Comparative research: journalism, media and politics
Introduction

Arnaud Anciaux
Professeur adjoint
Centre de recherche interuniversitaire sur la communication, l'information et la société (CRICIS)
Université Laval
Québec, Canada
Arnaud.Anciaux@com.ulaval.ca

Julián Durazo Herrmann
Professeur de politique comparée
Département de science politique
Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM)
Canada
durazo.julian@uqam.ca

Liziane Guazina
Professora
Faculdade de Comunicação
Universidade de Brasília
Brasil
liziane.g@uol.com.br

To study journalism, media or politics is to study each topic individually as well as in the context of their relationships with each other and with the societies in which they operate and to which they contribute. These relationships engage us in thought on the major theoretical constructs of the social sciences as well as on the questions that arise from empirical analysis and fieldwork—as several issues of this publication have pointed out.

In light of this, comparative analyses of different areas, times, societies and world views are undertaken regularly, especially for their heuristic value, contributing to a long tradition of research in the human and social sciences fields. These studies, resulting from individual reflection, collective projects or tangential convergence, appear to be constructed and contribute to research in very diverse and fragmented ways. This may be a result of the demands and incentives of research institutions, universities, funding institutions, and more or less organized networks of researchers, but also from the individual tastes of the individuals, creators, and producers of research. Whatever the case may be, comparative research has, above all, a specific heuristic value, striving to shift analytical perspectives away from customary and familiar contexts, and to question and reframe findings.

Pour citer cet article
Référence électronique
Arnaud Anciaux, Julián Durazo Herrmann, Liziane Guazina, « Comparative research: journalism, media and politics. Introduction », *Sur le journalisme, About journalism, Sobre jornalismo* [En ligne], Vol 6, n°2 - 2017, mis en ligne le 15 décembre 2017. URL : http://surlejournalisme.org/rev

Across comparative approaches, transversal enquiries have a prominent role. This is the focus of this issue of *Sur le journalisme – About Journalism – Sobre jornalismo* addressing comparative research questions, simultaneously or in parallel, across journalism, media, and politics within different areas, times and societies. This allows us to propose a joint reflection, albeit polyphonic and non-exhaustive, on the heuristic value of comparative research, and therewith a better understanding of potential and open-ended exchanges, rather than definitive conclusions, between journalism, media and politics.

The Heuristic Value of Comparative Research

The primary focus of this thematic issue, as reflected in its articles, is to evaluate the heuristic value of comparative research. Most notably, comparison makes it possible to problematize issues innovatively and to avoid essentializing relationships which are unique to a single case and do not apply to an entire phenomenon (Fierens, this issue).

Comparative research has its roots in the very origins of social sciences, especially among the precursors of political science, sociology and political economy (Tocqueville, Durkheim, Marx, Smith or Ricardo, among others). Comparing situations between or within different countries led to the creation of structuring theories for research. To explain, and "*causally understand the comprehensive meaning of an activity*" (Weber, 1971 [1922]) is not simply a matter of putting isolated facts and restrictive ideas side by side, but of making them converse with each other by methodological as well as theoretical means. The heuristic of comparative research comes from its rigor: research design is the essential challenge of any comparative endeavour. From this issue of *Sur le journalisme – About Journalism – Sobre jornalismo*, it even seems possible to argue that the most important contribution of comparative approaches lies in the systematic and thoughtful contrast between theory and empirical reality employing a method that examines multiple case studies and generates new knowledge. As Sartori (1994) points out, "*the comparison and the study of cases can work very well by mutually reinforcing and complementing each other […]. Heuristic case studies provide the ideal—and perhaps the best—basis for conceptualizing generalizations.*"

No consensus exists, however, on the theories or methods to use in comparative research, neither among our authors nor in broader literature (see, for example, Sartori, 1994; Kohli et al. 1995; Lichbach and Zuckerman, 2009). Hallin and Mancini (2012) even advise against proposing comparative analysis as a universal framework, method or model in communication studies, especially when considering very different political contexts.

