which has inspired a great number of follow up studies (see below for details). The clarification and validation of dimensions and categories, which are used to build typologies, ideally serves as the starting point of a theory on a subject. In this vein, comparative communication research has clear aspirations not only to overcome mere description and to strive for explanation but also to level up to theory building.

**The Political Communication System**

Political communication settings are often described from a systemic perspective. The concept of “political communication system” was originally introduced by Gurevitch and Blumler (1977) and has been developed further into a framework for comparative research (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995; Pfetsch 2008). The systemic perspective has several advantages (Blumler 2016b): It allows us to identify those components that remain stable and those that undergo chance, and it helps to differentiate between ‘internal’ national arrangements and ‘external’ transnational influences. A systems approach also recognizes that all participants of political communication processes are linked by interdependencies and mutual adaptions and that influences at the country level have trickle-down effects on organizations and actors (calling for a multi-level perspective and cross-level thinking). Eventually, the notion of a political communication system provides an anchor for discussing normative issues – an aspect to which we will return in the conclusion of this chapter.

In this chapter, the model of a political communication system (Pfetsch and Esser 2012) shall be used to illustrate the rationale of comparative research and also to provide a guiding structure for organizing the abundance of studies that already exist. This heuristic conceives of political communication processes as an ordered system in which the triangular relationship between politics, media and the public is integrally embedded (see Figure 1).
At the horizontal level, two sets of institutions – political and media organizations – are involved in the production and dissemination of information in accordance with their respective norms and goals. Their goals are dissimilar because politics and media perform different functions for society: the production of collectively binding decisions on the one hand and the creation of a public space for issues and opinions on the other. To perform these functions, interaction and exchange of information for publicity between political and media actors are necessary, yet there is an inherent tension in their relationship. At certain times and in some countries more than in others, the relationship becomes conflicted when actors from both groups are competing to gain the upper hand in framing issues and setting the public agenda (Schwab-Cammarano and Diez-Medrano 2014). Comparative studies have focused on the structure and attitudinal underpinnings of this linkage and found that long-term formal and informal interactions have created models and cultures of political communication (see below).

Figure 1 further shows that the political communication system also includes a vertical dimension, which refers to the information flow between the media/politics nexus on the one hand and the public on the other hand. The top-down dimension involves the goal-oriented construction of messages and the use of certain channels to disseminate them. There is also
a bottom-up flow of information, reflecting the extent to which these communication channels are used by the public to communicate their demands and support. Finally, the vertical dimension addresses political information effects on the audience. From the perspective of media and political actors, the public is the common reference point for the production of messages.¹

With the advent of new information technologies, additional communicators such as bloggers and new intermediaries such as social media networks and search engines also have obtained the tools to publicize their issues, reach large audiences, and feed their demands – via online channels – into the media/politics nexus from the bottom up. However, in contemporary political communication systems the professional news media remain major actors with regard to public and political agenda setting (Perloff 2015). While journalists increasingly change their function from gatekeeping to gatewatching in the multi-media environment (Bruns 2005), they remain highly relevant reference points for both politicians and information-seeking citizens (Perloff 2015). Blogs and social media have expanded but certainly not replaced the role of professional news media thus far. In fact, there is evidence that the political blogosphere follows or amplifies the agenda of mainstream media (Haas 2005). Moreover, news aggregators and intermediary networks hardly produce any original political information content themselves but rather repackage the offerings of existing news providers (Perloff 2015). Thus, although the flows of information have naturally become more complex than indicated in Figure 1, the fundamental set-up of political communication systems is still valid and of undiminished heuristic value. We present Figure 1 in its present form because the comparative literature has not yet fully embraced the new complexities of political communication and still largely focuses on the downward flow of information from the media/politics nexus to the public.

It is also important to stress that the analytical categories of the political communication system are not exclusively tied to the national level. They can also be applied to locales of political communication that are situated below or above the country level. A final distinction is between macro- and micro-level approaches. Many comparativists take a macro-analytical perspective and use aggregate data to compare structures or cultures of communication at the country level. In micro-analytical studies, the country variable is usually tackled as a context variable of political communication, assuming that the national environment impacts on individual-level processes. Such studies that are interested in how country-level contextual conditions influence relationships between micro-level variables usually work with nested designs – an important feature of explanatory comparative political communication scholarship (for methodological details see Esser and Vliegenthart forthcoming). Although there is a growing number of comprehensive multilevel studies, hardly any single study takes into account all components and interactions of the political communication system.

Beyond assertions about differences across national communication systems, the major theories in the field consist of assertions about the long-term development of political communication. However, the comparative literature has not yet fully embraced the new complexities of political communication and still largely focuses on the downward flow of information from the media/politics nexus to the public.

¹ Even if the public remains largely passive in their political communication behavior, it still fulfills a powerful role as political and media actors constantly try to anticipate citizens’ interests and demands and incorporate those as an action-guiding projection that influences their framing and targeting of messages.
communication, which requires a temporal dimension. In fact, the spatial and temporal comparison must be combined to capture longitudinal trends in political communication systems such as digitization, globalization, and individualization of communication (Blumler, McLeod and Rosengren 1992). Scholarship has developed various models in this regard, such as Strömbäck’s (2008) theory of “four phases of the mediatization of politics” and Blumler and Kavanagh’s (1999) approach of “three eras of political communication”.

Based on the heuristic of the political communication system, we will review a relevant selection of significant comparative studies that have also made a contribution to identifying long term developments. In accordance with the components highlighted in Figure 1, we discuss research on (i) institutional interactions between media and politics, (ii) professional interaction cultures between journalists and political elites, (iii) patterns of message construction by political actors and (iv) by media actors, (v) the usage patterns of political information and (vi) the effects on national audiences. The first two of these components relate to the horizontal “media-politics relations” and other four components relate to the vertical “political communication flows” with the public. We will organize our discussion of the relevant comparative literature according to this structure.

In sum:

- Comparative political communication research is occupied with contrasting a minimum of two political communication systems – either at the national, subnational or supranational level – at one or more points in time.
- The object of comparative analysis may refer to any component of the political communication system, for instance the institutional elements of media and politics and their model-like interactions, the attitudes of involved communicators and their culture-specific interactions, the patterns of message construction by the relevant communicators, the patterns of consuming political information by the general public, the effects of political information on audiences, or any other element relevant for political communication theory.