Many positions coexist in this issue, sometimes varying along disciplinary lines, sometimes within them, ranging from rationalism and historical institutionalism to culturalist approaches. Yet, we are not interested in taking up here the often acrimonious debate between them. We therefore avoid any normative hypothesis on the links between journalism, media and politics, and prefer instead to highlight the areas of debate and cross-fertilization that emerge from the articles of this thematic issue.

Designing Comparative Research

At the core of the comparative approach is the crucial "research question". All articles in this thematic issue highlight how vital the research question is in the selection of the study sample (see Hirschl, 2005), in the construction of the theoretical framework, in the implementation of the methodology and in the execution of the empirical research. From a formal point of view, the research question also guides the writing of papers by helping researchers articulate their findings in a complete and coherent way.

However, the research question is not just a matter of form. If the aim of comparative research is to de-essentialize the relationships being studied, it is the research question that makes it possible to problematize the subjects and to re-examine theoretical givens in light of empirical results (see the articles by Fierens and Mick in this issue). The research question thus allows for the theory/empirical reality dialogical exchange. In this way, the comparative research question not only addresses empirical facts, it also brings into question the relevance and completeness of the theoretical proposals put forth.

After the research question, the most important decision facing the comparative researcher is the choice of case studies (see Charbonneaux's argument on this subject in this issue). As the articles in this issue emphasize, the sample size can be small—as little as two cases—or large. This choice leads to important methodological considerations: it is equally impossible to carry out institutional or historical studies reaching the requisite depth with a very large number of cases, as it is to carry out statistically significant quantitative studies with a limited sample size.

Of course, the ontological positions of researchers, whether explicit or only deductible from the

methods chosen, may sometimes prove incompatible. The articles in this issue demonstrate, however, that it is possible to maintain a methodological dialogue and make important analytical contributions using mixed research methods if the analysis is rigorous and systematic (see for example the work of Anastasiou, Prmanova, Guillén and Rodríguez Díaz in this issue); making possible, among other things, the reproduction of these studies in other contexts and thus furthering the theory/empirical reality dialectical cycle.

However, the criteria used for selecting a study sample include not only size, but also type. Some authors, like Jacques Mick, criticize the "national bias" (the idea that the best study sample is the one bounded by the borders of contemporary nation states (cf. Snyder, 2001)). Others show that this construct—which can be both heuristic and political—can still be useful (Prmanova), or remind us of the pertinence of comparative research in multilevel analysis (Anastasiou). Ultimately, this debate brings us back to the centrality of the research question, for this is where a study sample relevant to the analysis is identified and will include—and sometimes bring into question—pre-existing and familiar boundaries (nation states, cultural regions, historical eras, social groups, etc.).

A related concern is globalization and the challenges it brings to comparative research. To what extent does the intensification of interactions, the creation of new relations between different regions and the bridging of previously separate dimensions of activity—"the erasure of borders," in other words—undermine the possibility of establishing and studying distinct and comparable case studies? More generally, as Vera-Zambrano and Powers ask, how can we prevent creating spurious relationships when undertaking comparative analysis?

The papers in this issue offer a variety of answers. On the one hand, they remind us that, in addition to determining the similarities and differences (see below) between two or more subjects considered distinct, the identification and study of the relationships between these subjects are paramount in comparative research (Mill, 1843; taken up here by Charbonneaux and Oliveira and Paulino). On the other hand, comparisons need not be synchronous. To accomplish its interpretive goals, comparative analysis can equally well apply to phenomena taking place in the same geographical space, but separate in time. This makes it possible to widen both the study sample and the research perspective, while also benefiting from breakthroughs from pre-existing research, as Trudel and De Maeyer do in this issue. As we noted above, comparative research appears to us to be above all a heuristic tool—theoretical and methodological—for uncovering and explaining relationships and, possibly, causal links between phenomena, whatever their nature may be.

Comparative Studies and Their Findings

The cases studied in this thematic issue are geographically diverse (Africa, the Americas, Central Asia and Europe) and span the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. In keeping with our discipline's current predominant systems of thought, we try to avoid Atlantic and Eurocentric approaches (cf. Hallin and Mancini, 2012). In light of the way we conceive comparative analysis (linking theory, methodology and empirical reality), the critical factor is how each element contributes to answering a research question.

In keeping with the *Sur le journalisme – About Journalism – Sobre jornalismo* tradition, this issue's papers are written in four languages (English, French, Spanish and Portuguese). We thus hope to strengthen the dialogue between different schools, approaches and research rationales (cf. the transatlantic dialogue proposed by Vera-Zambrano and Powers). But language is also important as a methodological instrument in helping to understand scientific arguments, political structures and social dynamics. Language is a fundamental key to unlock context, which is a central element of comparative analysis.

Indeed, the thematic subjects of this issue and the possible links between them mean that authors turn to context—understood as a dynamic and complex set of social relations having an effect on the phenomenon while also transcending it (March and Olsen, 1989)—as an element of their comparative approach. Whether it is an institutional framework, historical or social structures, or the ideological and cultural notions surrounding the operations of journalism, the media and politics in their respective dynamics, we are constantly reminded that phenomena cannot be explicated without a systematic and thorough reference to the environments in which they manifest, as Fierens and Prmanova point out in this issue.

The significance of context spurs the authors of this thematic issue to make empirical work a central element of their approach. Obviously, not all papers will have empirical findings—some are more concerned with explicitly applying the comparative approach in support of a broader research project than the article published here. Nevertheless, all authors recognize the necessity of field-sourced em-

pirical material to support analysis. Here, again, the theory/empirical reality dialectic asserts itself in comparative research.

How context is treated brings us back to questions of method in comparative studies, this time from a broad perspective. The method of difference, for example, makes it possible to identify the effects of the interaction between a phenomenon and a specific context. For its part, the method of agreement favors singling out the elements of the phenomenon under study that are common throughout its various manifestations, thus allowing us to identify and define its characteristic traits (Przeworski and Teune, 1970; Skocpol, 1978; cf. Oliveira and Paulino, this issue).

Thus, if we adopt Daniel-Louis Seiler's distinction (1994), two main approaches can be adopted when using the comparative approach: "compare to classify" and "compare to understand." The first refers to an approach more steeped in structuralism, whether it is the creation of analytical subjects through the construction of ideal types, metonymic models, taxonomies, or Michel Foucault's "epistemes" (1966, 1969).

More in keeping with the focus of this thematic issue, the principle of comparing to understand is based on the notion that comparison decenters the researchers' focus, making it possible for them to distance themselves from what they know *a priori* and search for common traits, even universal ones, between the different situations they experience or discover. These may open researchers to a deeper understanding of facts and operative events.

In their desire to provide convincing explications—including both a precise definition of the phenomenon and a description of the essential characteristics of its interaction with broader social dynamics—the authors of this thematic issue often combine different approaches in a single research project (Mill, 1843). Once again, methodological creativity and a theoretical openness are imperative.

Regardless of the approach chosen, it is important for researchers not to conflate study samples when comparing them, particularly with regards to prescriptive prior knowledge and presuppositions that are often external to the research question but which are frequently found in the fields of journalism, media and politics (as will be discussed below). This requires maintaining a steadfast relationship between the subject and its specific context, a creative methodological approach to identify and operationalize the research criteria effectively, and an open mind to mine theoretical and methodological elements from disparate sources (see, among others, the work of Mick, Trudel and De Maeyer, Vera-Zambrano and Powers).

Interchanges between Journalism, Media and Politics

While it may be easy to point out in a general way the contributions and heuristic value of comparative research—emphasizing its scope, issues and methods—it is much less easy to make a conclusive contribution to the interchanges between journalism, media and politics. The wealth of empirical material put forth by the papers in this thematic issue does not lend itself to such a simplistic systematization exercise. It is possible, however, to highlight a few elements that, in our view, could serve as building blocks for long-term reflection and contribute to a far wider debate than the one we can propose here.