**MEDIA-POLITICS RELATIONS**

**Comparing Institutional Interactions Between Media and Politics**

An important body of the comparative political communication literature explores the macro-level relationships between media institutions and political institutions and how they differ across countries. Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) study, *Comparing media systems – Three models of media and politics*, has become a central reference point in this regard. Drawing on Lijphart (1999), it assumes that political systems influence the news media depending on the following: the role of the state in media policy and regulation, the presence of either a majoritarian or a consensus electoral system, the pattern of interest mediation, the form of pluralism, and the type of political authority. Hallin and Mancini (2004) argue that these *political* factors have had a defining historical impact on how the *media* are institutionalized in the Western world. Based on research in 18 Western European and North American countries, their study offers a typology of three types of Western media system – a North Atlantic “liberal” model, a northern European “democratic corporatist” model, and a southern European
“polarized pluralist” model. Examples of which countries belong to which model can be found in Figure 2.

Hallin and Mancini’s accomplishment is to demonstrate how these three types of media systems differ as regards their relations with four key forces: the market, the party system, the state and the autonomy of journalism. To assess these relationships in more detail, the authors develop measures to gauge their intensity across countries (see Figure 2). For instance, the first factor – the market – refers to the commercialization of market structures; it has its roots in many countries in the historical development of mass-oriented newspapers that are able to sustain themselves without political protection. Next, the influence of the party system can be analysed with respect to political parallelism, meaning whether media content reflects distinct political orientations that represent ideological worldviews or party lines. Third, state relations can be categorized by the degree and form of state intervention in the media regarding regulation, ownership, or formal and informal control. Finally, the nature of a media system also depends on the autonomy of journalists, which is determined by professionalization and an independent set of shared norms of journalistic practice. Figure 2 offers a condensed summary of Hallin and Mancini’s book-length analysis and is meant to illustrate the usefulness of these four comparative dimensions for characterizing differences between three types of Western media systems.

Figure 2: Three models of media-politics relations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Polarized Pluralized Model</th>
<th>Democratic Corporatist Model</th>
<th>Liberal Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece)</td>
<td>(Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Belgium, Germany, Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland)</td>
<td>(United States, Canada, Great Britain, Ireland)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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| Development of mass-oriented press and large news audiences | Low | High | High |
| Media parallelism with distinct political orientations | High | High | Low |
| Journalists’ professional independence | Low | High | High |
| State intervention in media policy | High | High | Low |

Source: Adapted from Hallin and Mancini (2004: 299)
The resulting typology of Western media systems by Hallin and Mancini – based on a historically grounded institutionalist approach – has replaced the outdated media systems typology by Siebert and Schramm (1956). It received considerable praise but also some constructive criticism. For instance, some scholars suggested incorporating additional dimensions for defining media systems, such as the proliferation of new information and communication technologies (ICT); the penetration of media markets by foreign/transnational media; the geographical size, economic weight and ethnic heterogeneity of media markets; or the extent to which market competition and media policy jurisdiction is centralized. It has further been argued that factors such as press freedom and journalistic independence, as well as media concentration’s impact on the diversity of editorial content, deserved greater attention (see Hardy 2008; Humphreys 2012; Norris 2011).

Most important, Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) study triggered substantial interest in developing quantitative indicators for determining media systems. For instance, with regard to the dimension of political parallelism, Popescu (2011) conducted expert surveys to measure cross-national differences in media partisanship, whereas Kempen (2007) used public opinion data from European Election Studies to measure the relationship between party preferences and media consumption. Esser and Umbricht (2013, 2014) developed measures of news objectivity, interpretive and opinionated journalism, and political negativity to map news cultures accordingly. The most straightforward attempt to test Hallin and Mancini’s typology of media systems was presented by Brüggemann et al. (2014), who used secondary data sources to conduct a cluster analysis that confirms the original typology in its essential features. However, they find four instead of three Western models because the group of “democratic corporatist” systems is split into two separate types and because some countries, such as the Netherlands and Portugal, converged toward the “liberal” model.

Hallin and Mancini (2004) also triggered a discussion about the applicability of their typology to systems outside the Western hemisphere. One conclusion was that the four underlying dimensions need to be modified (see Hallin and Mancini 2012; Voltmer 2013). For instance, the dimension role of the state ought to take into account that state intervention is more pertinent in non-western media systems – either with the purpose of censorship and control to stabilize an authoritarian regime, or with the purpose of nation-building to promote national integration, economic development, and territorial and cultural sovereignty. It was also argued that press-party parallelism needs to be defined in broader terms because in non-western media systems, the media may act in parallel with more actors, such as political movements, high-profile politicians, or ethnic, religious, lingual or cultural fractions. Regarding media markets, it was noted that non-western media markets are generally weaker, technologically less advanced, and less well organized. Even commercial media are often not free from political influences but rather are interlocked in what has been labelled crony capitalism, where economic success depends on serving the interests of politico-economic circles at the expense of those of the wider public. Concurrently, there are often alternative media sources from abroad and the underground that can have democratizing, freedom-enhancing effects in non-western markets. Finally, Hallin and Mancini’s typology led to demands to “de-westernize” the concept of journalistic professionalism. Instead of striving for independence, journalists often display greater willingness to be corrupted because of a
pervasive lack of material resources and, more importantly, their close entanglement with political and economic elites. Furthermore, non-western media systems have seen the emergence of other professional ideals, such as ‘development journalism’ or ‘communist journalism,’ that are hardly compatible with Western understandings of professionalism.

Based on these considerations, Voltmer (2012: 241-243) has proposed the establishment of two additional non-Western media-politics models: first, a model for media systems in the delegative, populist democracies that have emerged in Latin America and in some former Soviet states and, second, a model for media systems in democracies with one-party predominance, which are often found in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Unfortunately she has neither given them catchy labels nor comprehensively described their specific nature.

Comparing Cultural Interactions Between Media and Politics

Comparisons of political communication systems must be complemented by studying the attitudinal underpinnings of the media-politics relationship, which refers to the orientations that guide the roles of actors and their practices and, eventually, the degree of media-political elite integration, which is to some degree necessary to safeguard the flow of information in a democracy. In political communication research, three strands of comparative research on values and attitudes can be identified: first, studies of journalism culture examine the professional orientations of media personnel and explore whether these attitudes converge across cultures and countries; second, studies in comparative politics focus in particular on political elites’ and journalists’ perceptions of media and political power; and third, studies on political communication culture investigate the interaction norms of politicians and journalists and link them to national political and media systems.

Comparative research into journalism culture aims at analysing role perceptions and professional identities empirically (Donsbach and Patterson 2004; Weaver and Willnat 2012) and revealing the predispositions that influence how news-makers perceive and report politics. For a long time, this work was limited to single country studies that used the Western model as a yardstick of journalism. Progress was made only when the debate about global journalism raised awareness of the implicit Western bias of journalism culture (Reese 2008) and when a theoretical framework for comparative research was proposed. Specifically, Hanitzsch (2007) suggested functionally equivalent categories for identifying the commonalities and differences across journalistic norms in various national and cultural settings and organized an international survey of journalists in 19 countries (Hanitzsch et al. 2011). The findings show that detachment and non-involvement, as well as factuality and reliability of information and the idea of being a watchdog of government and business elites, are general values that reach beyond national idiosyncrasies. Particularly revealing are the results for watchdog journalism (see BOX I). However, there is also evidence that journalists’ ethical orientations are not rooted in universally internalized values but rather vary according to cultural and ideological contexts (Plaisance, Skewes and Hanitzsch 2012). For instance, interventionism, power distance and objectivity are culturally driven orientations that qualify Western journalism cultures in particular (Hanitzsch et al. 2011). Other studies demonstrate that political role perceptions of journalists also differ within Europe: the tendency to interpret their role as advocate and opinion-maker is particularly widespread in Southern European countries such as Spain but almost universally
rejected in Northern European countries and in countries such as Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (Esmark and Blach-Ørsten 2014).

BOX I: Where do journalists see themselves primarily as “watchdogs of government” and where as “opportunist facilitators” of government?

A survey of 1800 journalists from 18 countries identified by way of cluster analysis four professional cultures: the detached watchdog, opportunist facilitator, populist disseminator, and critical change agent (Hanitzsch 2011). The detached watchdog milieu clearly dominates the journalism in most Western countries, as can be seen from Figure 3. This approach to news-making combines detached distance, scepticism toward power-holders and commitment toward informed citizenry and represents the prototypical ideal of Western mainstream journalism. In contrast, the milieu of the opportunist facilitator reigns supreme in several developing, transitional and authoritarian contexts. Their main characteristic of this group of journalists is their support of government and official policies, their identification with economic development and political transformation, and the positive image they convey of political and business elites. There is no systematic distribution of the two remaining cultures of the populist disseminator and the critical change agent. The populist disseminator concentrates mainly on news that attracts the widest possible audience, and the critical change agent focuses mainly on advocating social change, influencing public opinion and setting the political agenda (Hanitzsch 2011).

The distribution of four key professional cultures in global journalism (in percent of cluster membership)

Source: Thomas Hanitzsch, personal communication
It is most relevant for the analysis of political communication systems that patterns of journalism culture are significantly related to features of the political and economic environment. Journalists around the world display significant variation with respect to their perceptions of political and economic pressures. As Hanitzsch and Mellado (2011) demonstrate, journalists feel constrained in their work by political and economic forces, particularly in those countries that display weak democratic performance, low levels of press freedom and a high degree of political parallelism. In fact, the degree to which political influences constrain news making is a dimension along which journalism cultures can be differentiated cross-nationally. Notably, journalists seem to push these influences out of their minds during their daily practical work (Hanitzsch and Mellado 2011).

In the comparative politics tradition, the interaction of journalists and politicians is explored with respect to the perceptions of mutual power. Research from various European countries demonstrates that the relationship is characterized by mutual imputations of (legitimate or illegitimate) power and perceptions of who “leads the tango” in setting the public agenda (van Aelst et al. 2008). While politicians prefer to believe that journalists are powerful agents in agenda setting and promoting the individual careers of politicians, media actors are reluctant to acknowledge their influential position in these respects (Lengauer, Donges and Plasser 2014). In fact, the relationship between politicians and journalists has been described using the terminology of ambivalent emotions. Van Aelst and Aalberg (2011) speak of patterns of “love and hate” as feelings that govern the exchange. In Belgium, Sweden and Norway, their study shows that informality goes together with a deep rooted suspicion. It seems that political reporters in many European countries have become quite cynical (van Dalen, Albaek and de Vreese 2011). Several studies of Western Europe highlight that journalists’ cynicism about politicians interacts with negative views of spin doctors and media salacity (van Dalen, Albaek and de Vreese 2011; van Aelst et al. 2008). However, politicians are also ambivalent towards media reporters and act out this ambivalence in two ways (Pfetsch et al. 2014b). Outwardly, politicians describe their relationships with journalists as rather harmonious; inwardly, however their relationships are marked by diverging interests and conflicts. Therefore, the self-image of politicians and journalists has been characterized by tensions resulting from the conflicting objectives of their institutions of origin. These tensions occur in similar ways throughout Western Europe (see BOX II). However, the intensity of this pattern varies between countries with a high level of politicization of the media-politics relationship and countries with less politicization (Pfetsch et al. 2014b, Emark and Blach-Orsten 2014; Schwab Cammarano and Diez Medrano 2014).

**BOX II: Where do communication roles of journalists and politicians clash?**
Several comparative studies examined self-images, communication roles and conflicting perceptions in the interaction of journalists and politicians:

In Western European systems, journalists and politicians subscribe to *idealized roles based on democratic functions* and *instrumental communication roles* regarding the objectives to reach large audiences in the case of journalists and party supporters and citizens in the case of politicians (Emark and Blach-Ørsten 2014).

While it is granted that each side pursues their strategic interests, there is also reservation and mistrust on each side about advocacy and political motives of journalists and about media performance
strategies of politicians. Journalists tend to have become cynical about politicians and hold negative views of spin doctors and media salacity (van Dalen, Albaek and de Vreese 2011).

The relationship is guided by the clash between idealized self-image and cynical outside assessment with respect to information provision: Journalists lament that politicians release only partisan information and politicians insinuate that the day to day behavior of journalists does not meet their self-proclaimed ideals (Esmark and Blach-Ørsten 2014).

The patterns are similar across Europe, however there is stark variation between the more distant and professional interaction patterns in Nordic Countries and the more politicized and conflictive culture in Southern Europe (Schwab Cammarano and Diez Medrano 2014). There is also a profound distinction between professional media politics relations in “old” democracies of Western European democracies and mistrust and cynical political communication cultures in “new” democracies of Eastern Europe.

Comparative studies also reveal that the relationship between journalists and political actors is overshadowed by mistrust, particularly in transitional democracies and countries with a history of sudden regime change. In new democracies such as Chile, South Africa, Poland, Turkey and South Korea, journalists are more mistrusting of political elites and dissatisfied with democratic institutions than in established democracies such as Sweden and Germany (van Beek 2010). Mistrust between media elites and political elites has also been particularly strong in Eastern European transformation democracies, as journalists have strong reservations about the integrity of political actors (Pfetsch and Voltmer 2012).

In the tradition of political communication culture (Gurevitch and Blumler 2004; Pfetsch 2004, 2014), research aims to work with the empirical measures of orientations guiding the interaction between media and political actors and link them to the conditions of the media system and political system. Findings for Western Europe show that country families with similar conditions indeed converge regarding their professional identity, their work restraints and their mutual interactions (Pfetsch, Mayerhöffer and Moring 2014a): within Europe there is a clear division between southern European countries like Spain, France and Slovenia, compared to Northern countries, such as Denmark, Sweden and Finland, and the German-speaking countries (Germany, Austria and Switzerland). In the southern European group, levels of political and economic stress are perceived as highest, whereas in Scandinavia these are perceived as less intense. Mayerhöffer (2015) presents evidence for a systematic relation between structural conditions and attitudinal cohesion of politicians and journalists. When moving from Northern to Southern Europe, the political autonomy of journalists and sectoral cohesion both decrease while attitudinal cohesion between media and political elites increases. At the same time, journalists in Northern Europe display a particularly high level of internal congruence in their attitudes, which can be traced back to their high level of professionalization and political autonomy. In Southern Europe, the study finds high levels of politicization of media relations.

It might be concluded from comparative studies that political communication culture in Western democracies is under stress, as journalism cultures suffer from political and economic pressures and journalists and politicians perceive each other in the light of media salacity and suspicion. Mistrust seems to be a prevalent feature everywhere but is particularly strong in transformation democracies. Within Western Europe, political communication cultures vary depending on whether media autonomy, professionalism and pluralism of the media are high or rather restricted or politicized. While research has made remarkable progress, comparative
studies of media-politics relations still suffer from shortcomings. The country samples are often small and skewed toward continental and northern European contexts. Therefore, it is hardly possible to generalize from these findings to other systems outside of Europe. Additionally, the categories developed for Western European contexts capture only one segment out of a much larger picture that remains in the dark.

In sum:

- Based on characteristic constellations of political and media variables, Hallin and Mancini (2004) deduced and conceptualized three ideal models of media-politics relations for Western countries.
- Current research is focused on adding and refining the comparative dimensions of the framework, developing additional models for non-Western media systems, and translating the relevant theoretical concepts into quantifiable indices for the purpose of rigorous empirical testing.
- Based on elite surveys, several studies compared the professional attitudes, role self-perceptions and interaction cultures of journalists and politicians. Most of them focused on European countries and found clear differences and divisions between North and South and East and West.
- Future research should devote more attention to unveiling media politics interactions in non-Western countries and in frail democracies. The role of political communication cultures is assumed critical for understanding political transition and system change.

**POLITICAL INFORMATIONS FLOWS**

**Comparing Message Production by Political Actors**

Politicians, parties and governments can assume powerful roles in the political communication process. Comparative social scientists have paid particular attention to three areas in which political actors engage in message production: government communication, parliamentary communication and election communication.

In the area of government communication, early work based on the US, the UK and Germany emphasized the strong connection between institutional structures of governance and communication strategies (Pfetsch 2007). In this vein, a multi-country study by Sanders and Canel (2013) finds considerable differences between countries depending on whether their governments take a “party-centred” or “citizen-centred” approach to communication. A “party-centred” approach refers to a partisan style that is primarily oriented toward the interests of the ruling party; it is found in countries like Zimbabwe, Singapore and China, which all grant only limited political and media freedom. A more “citizen-oriented” and participatory approach is found in the United States and United Kingdom, where institutional resources and policy guidelines demand a non-partisan and civic minded style of addressing the public. Sanders and Canel (2013) further note considerable differences in the level of professionalism in government communication. “Strategically” operating units of government communication will recruit professionally trained specialists and afford them an autonomous organizational status at a senior level, whereas a purely “tactical” approach goes hand in hand with low specialization and autonomy, weak coordination of tasks, an underdeveloped legal basis and less advanced technical equipment. The Anglo-Saxon countries are classified as the most...
strategic whereas Zimbabwe, Mexico and Singapore are mainly tactical. In the middle ground between these two dimensions (party vs citizen-centred, strategic vs. tactical), the researchers placed a diverse set of countries from Europe and Latin America, supplemented by South Africa and India. To various degrees, these countries combine elements of both dimensions of government communication, which the researchers attribute to their particular historical legacies (see also Canel and Sanders 2014).

In the field of parliamentary communication, comparative agenda setting research has demonstrated that the news media in most political systems has a powerful impact on setting the parliamentary agenda. A seven-country study by Vliegenthart et al. (2016) demonstrates that opposition parties in their parliamentary activities are generally much more sensitive to media coverage than government parties. More specifically, a three-country study by van Santen, Helfer and van Aelst (2015) finds that voicing criticism towards a member of government in a parliamentary question increases the chances of getting covered by the press, which relates to the news media’s preference for conflict framing in parliamentary activities (see also Sevenans and Vliegenthart 2016). An earlier study of Belgium and Denmark had already established that members of parliaments are most strongly influenced by media coverage and their issue ownership when deciding what questions to ask in parliament (Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011). In brief, the news media serve as a strong agenda setter for parliamentary debates throughout Europe.

While traditional mass media are prevalent in parliamentary routines, politicians also turn to online media in their election campaigns. Vergeer, Hermans and Cunha (2012) compared the features of 1026 candidate and party websites from 17 countries in the European Parliament elections of 2009. These websites were mainly used to offer contact opportunities to voters, provide reputation-enhancing information, promote social network links to maintain reciprocal relations with voters, and provide video spots. While politicians from some Southern European countries (Greece, Portugal and Cyprus) tended to use these website features less than those from Northern European countries (Sweden, Ireland), the study eventually concluded that it is not so much national campaign cultures but rather the resources of party organizations and the personal preferences of candidates that explain the differential use of digital campaign tools (Vergeer, Hermans and Cunha 2012).

Election campaigns are a classical subject of comparative analysis. Particularly during national election campaigns, political communication systems shift into a higher gear and their internal processes can be compared as if held under a microscope. An important advancement was to contextualize seemingly global trends in national campaigns. A core contribution in this regard was Swanson and Mancini’s (1996) eleven-country study, Politics, Media, and Modern Democracy, which introduced a theoretical model of the Modern Campaign, driven by personalities, polls, experts, marketing and media pressures. These scholars hypothesized that the ideal type of the modern campaign is more likely to emerge in majoritarian electoral systems than in proportional systems (H1), in systems consisting of just a few parties rather than in multi-party systems (H2), in unregulated campaign environments rather than in strictly regulated regimes (H3), in commercial broadcast systems rather than in public service dominated systems (H4), and that such campaigns will be adopted with varying degrees of intensity and motivation in different types of political cultures (H5). To their surprise, however,
only the fifth hypothesis received unqualified support (Swanson and Mancini 1996: 261-265). The model of the “modern” campaign was taken up by Norris (2002) and extended to include a “pre-modern” and a “post-modern” stage, which widened the cross-national and the cross-temporal applicability of the framework.

Further studies have compared the cross-national use of several other campaign elements, such as political marketing (Lees-Marshment, Strömbäck and Rudd 2010), political advertising (Kaid and Holtz-Bacha 2006) and website features (Kluver et al. 2007). Most of them had difficulty identifying stark differences that could be attributed to country-level contextual conditions. A notable exception was the Global Political Consultants Survey by Plasser and Plasser (2002), which used a common questionnaire to gather individual-level data from campaign managers in 43 countries about their professional views and work practices. Based on their answers, the authors distinguished between U.S.-American, Australian, Western European, Latin American, East Asian, Russian and post-communist styles of campaign communication (a follow-up publication with newer data confirmed the initial picture; see Plasser 2008). In a second step, Plasser and Plasser (2002) gathered relevant structural data about the external conditions of election campaigning in those 43 countries and ran regression analyses to identify the most powerful contextual factors determining a post-modern campaign strategy. These factors were low turnout culture (below 50%), a party system with a low number of parties (below 5), a candidate-based electoral system (e.g., presidential system), and finally, access to paid TV advertising (the opportunity to buy airtime).

In an attempt to bring in an alternative concept, Tenscher and colleagues (2012, 2016) compared the level of “campaign professionalism” in national elections. A 2013 survey of party secretaries and campaign managers in 12 European countries found, however, no meaningful differences in “organizational” indicators of campaign professionalism (such as budget size, staff size and the externalization, centralization and differentiation of tasks) and only a few differences in “strategic” indicators (such as the use of audience targeting, narrow-casting, news management, personalization and heavy emphasis on advertising and talk shows). The researchers also found only a few meaningful differences in the use of “new media” such as social network applications or online platforms. Across all countries, Facebook was considered the third most important tool to communicate with voters (after television and face-to-face interactions); Email, Twitter and Youtube follow on ranks five to seven. It seems that Facebook, in particular, is establishing itself as a catch-all campaign medium of transnational importance, although it is held in higher regard by campaign managers from younger EU democracies, where it is used to level out the weaknesses of fragile and fragmented party systems (Lilleker, Tenscher and Stetka 2015).

A pressing subject of current research is e-campaigning and the thesis that the Internet has led a push toward more postmodern, professional campaigns. Ward et al. (2008) use 12 loosely synchronized case studies to examine the role of the Internet in elections from established and non-established democracies in Western Europe, North America, Latin America and Asia between 2000 and 2005. In another relevant study, Lilleker and Jackson (2011) investigated online campaigning in British, French, German and U.S. elections between 2007 and 2009. Both studies concluded at the time that the Internet had not levelled the playing field for smaller parties or minor candidates, so the expected “equalizing” effect in political
competition could not be detected. The Internet was still only an add-on in the communication repertoire of the mainstream parties. No large scale “democratizing effect” could be revealed since large resources still mattered. The use of the Internet generally reinforced existing hierarchies and campaign trends. Additionally, on many campaign websites, one-way mass communication still ruled whereas interactive and participatory elements were used with caution (see BOX III). And although the 2008 Obama campaign was often referred to as an inspirational source, most parties and candidates showed little interest in fully involving users, out of fear of losing control of the campaign’s outer appearance. The most revolutionary potential of the Internet was found in the areas of fundraising and of mobilizing loyalists (see Lilleker and Jackson 2011). A recently published comparative synthesis of online campaign trends (by Gibson, Römmele and Williamson 2014) indicates that in the United States the “citizen-driven” participatory model of campaigning is already coming to an end again in favour of a more “data-driven” version that focuses on mining social media platforms to improve voter profiling. In many European countries, by contrast, campaigners continue to be more reluctant than in the U.S. to adopt highly professionalized e-campaign tools and exploit the potentials of social media effectively. From this it seems that the parties in all countries are missing “important opportunities to revitalize their base and attract new supporters” (Gibson et al. 2014: 127). So far, meta-analyses of existing studies provide little evidence that the social media aspects of election campaigns were successful in raising people’s likelihood to vote or to participate otherwise in a campaign (Boulianne 2015).

**BOX III: How interactive are election campaigns in various countries?**

An innovative feature of Barack Obama’s reach for the U.S. presidency in 2008 was the use of interactive website features that allowed users to participate in the progression of the campaign. Lilleker and Jackson (2011) label his approach “three-way” in that New Media was used not only to encourage supporters to spread the word and persuade others to join but also to offer them a broad range of communicative opportunities that made them feel part of a community that is welcoming and empowering. This was achieved by inviting supporters to actively co-create elements of the campaign, for instance by field-testing ideas within intranets or opening up ideas to wider audiences. Compared to this democratic and cooperative approach, campaigns in other countries at the same time offered significantly less participatory experience and user control, retaining instead an information-heavy approach that largely marginalises participatory opportunities (Lilleker and Jackson 2011).

| Distribution of interactive features on campaign websites in each nation (in percent of features used) |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| One-way | Two-way | Three-way | Total |
| France 2007 | 98 | 1 | 1 | 100 |
| United States 2008 | 6 | 0 | 94 | 100 |
| Germany 2009 | 89 | 1 | 10 | 100 |
| United Kingdom 2010 | 26 | 1 | 73 | 100 |

Source: Adapted from Lilleker and Jackson (2011: 161)

Outside the context of elections, the Arab Spring has fuelled scholars’ interest in how social media can shape protest events. This has triggered many studies in a diverse set of countries but overall the literature offers little clarity, mainly due to the use of non-causal designs and too rough measures for social media use and protest-type activities (Boulianne...
One of the very few comparative studies in this context examined the relationship between social media use and protest events in Spain, Greece and the United States (Theocharis, Lowe, van Deth and Albacete 2015). It showed that, although Twitter was used considerably for political discussion and to communicate protest information, calls for participation were – against theoretical expectations – marginal in the three cases. Less than ten percent of all tweets referred to protest organization and coordination issues, indicating that Twitter had hardly altered the underlying processes that drove the collective actions.

Comparing Political Message Production by Media Actors

Political information is the key to many democratic functions of communication. Therefore, most comparative research on political media content focuses on news. In addition to its surveillance function, political news is expected to reflect public opinion, expose political misbehaviour, facilitate public discourse, and foster citizens’ political participation (Schulz 2008). For comparative scholars, these functions provide a yardstick by which to assess cross-national differences in the selection, evaluation and framing of news issues. Studies in the area of political news follow several trajectories2 of which two will be discussed here in more detail: First, studies that focus on international and foreign news seek to establish how prevalent the allegedly outdated “national” perspective remains in globalized news arenas. Second, comparative research on domestic news aims to demonstrate relevant trends in political affairs coverage and how these trends relate to existing typologies of media systems.

The key finding of comparative studies on international news is that mass media tend to “domesticate” transnational events by evaluating and framing them using national ideologies and national reception prisms (Clausen 2003; Lee, Chan, Pan, and So 2002). The same process of domestication was found to take place in the construction of news about the European Union, where “evaluation and framing” also follows an adaptation process at the national level within each EU member state (de Vreese, Banducci, Semetko, and Boomgaard 2006; Pfetsch, Adam, and Eschner 2008). Further nation-specific framing mechanisms were explored in studies comparing how the same global event, such as the Iraq war, or a transnational issue, such as genetic engineering or climate change, is covered differently across political communication systems (Dardis 2006; Kohring, and Goerke 2000; Brossard, Shanahan, and McComas 2004; de Vreese, Peter, and Semetko 2001). The recurring evidence of dominant national angles has prompted the largest-scale comparative study on the topic to ask with exasperation, “Where in the world is the global village?” (Cohen 2013). While there are only selected rare cases in which national media have generated, momentarily, an encompassing global public sphere and international convergence in national news reporting (Curran et al. forthcoming), researchers agree that media do play a role in the emergence of a European public sphere. Thus, under certain conditions, the media, through long-term processes of framing news and information, contribute to the emergence of a common European public debate that bears on the political identity and politicization of the European Union (Pfetsch and Heft 2015).

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2 For reasons of space, we had to leave out other important lines of comparative news research, for instance those on the deliberative character of news (Benson 2014; Wessler and Rinke 2014) or on the mediatization of politics (Esser 2008; Strömbäck and Dimitrova 2011; Zeh and Hopmann 2013).
The second line of comparative news research takes up the historical institutionalist approach of Hallin and Mancini (2004) and argues that each type of media system features a specific type of news journalism. Thus, Anglo-American journalism developed in liberal media systems characterized by objectivity, separation of news and opinions, professional standards that reinforce the independence of journalism from politics and other societal powers, and the media’s role as watchdog for society. Journalism in polarized Mediterranean media systems relies on a tradition that is elite-oriented and has not been successful at attracting large audiences to its news offerings. It prioritizes opinion over factual reporting, tends to refrain from watchdog journalism, and has close ties to political institutions. This type of journalism has often been instrumentalized by politicians in partisan battles, which are typical of polarized systems. The Northern European Corporatist model, which spans the German-speaking, BeNeLux and Scandinavian countries, takes a middle position. It is characterized by the decline of press partisanship and commentary-oriented journalism and the growing emphasis on professional and information-oriented news making. The connection to politics is not realized through instrumentalization but through a consensus about the core values of welfare state democracy, compromise and power sharing.

Esser and Umbricht (2013) examined the empirical relevance of these theoretical models and were able – in a content analysis of 18 news outlets from six countries from the 1960s to the 2000s – to largely confirm and further specify the news cultures in Western political communication systems. In U.S. newspapers, they focus on the coexistence of objective and interpretative journalism (allowing for rational news analyses); in Italian newspapers, they find a coexistence of opinionated and negative news (promoting the provision of polarized information); and in German and Swiss newspapers, reveal a coexistence of news and views (although with an emphasis on rational, factual and consensual reporting). French and British newspapers occupy intermediate positions because they combine elements from various traditions. Over the past decades, British newspapers have in many ways aligned more with continental European newspapers than with U.S. papers and are even absorbing some elements of polarized Mediterranean journalism in their day-to-day coverage of politics. French journalism differs from Italian journalism in its greater appreciation for rationality and empiricism (Esser and Umbricht 2013; Umbricht and Esser 2014; see BOX IV).

These cross-national reporting styles are not set in stone but have all drifted toward interpretative journalism as the decades have passed. Since the 1960s, the newspapers of all six countries have increased their interpretive news analyses and opinion-based stories while at the same time reducing their “information-pure” news items. Today, even those “pure” news items include more analytical components, such as discussions of causes or consequences, than in the past (Esser and Umbricht 2014). This increase in interpretation could certainly be welcomed if it related to “policy” coverage that helps readers understand substantive issues. However, “policy”-related interpretation has been steadily on the decline whereas interpretive stories on “game”-related aspects are clearly on the rise (Esser and Umbricht 2014). Searching for an explanation of the high degree of interpretative news, a comparative study of 16 countries by Salgado et al. (2016) shows that interpretive journalism on television is a function
of commercialism and channel competition whereas in newspapers it is a function of an increasingly critical attitude of journalists toward politics.

BOX IV: Three approaches to political affairs coverage in western newspapers
Esser and Umbricht (2013) conducted a correspondence analysis that cross-classified six newspaper systems with a set of story features commonly found in political affairs coverage. As indicated by the triangle in Figure 5, three prototypical reporting styles emerged. Although U.S. newspapers prefer more interpretative story types such as news analyses and background reports, they remain committed to a fact-based reporting style that relies on expert statements and presenting both sides of a story, except when a scandal breaks. This American approach is very different from the prototypical Italian approach where a fundamentally negative, conflict-oriented and opinionated reporting style prevails. A third prototypical style is found in German and Swiss newspapers where a strong emphasis on news concurs with a continuing interest in opinion, with both story types usually separated on a news page.

Descriptive representation of three characteristic reporting styles in Western newspapers (correspondence analysis)

Another characteristic of current news formats is the intensive use of popularization techniques to make political news more appealing, leading to growing shares of
sensationalism, scandalization, emotionalization, common people’s perspectives and private revelations of public figures. In Anglo-American news systems this trend can be explained by a long tabloid tradition that celebrates popular culture, a strong journalistic autonomy and a distinct commercially driven audience orientation. In the polarized Mediterranean systems, however, the popularization of news is related to a communication culture that is generally more affective and expressive in daily life, and a political culture that leans towards antagonism, polarization, spectacularization and exposing clientelism (Umbricht and Esser 2016).

While many studies are interested in delineating cross-national differences in long-term reporting styles, others are interested in discussing the causes and consequences of these reporting styles. Albaek, van Dalen, Jebril and de Vreese (2014) find close relationships between journalists’ attitudes and role self-conceptions and the kind of political news they produce. For instance, Spanish journalists are fairly partisan and so is their news, whereas British journalists are more infotainment-oriented and their coverage frequently focuses on scandals and politicians’ private lives. In terms of audience effects, the authors find that the public tends to be more content with journalists if they are performing a good “watchdog” function. In Spain, where watchdog journalism is perceived to be less prevalent, citizen satisfaction with media coverage is lower than in Great Britain, where reporters are seen to be more vigilant towards government. The authors conclude their four-country study by arguing that the most favourable contextual conditions for political journalism include “a high degree of professionalism in journalism, a low degree of political parallelism, a strong public broadcasting system, and moderate degrees of commercialism and competition” (Albaek et al. 2014: 170) – a verdict that is hard to disagree with.

Comparing Usage Patterns of Political Information

Changes in the use of political information deserve special attention because news is the essential channel for disseminating political knowledge and motivating citizens to participate and eventually make informed choices. This insight triggered a long line of research on the use of political information and its long term impact on democratic attitudes.

Even though the triumphant march of the Internet is beyond doubt, empirical data from such different countries as the United States, Japan and European countries highlight that television remains the predominant source of political information, followed by online news sites and printed newspapers (Nielsen and Schrøder 2014). A follow-up study from 2015, which included more countries, shows that TV continues to be the most important news source; however, in many countries, online news sites are supplanting television at the top of the user hierarchy (for instance in Australia, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, and the United States; see BOX V).

News consumption across Europe, the Middle East, Asia and the Americas follows particular national and cultural patterns (Cohen 2013): There are countries that are characterized as television centric cultures, such as the United States, Taiwan, Portugal, Poland, Chile, Canada, and Brazil, whereas some European countries such as Switzerland, Germany and the Nordic countries are prototypical newspaper cultures. In countries with high newspaper circulation, citizens spend more time reading about political and current affairs than
in other countries (Shehata and Strömbäck 2011). With respect to television news, geographical mappings are somewhat ambiguous: while Aalberg, Blekesaune and Elvestad (2013) find small differences between Southern European and Nordic countries, Meulemann (2010) notes that television news consumption is significantly lower in Southern European and former communist East European countries than in Anglo-Saxon countries.

**BOX V: Where has the consumption of online news surpassed traditional sources of news?**

The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism commissions YouGov every year to conduct an online survey of 1000-2000 respondents per country to track patterns of news consumption. Please note that this is an online survey and as such the results underrepresent the consumption habits of people who are not online (typically older, less affluent consumers with limited formal education). Here are the results to the question “You say you’ve used these sources of news in the last week, which would you say is your MAIN source of news?” (in percent, ordered by TV):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Television</th>
<th>Online (incl. Social Media)</th>
<th>Printed Newspaper</th>
<th>Other (incl. Radio)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Adapted from Newman, Levy and Nielsen (2015: 11) and Fletcher and Radcliffe (2015: 48).*

On a more global level, usage patterns and media preferences reveal clear country groupings (Papathanassopoulos et al. 2013): People in Norway, Japan and Italy tend to use many different news media types and genres simultaneously and are therefore labelled as Omnivores. Audiences from Italy and South Korea are characterized as Audiovisuals, whereas Norwegians qualify as Digital Press Devotees. News users from India are described as Traditionalists, whereas those from Colombia and Greece are labelled TV-Only. Finally, Born-Digitals are encountered most frequently in Norway and Korea. A similar effort to classify national audiences by Newman, Levy and Nielsen (2015) finds that Low-Intensity Users who check news less than once per day are most common in the United States (21%) and Australia.
(19%), whereas High-Intensity Users who check news more than five times per day are most common in Japan (23%) and Brazil (20%).

Although usage patterns vary it is a common finding that in most countries, senior citizens rely more on traditional news sources and use them more frequently (Nielsen and Schrøder 2013). It remains to be seen whether this represents a generational effect, meaning that today’s young consumers will increase their news usage over the course of their lives, or whether today’s older cohort is simply more interested in current events and the younger generation will never reach an equal level of interest. This gap in news consumption does not only exist between the young and the old but also with respect to different educational and income categories (Newman, Levy and Nielsen 2015). Should these gaps in media use continue to grow, the trends separating the socially disadvantaged from the socially privileged will solidify in many countries.

One of the pressing questions with the advent of the Internet is how searching for political information online is different from habitually consuming conventional news media sources. Comparative research suggests that selective news consumption goes hand in hand with a reduced level of general knowledge of political topics and decreased political efficacy (Papathanassopoulos et al. 2013). In this light, it is an alarming finding that the number of so-called news avoiders has been increasing. Thus, Aalberg et al. (2013) find that TV news consumption is decreasing across Europe while general TV consumption (including entertainment) continues to rise.

Even when news is consumed, one cannot exclude the possibility that users mostly access those media sources that conform to their own political convictions (Goldman and Mutz 2011). This so-called echo chamber effect can be observed more clearly in some countries than in others and is more strongly present among newspaper users than television news users. The reasons are not entirely clear and more comparative research would be desirable.

**Comparing Effects of Political Communication**

From the citizen’s perspective, exposure to political messages impacts their capacity to perform their political roles, for instance keeping abreast of political issues and making informed voting decisions. Additionally, according to theories of public opinion (Zaller 1992), the 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 cognition and orientations. One central question here relates to whether the media contribute to the political education and democratic orientations of the people. Not all political communication systems produce equally favourable information environments. Dimock and Popkin (1997) argued some time ago that Europeans were much better informed about world events than Americans, and suggested that this was due to “substantial differences between countries in the communication of knowledge by TV” (1997, 223).

Several attempts to investigate this claim systematically followed – starting with a four country study by Curran et al. (2009) and a six-country study by Aalberg and Curran (2012), followed by an eleven-country study by Soroka et al. (2013). The samples always included the United States and varying compositions of European countries. The last study expanded its
scope and also included Australia, Canada, Colombia, Greece, India, Japan, and South Korea. Generally, these studies suggest that there is a negative relationship between the level of commercial media and general news knowledge.

In public service systems – countries that support public broadcasting and actively regulate commercial broadcasters – TV newscasts air more hard news, more international news, and their domestic political news coverage is less game centred and less tabloidized. Additionally, newscasts tend to air more frequently during prime time viewing hours when television audiences spike. In market-based systems, on the contrary, unregulated commercial networks respond to market forces and offer news programming that is sporadic and less substantial. The three largest U.S. channels – ABC, CBS and NBC – allocate considerably less airtime to their news and current affairs programming and attract considerably smaller audiences than generalist channels in Norway, Sweden, Belgium or the Netherlands (Aalberg, van Aelst, and Curran 2010). As a result, there are significant cross-national differences in citizens’ “costs” of acquiring hard news and international news knowledge. The costs are higher in the U.S. and political knowledge among Americans is heavily dependent upon individuals’ interest in politics. The costs are lower in the Northern European public service model, which enables less-motivated citizens to acquire more political information more easily than in the U.S. (Iyengar et al. 2010).

Inadvertent or incidental exposure to political information during prime time news programs occurs more frequently in countries where public broadcasting is a strong component of the national media system. Using varying measures of knowledge testing, the consistent finding is that Americans are especially uninformed about international affairs, and compared to citizens in Northern Europe they are also less knowledgeable about domestic politics (Curran et al. 2009, 2012). This is also largely true for international politics (see BOX VI).

The challenge for research on the relationship between the content of news and citizens’ knowledge patterns is to establish a causal relationship. For this reason, two of the available cross-national studies use propensity score matching (Soroka et al. 2012; Fraile and Iyengar 2014) and demonstrate the positive contribution of public service broadcasters to informed citizenship. However, this can only be generalized to other countries if three conditions are met. First, public broadcasters ought to be funded largely by public money to keep dependence on additional advertising revenue low, as is the case for the BBC. Second, public broadcasters need the backing of a substantial audience – something that PBS in the United States fails to achieve. Third, public broadcasters require independence from government, meaning no undue political interference. The implication of these comparative studies is that in-depth political journalism from public broadcasters and quality newspapers plays an important role in public affairs knowledge and, ultimately, the functioning of democracy. It is simply not true that all news sources are equally informative (Fraile and Iyengar 2014; Soroka et al. 2012).
A second line of comparative effects research focuses on media and citizenship in Europe. It explores the consequences of the fact that EU citizens receive very different kinds of news about the EU from the media in their respective home countries. Regarding the nature of coverage it was found that (between 1999 and 2009) the salience of EU politics in news depended on the controversy surrounding the issue in national public spheres. Thus, the more national parties were divided about the EU and took negative positions toward it, the greater the increases in EU news media coverage (Boomgaarden et al. 2013). The conflict framing of EU politics was also evident in the 2009 European election campaign news (Schuck et al.
2013) but was contingent upon the type of medium (quality of mass-oriented), the electoral system (proportional or not) and public opinion towards the EU (based on Eurobarometer data). The question of whether conflict-ridden coverage of the EU affects political mobilization was explored with a multilevel analysis for 21 member states (Schuck, Vliegenthart and de Vreese 2016). The study confirms that the overall evaluation of the EU in the news impacts political mobilization in European elections insofar as the more controversial and politicized the debate in the media, the more salient EU politics becomes and the more the voters are motivated to go to the polls.

In sum, comparative effects research has established strong relationships between macro-structural variables of the political communication system and individual-level variables like civic knowledge and political participation. Further efforts to advance media effects research should concentrate, in particular, on the explanatory mechanisms connecting the broader media environment and individual effects.

In sum:

- Political actors professionalize their approach to government communication, parliamentary communication and election communication at the same time as they perceive the mass media as increasingly important. In the area of election communication, parties particularly in Europe seem to show an inclination to adjust their campaign styles to one another.

- The news media in many Western countries have become increasingly objective in their political affairs coverage since the 1960s but they have also become more interpretive, negative and sensationalist. This has, however, not led to a convergence of reporting styles as news outlets continue to follow distinct, path-dependent journalistic traditions that have clear links to Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) typology of Western media systems.

- The desire of citizens to be well-informed and take advantage of news services is not distributed equally across societies. Distinct cross-national differences in media use behavior prevail. Even within the comparatively homogeneous region of Europe, there are huge gaps in news consumption between the North, East and South.

- Cross-national effects studies established a positive role of public service broadcasters for political learning. Other high quality news outlets contribute similarly to informed citizenship if available and widely used. Effects studies also show that during election times conflict framing in campaign news mobilizes voter interest and boosts turnout.

CONCLUSION

While the field of comparative political communication research has long had a reputation for immaturity, it is our intention to demonstrate the truly remarkable advances that have been made in recent years. Across the various components and linkages of the political communication system, we observe clear progress in comparative theory, methodology and knowledge. All the studies consulted for this chapter agree, almost without exception, that earlier fears of a convergence of political communication systems toward a globalized standard model are largely unfounded. National political communication cultures will continue to matter, even in a digitalized and globalized world (Mancini 2015). What we see is a complex
simultaneity of stable relationships as well as change, which requires sophisticated research designs that are sensitive to the concurrence of global influence and national resilience (Esser 2014). A case in point is Nielsen’s (2013) long-term comparison of Western media systems, which finds no hints of a unifying Americanization but instead a mixture of widespread particularities and small-scale changes in similar directions. This diversity of path-dependent developments applies also to the cross-national trends we see in the world of online communication (see Benson et al. 2012; Humprechrt and Esser forthcoming) – certainly an area that will attract much attention in the future.

The starting point and backbone of our review has been the heuristic of the political communication system. We have outlined this framework in only general terms and more specifications would be needed to account for many on-going developments. These developments include the penetration of ICT into political communication, the intermixture of online and offline communication and its effects on public debate, the individualization of news consumption and the effects of connective action on political mobilization, the integration of mass and interpersonal communication and its effect on citizens’ information supplies, the widening scope of “the political” and its effects on political and media elites, the denationalization of political and media spaces and its effects on political identity, and the necessity to de-westernize key concepts of political communication – including our understanding of (mediatized) democracy.

With regard to the final question of what normative conclusions can be drawn from our review, we come to a sobering assessment. The material presented here clearly highlights the disparities between high-minded civic ideals and disillusioning reality. The pompous ideals would expect media systems to provide information-rich environments where people can enjoy multiple encounters with high quality political journalism; these ideals would further expect people to be highly interested in news and in staying informed and to acquire vast knowledge about domestic and international affairs; they would expect political actors to provide citizen-oriented information and to entertain cooperative relations with journalists; and these ideals would expect media actors to provide objective reporting that is fact-based and not sensationalized. In reality, we see, at least in some countries, indications of deteriorating media/politics relations, declining substance of political information, declining news consumption, declining knowledge and, ultimately, declining participation.

Thanks to comparative research we have the tools to specify the conditions under which these discrepancies emerge to a greater or lesser degree across countries and systems and also to address issues that stand in the way of democratic political communication and its improvement in the future.

REFERENCES