At the risk of stating the obvious, the links between journalism, media and politics are complex and multidirectional (Gingras, 2010). They do, however, appear to be co-constitutive, meaning the best temporal frameworks for the analyses presented in this thematic issue seem to address the socio-political cycles of the societies studied. Though media and journalistic processes may not coincide perfectly with the political life of the society to which they belong, they are nevertheless strongly influenced by it, as Fierens demonstrates in her article on journalism in the Congo and Côte d'Ivoire.

Moreover, the democratic nature of certain political regimes—as complex and steeped in normativity as it may be—seems to suggest a connection with the emergence of media discourse per se. Some argue that such a discourse is in a better position to implement and depict critical horizontal and dialogical relationships with politics—albeit not completely free from normative biases. Media, and, at least partially, journalistic discourses thus construe their specific relationships to politics as distinct from both public relations and propaganda.

Nevertheless, this thematic issue shows us that the very understanding of what constitutes the principles governing the role of journalism in democracy varies so much as to make them unrecognizable from one polity to another (see Anastasiou's comparison of Greece, Sweden and the United Kingdom). As mentioned above, the different contexts—history, society, culture—play a central role in framing the interchanges between journalism, media and politics and it is the mission of comparative studies to understand them and to try to explicate them (as

Oliveira and Paulino say, to "understand causally the comprehensive meaning of an activity," Weber, 1971 [1922]).

Comparative research suffers a tension between two poles that is frequently evoked and difficult to erase: determinism and relativism—two issues frequently studied in political science. Pushed to its extreme, determinism might take the form of a negation of differences and a reduction to uniformly applied standards. A teleological outlook can thus seek to establish a natural or desired objective (under the guise of statements concerning the "development" of societies, the "independence of the media," or the "role of journalists" in a democracy, etc.), becoming itself the source or the benchmark, explicit or not, of the comparison. The risk of relativism, on the other hand, lies in the representation of strict separateness in which differences are proposed and maintained to ensure they are not disregarded and external views and values not imposed on them, thus limiting the scope of comparison and interchange and risking to artificially erase existing common points.

In the context of research on media and journalism, the risk of determinism in comparative research seems particularly significant to us in that it can concord with discourses, values and identities heavily derived from the biases and imaginaries of the prevailing actors and professional groups. The fragile equilibria of both comparative research and the journalism, media and politics interchange calls for a concerted effort to distinguish and study these normative elements in the discourses and organizations concerned. Thus, the professional standards of journalism as they are perceived and reproduced, both by actors and by those who study them, must be placed back in their context at all costs. These normative elements may be shared by different cultures, notably Western cultures, without necessarily having to be naturalized, displaced, and imposed on other cultural, historical, socio-economic and political spaces. What is more, these normative elements are also subject to very strong resistance, adoption and adaptation processes that themselves reflect the vagaries of local power balances (cf. Albuquerque, 2012).

On a different note, this issue's authors seem—implicitly or explicitly—to emphasize that print media (newspapers and magazines) remain an important, if not the main, vector in constructing public representations of actors and issues in the public arena (Habermas, 1991 [1962]). By combining images and texts, by transmitting different types of discourse (ranging from superficial anecdotes to reports and opinion pieces) and by remaining physically available beyond instantaneity, the print media contribute to the institution of public authority figures in a society, and thus remain a central element in the study of the relationship between journalism, the media and politics (cf. Charbonneaux, Mick, this issue).

Beyond media's contingent representation of reality—where the debate on framing and agenda-setting assumes its full meaning (cf. Canelas Rubim et al., 2004)—it is well-established that the effects of the media on political discussion (among others) can no longer be taken for granted. Even the print media are essentially ephemeral, which may contribute to their limited impact on the dynamics and content of major social and political debates. Thus, the commonly-held view that media cannot impose ideas but can still erase or impose the subjects of discussion appears questionable (Cohen, 1963, quoted by Guillén and Rodríguez Díaz in this issue).

In so far as they are not dealt with here directly, we must point out that the complex nature and dynamics of public opinion need to be studied further. In this sense, a related research subject this thematic issue proposes is to consider the interchange between journalism, the media and politics in a roundabout way. For example, if journalism—and the media—can institute figures of public authority, the forms of authority themselves are not always overtly political. Knowledge, for example, including scientific knowledge, can be a source of authority and power. The articles in this thematic issue barely address it, but the question of the political role of information—often known or depicted as technocracy—cries for attention (Garretón, 1989, made relevant again by Trudel and De Maeyer).

In a discursive context where "fake news" flourishes (sometimes identified *a posteriori* as such) and "alternative facts" are claimed *a priori*, questions of power are as significant today as ever before. These statements and discourses underline the prevalence of conflict for authority. First, they contain implicit or explicit assertions of legitimacy in the public space (although this may be more than ever removed from the Habermasian conception of it). Second, they lead to reactions (typically negative) among the many actors at work in the realms of knowledge and power—journalism, media, politics, and even science. It is thus that universal truths, though doubtless contestable, are espoused based on ontological positions mistaken in part for established presuppositions (the real as referent, if not the truth) and permeate journalism, the media and politics (and their studies). As a result, many discursive institutions are seeing swaths of their principles, boundaries and conditions challenged and brought into question. We

invite researchers to direct their own questions at this issue.

This is only one reflection among others. We are confident that this thematic issue of *Sur le journalisme – About Journalism – Sobre jornalismo* on comparative studies on journalism, media and politics is rich in questions, research insights, methodological proposals and even new explications. In conclusion, and at the risk of repeating ourselves, this thematic issue confirms that comparative studies thrive in a heterogeneous environment, abounding as it does in theoretical and methodological debates.

Translation: Helmut Obermeir

Bibliography

Albuquerque, A., 2012, "On Models and Margins: Comparative Media Models Viewed from a Brazilian Perspective", *in* Hallin, D., Mancini, P. (Eds.), *Comparing Media Systems beyond the Western World,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 72-95.

Canelas Rubim, A. (Ed.), 2004, *Comunicação e Política*, Salvador, EDUFBA – COMPOS – UNESP.

Cohen, B., 1963, *The Press and Foreign Policy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.

Foucault, M., 1966, *Les mots et les choses*, Paris, Gallimard.

Foucault, M., 1969, *L'archéologie du savoir*, Paris, Gallimard.

Garretón, M. A., 1989, *The Chilean Political Process*, Boston, Unwin Hyman.

Gingras, A.-M. (Ed.), 2010, *La communication politique. État des savoirs, enjeux et perspectives*, Quebec, Presses de l'Université du Québec.

Habermas, J., 1991 [1962], *L'espace public*, Paris, Payot.

Hallin, D., Mancini, P., 2012, *Comparing Media Systems beyond the Western World,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Hirschl, R., 2005, "The Question of Case Selection in Comparative Constitutional Law", *The American Journal of Comparative Law,* vol. 53, nº 1, pp. 125-155.

Kohli, A. *et al.*, 1995, "The Role of Theory in Comparative Politics", *World Politics,* vol. 48, nº 1, pp. 1-49.

Lichbach, M., Zuckerman, A., 2009, *Comparative Politics. Rationality, Culture and Structure,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

March, J., Olsen, J., 1989, *Rediscovering Institutions. The Organizational Basis of Politics*, New York, Free Press.

Mill, J. S., 1843, "Of the Four Methods of Experimental Inquiry", *A System of Logic*, London, John Parker, pp. 450-479.

Przeworski, A., Teune, H., 1970, *The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry*, New York, Wiley-Interscience.

Sartori, G., 1994, "Bien comparer, mal comparer", *Revue internationale de politique comparée,* vol. 1, nº 1, pp. 19-36.

Seiler, D.-L., 1994, "Science politique, comparaison et universaux ou ce que comparer veut dire", *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, vol. 1, nº 1, pp. 91-110.

Skocpol, T., 1978, *States and Social Revolutions*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Snyder, R., 2001, "Scaling Down: The Subnational Comparative Method", *Studies in Comparative International Development*, vol. 36, nº 1, pp. 93-110.

Weber, M., 1971 [1922], *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr.