

## **Comparative and transnational approaches to the field of media and communications: Reflections from the project EU Kids Online**

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### **Introduction**

Today I wish to offer some reflections on the ambitions and scope, and also the practicalities and problems, of working in the field of media and communication in an age of globalisation. I have been led to these reflections partly because I have spent the last year being President of the International Communication Association – and the 'International' part was by far the most contested and, therefore, demanding; like you, I teach in a new department (it just celebrated its fifth birthday), one in which just 1 in 20 students is British: i.e. I teach an international cohort what I hope is of international value; I direct a 21 nation network – EU Kids Online – bounded by a definition of Europe which is simultaneously expanding its reach and, arguably, fragmenting from within; and because the honour you have paid me today has led me to consider where the two decades since I received my PhD have taken me and, moreover, where the coming years might lead.

When I received my PhD in 1987, I was well-trained in a discipline that made unthinkingly universalistic claims – psychology studies human nature, notwithstanding a little cultural exceptionalism. Then I gained a teaching position teaching British students about British media familiar to us both so they could get British jobs. And I was advised by those ahead of me to look only to the USA if I was ambitious enough to build an 'international' career.

This week, one of my doctoral students, Ranjana Das, having discovered that much audience reception theory is published in German, asked if – like an anthropologist perhaps – she should immerse herself in a new language before continuing her studies. With apologies to German scholars here, I said no – instead, she should contact German researchers and ask if they had written something in English, we could apply for translation money for one or two articles, we might plan an invited symposium of scholars from different theoretical and linguistic traditions, and perhaps then she'd be ready for a postdoctoral position in Germany.

So, our field has changed – it's far more multi-lingual, open-minded, networked. And to cope with this, we have new strategies and resources – for comparative study, cross-national networks, translation and travel funds, young scholar exchanges, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> I dedicate this article, with gratitude, to my two mentors – Jay Blumler, a committed advocate of system-sensitive approaches to cross-national research, and Elihu Katz, whose lifelong attempt to bring together opposing sides has also guided my career. This paper is partly a belated response to some lively conversations with Kevin Robins during the ESF's *Changing Media, Changing Europe Programme*. Last, I thank Liesbet van Zoonen and Jos de Haan for their constructive responses to my presentation of this paper in Rotterdam, and Susanne Janssen for doing me the honour of acting as my 'promoter' to the Erasmus University of Rotterdam.

## **Comparative research is necessary**

Twenty years ago, we thought comparative research was a choice. In *Comparatively Speaking*, Jay Blumler, Jack McLeod and Karl-Erik Rosengren (1992: 2) wrote that it 'can pose challenges to scholars' preconceptions and is liable to be theoretically upsetting... [But its contribution] is not confined only to testing, validating and revising existing theory. It also has a more creative and innovative role – opening up new avenues' – it seems to me they were trying to persuade those who could and did mainly choose to continue with national studies.

Today we don't have a choice. Partly because of the what my colleague Mike Power (1999) terms 'audit culture', which means our work is increasingly assessed for its status in an international arena - in terms of citation indices, publications in English, membership of prestigious networks, recognition in far-flung parts of the world. But more importantly, we don't have a choice because of globalisation – the globalisation of economy, culture, politics, and, of course, media and communications.

Today, it doesn't make sense to study one phenomenon in one country without asking also – is this common across the globe or distinct to one country or region? We have to write the answer into everything we do – we can no longer simply study 'the news' without qualifying whether we mean British or Dutch news, European or supposedly global news. Even if we avoid the question, our readers cannot – for they must locate each project in their international literature review. Neither a simple assumption of difference or similarity will suffice. How frustrating is the research report with chapters headed 'Britain', 'Netherlands', 'China', 'Brazil', written by people who don't know if what they are claiming is commonplace or distinctive. How meaningless is the accumulation of decontextualised studies from different countries as if they all treated as another brick in the universal wall of knowledge.

It is precisely the explanation of the observed pattern of similarities and differences that matters. How can we develop this?

## **Comparative research is difficult**

In the EU Kids Online project, we set ourselves the task of identifying research across 21 countries, coding and comparing recent findings about children's uses, risks and safety on the internet in order to (1) evaluate the available research and pinpoint key gaps, (2) review the methodological challenges of cross-national work with children, especially online, and produce a best practice research guide, (3) compare findings obtained in different countries to describe, and to explain, the pattern of similarities and differences, and (4) to draw out the implications and recommendations for national and European policymakers.

I won't develop our findings here – they are all on our website at [www.eukidsonline.net](http://www.eukidsonline.net) – but rather reflect on the challenges that projects like this encounter. For the effort to be international has some real limits – administrative, financial, human. We spend ever more time on aeroplanes and in international hotels, in emailing colleagues with whom a collaborative project just might get funded and trying to keep up with the avalanche of new 'international' journals.

This effort to compare, and to internationalise, also occasions new uncertainties – about the relevance of our ideas, the nature of our contribution, even the legitimacy of our inquiry.

In Britain, the government's audit of research excellence requires that we judge whether, for example, a study of a BBC radio station in Wales, while locally focused, is nonetheless 'international' in its quality – meaning that people in other countries 'should' read it. In the International Communication Association (see [www.icaheadq.org](http://www.icaheadq.org)), we became acutely aware of how the effort to internationalise can simultaneously include or generate new forms of marginalisation and exclusion – for those who don't speak English, for those who lack generous travel budgets. Hence we increased translation of ICA journals, conference grants for 'international' students, and attempted to spread responsibilities and rewards more widely than 'the usual suspects' (Livingstone, 2007).

But it is the intellectual case for an international field of study that most demands our attention. What are we doing in building an international field of study? Especially as Else Øyen (1990: 1) writes in her *Comparative Methodology*:

'All the eternal and unsolved problems ... are unfolded when engaging in cross-national studies. None of the methodological and theoretical difficulties we have learned to live with can be ignored when we examine critically such questions as what is comparative research, how we go about doing comparative work, and how we interpret similarities and differences in countries compared.'

Humility, therefore, is a good starting point for such work.

### **The dominant approach(es) to cross-national comparisons**

By far the dominant approach to international research has been that of the cross-national comparison, whether conducted by one researcher or teams of researchers based in each country:

- Traditionally defined as 'a study that compares two or more nations with respect to some common activity' (Edelstein, 1982: 14)
- It tends to be 'etic' rather than 'emic', sacrificing contextualisation for standardisation of concepts and measures in order to facilitate comparisons across contexts.
- It is parsimonious – for it assumes cross-national similarities unless proven otherwise, when we have to explain the exceptions.
- Within this, Melvyn Kohn (1989) identifies three distinct approaches, as I discuss in Livingstone (2003):

(1) *Treating countries as objects of analysis in their own right*: this approach employs an idiographic lens to understand countries for their own sake; comparison provides a useful strategy for 'seeing better' and determining what is distinctive (or not) about a country. Since this is fairly modest in aims, it makes few assumptions about comparability across countries and it offers little by way of explanation.

Examples include Coleman and Rollett's (1997) *Television in Europe*, or – of interest to EU Kids Online - the Eurobarometer survey of children's online safety (Eurobarometer, 2006). These provide country by country information, and comparisons are left to the reader. In our country reports for EU Kids Online, we also do this (Hasebrink et al, 2008), but we don't stop there.

(2) *Treating countries as the context for examining general hypotheses*: this approach analyses tests general theoretical models across nations; it hypothesises cross-national similarities but is open to findings of cross-national differences that challenge or limit claims.

In the EU Kids Online project, we identified the SAFT survey (Staksrud, 2005) as illustrating this. Five countries are used as a test bed to see if general findings such as a parent-child gap in perception of online risk, or gender differences in use of the internet – hold across all countries. We then extended this across all our 21 countries, finding some key similarities – first, in the rank ordering of online risks experienced by children, and second, in internet usage trends by age, gender and socio-demographic status across Europe.

(3) *Treating countries as units in a multidimensional analysis*: this approach seeks to explain patterns of similarities and, particularly, differences across countries; it inquires into the external indicators that explain how and why nations vary systematically. Blumler, McLeod and Rosengren (1992: 7) term this ‘system-sensitivity’, arguing that comparison ‘is not just a matter of discretely and descriptively comparing isolated bits and pieces of empirical phenomena situated in two or more locales. Rather, it reflects a concern to understand how the systemic context may have shaped such phenomena.’

Dan Hallin and Paolo Mancini’s (2004) lauded study of the relation between media and political systems, *Comparing Media Systems*, illustrates this approach, for they first identify robust and overarching dimensions of comparison (the parallelism between political and media systems, the independence of media from the state, the spread of press readership from elites to the masses, etc) and then they use these to identify differences across countries, grouping these meaningfully so as to generate further hypotheses.

In EU Kids Online, we are also attempting this, asking whether such factors as the degree of internet regulation, the nature of media coverage of risk, the embedding of the internet in the education system, etc can help explain patterns of difference in children’s online risk experiences. It’s a demanding task, requiring a classification of countries – by internet use, by online risk – and then an explanation for this classification (see Hasebrink et al, 2008). But we consider it is worth while, for only thus can one attempt to square the circle of comparing across countries while respecting contextual factors within countries.

As I have argued before (Livingstone, 2003), distinguishing these approaches guides researchers in making what are otherwise rather haphazard decisions. For example – how do we select the countries to study? We can’t just compare countries inhabited by nice colleagues who live in cities we are keen to visit. Rather, and particularly if we are testing general hypotheses across countries, very different countries should be compared; but if we are treating countries as units in a multidimensional analysis, too great a diversity of countries may be problematic – it is not accidental that Hallin and Mancini restricted their account to Western democratic countries in which their overarching dimensions were meaningful within a shared framework.

### **Challenging the cross-national comparative model**

Intriguingly, this cross-national model – long established, much employed – in all three variants, is now under pressure:

- It may inadvertently privilege the dominant norm (or the unmarked cultural form) over the norms of 'others', marked out as different. We are used to this, as when we draw conclusions like: 'The digital divide is reducing as the internet reaches the mass market, although it was always small in Sweden.' My favourite example came from an article that compared political campaigning in the US and in Spain: the article began with a section on the election process in Spain only – for that of the US needs no explanation... A more personal example – I recently received a critical review of an article submission, for my literature review was not up to date – a list of articles by American authors was helpfully provided, and my existing list of European scholars, rarely cited in 'international' articles, was ignored.
- The cross-national model is getting larger and larger, far beyond the comparison of two countries once commonplace, and may begin to collapse under its own weight. We must admire Annabelle Sreberny for completing her 29 national study of bias in foreign news reporting (1985) – but there are many other studies, some of them even bigger, that never reach publication for reasons of sheer scale and problems of coordination and funding. We are not natural dictators, I think, but achieving a deliberative consensus by email is tough.
- Cross-national research is often done badly – not deliberately but out of the difficulty of anticipating local variation in meanings, practices or contexts – hence Roger Jowell's (1998: 175) stern injunction to future researchers, in his critical article – 'how comparative is comparative research?' to employ 'stringent and well-policed ground rules for comparable survey methods'. His guidance on conducting comparative research 'properly' is full of terms like 'strict' and 'uncompromising' – indicating a kind of Canute-like struggle against the inexorable tide of cultural diversity and mutual incomprehension. Anyone who has read the European Social Survey's lengthy 'protocol on questionnaire translation strategies and procedures' knows what I mean.

Yet in their book on Ethnography, Hammersley and Atkinson (1983: 7), observe that 'using standardised methods in no way ensures the commensurability of the data produced. In fact, quite the reverse occurs. Interpretations of the same set of experimental instructions or interview questions will undoubtedly vary among people and across occasions'. The consequence is, as Peschar (1984: 4) puts it, that 'in order to achieve such an instrument... what is considered to be "noise", and thus removed, is in fact the most interesting part of the research, namely the *national particularities*'.

- Last, despite every effort to respect local cultural distinctiveness, cross-national projects somehow end up universalising; it seems that similarities are easier to observe than differences. I just read Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs' (2007) project on the worldwide reception of *The Lord of the Rings* – fascinating in many ways; yet though chapters are written by German, Australian, Dutch and Spanish scholars, we learn too little of German, Australian, Dutch or Spanish audiences – the global audience is rendered singular not plural. When they do offer an account of cultural difference, cross-national projects risk failing to convince – each time I teach Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz' cross-national study of the reception of *Dallas*, 'The Export of Meaning' (1990), someone will suggest that the researchers misunderstood the Japanese rejection, or that Russians are not all obsessed with ideology or....

In other words, while the search for similarities suggests a universalizing gaze that overrides cultural distinctiveness, the search for differences is open to the charge of missing key features of the context or, worse, exacerbating national stereotypes

or overstating internal homogeneity while underplaying heterogeneity, ambiguity and borderline phenomena.

For example, in EU Kids Online, it is clear that within national differences can be greater than those between nations – consider the urban/rural divide in Greece, the North/South divides in Norway or, differently, in Italy, the regionalisation in Spain, the linguistic/cultural divide in Belgium. At the same time, it's impractical to list 21 separate countries in all conclusions, and one must classify them into three or four groups, whether by geographic region or research theme. Then all claims must be checked, in an iterative, deliberative process, with researchers from each country.

### **The transnational alternative**

But for some, cross-national comparison is an inherently flawed enterprise. Lynne Chisholm (1995: 22) argues that 'societies and cultures are fundamentally non-comparable and certainly cannot be evaluated against each other'. Here are also echoes of Janice Radway's call for radical contextualism, eschewing the standardised 'etic' approach in favour of the ethnographic 'emic'. The argument that meaning depends on context and that contexts are incommensurate is compelling. But as Jim Beniger (1992: 35) says, when promoting comparison as a matter of principle, we must also grapple with the fact that, not only is it the case that '*all* social science research is comparative' but also '*all* analysis is comparative', there is no alternative. And now the field of comparison is on a global scale.

Others, however, do not argue against the notion of comparison, nor the global scale, but they do urge that the cross-national part is all wrong. Thus Kohn describes a fourth approach which, it seems, is on the ascendant, namely (4) *Treating countries as the locus for a global or transnational trend*: This approach, useful for examining grand historical claims of globalisation, individualism, mediatization and consumerism, is fundamentally concerned with transborder phenomena hardly containable within any one country.

Arjun Appadurai (1996: 33–6) is perhaps the leading exponent of the transnational approach in his argument for five vectors of social change, all of importance to our field, all of which escape the national: the ethnoscape (the shifting landscape of persons, identities, diaspora), the technoscape (the fluid, networked configuration of technologies), the financescapes (the disposition of global capital), the mediascapes (the distribution of information, images and audiences) and the ideoscapes (the ideologies and counter-ideologies which link images and ideas to the power of states). In a convergent late modern world, the scapes intersect, though we may distinguish them analytically. In the mobile and networked society characterised by Manuel Castells as 'a space of flows', it seems we require what George Marcus called 'multi-sited ethnography' – we must follow our objects of analysis (media, stories, peoples, innovations, even policies) wherever they take us, across whatever borders. And as Wimmer and Schiller (2002: 321) argue, 'globalization fever' has magnified interest in how communication technologies are reshaping 'transnational ties'.

Thus many have joined in the critique of what Ulrich Beck and others have called 'methodological nationalism' – the view in which 'the nation-state is taken as the organizing principle of modernity', whether naturally, historically or normatively (Chernilo, 2006: 6). Kevin Robins (2001: 77) points to the inevitable failure of the national vision – 'a way of thinking that tends to consider cultural complexity in terms of disorder and loss of coherence.' (Recall Roger Jowell's attempt uncompromisingly

to police his research collaborators as they try to 'control' for contextual variation and messy measures.)

As Robins says, 'the nation can never actually exist in the form of its ideal image of itself. It is always bound to be compromised by disorderly realities' (p.85). So too, we may add, the comparative research project unless it transcends the national frame and recognises – instead of marginalising – the contradictions and complexities, the transnational flows across and within borders. Robins develops this approach with Asu Aksoy (2000) in relation to Turkish television audiences within Europe. Many other research examples now come into view – revealing diasporic audiences (e.g. Silverstone's analysis of minority language media within and beyond Europe), alternative or community media (e.g. Carpentier and Cammaerts), technologically-mediated new social movements, and including, the newly transnational reach, albeit often reappropriated or glocalised, of Disney (Wasko, 2001), Big Brother (Mathijs & Jones, 2004), Pop Idol and more.

### **Converging approaches?**

But in pointing to the studies of Disney and Big Brother as examples of transnational projects, I've come full circle to meet those already referred to – on Dallas and The Lord of The Rings - as global cross-national projects. So when is a project a comparison of media in Germany and Spain, America and China – and when is it a study of media flowing across borders?

In Livingstone (2003), I illustrated this blurring of approaches with Liebes and Katz's (1990) *Dallas* project. First they treat the *nation as context of study*, thus testing the abstract hypothesis of cultural imperialism across contexts selected for the maximal diversity by using a standardised methodology; this tends, as noted earlier, to neglect the cultural complexity in which the viewing groups were embedded. However, having failed to find evidence for cultural imperialism, they turned to an 'emic' approach, creatively uncovering how people appropriated the text to fit their prior culture as part of a transnational negotiation – not a straightforward export - of meaning. So the distinction between cross-national and transnational approaches is not so clear in practice. Is EU Kids Online a cross-national project, for we have a research team sitting in each country examining local conditions of internet use? Or is it a transnational project, tracking the internet as it spreads from Northern to Southern and, most rapidly, to Eastern Europe, reshaping cultures of childhood in its wake?

The arguments held across this boundary of cross-national and transnational are also blurring, I suggest, for I do believe we are listening to each other. Audience researchers have struggled with radical contextualism yet still seek some generalisations regarding the reception process and its relation to texts, genres and the conditions of production and distribution (Schroeder, Kline, Drotner and Murray, 2003). The fight between macro-oriented political economists and the cultural studies folk committed to bottom-up ethnography has faded in ferocity as each seeks some rapprochement (Curran, Morley & Walkerdine, 1996).

Theoretically, this means our projects are becoming ever more ambitious, as we include institutional arrangements of production and distribution, texts and technologies, and social practices of reception and consumption – the whole circuit of meaning within the one project, and each part shaped by distinct flows and scapes – of people, finance, ideas, technology and media across the world. Methodologically, we have also become less polarised, preferring to triangulate emic and etic methods

as befits our research question and no longer agonised by incommensurate epistemologies.

But we still work in our own countries, despite the many flights and the even more numerous cross-national emails. And the national frame remains strong, despite the considerable appeal of the transnational flows and networks approach. At the recent Association of Internet Researchers conference in Copenhagen, the organisers mistakenly printed name labels for all British delegates with 'England' written on them, to the particular annoyance of my Scottish and Welsh colleagues....

## **Ways forward**

As Daniel Chernilo observes, we may reject methodological nationalism but we also seem unable to transcend it, and the notion of the nation persists – however ambivalently - as neither wholly inadequate nor finally obsolete – a point Beck recognises when he argues not that the nation-state has ceased to be but, rather, in favour of *methodological cosmopolitanism*. This, he says, 'implies becoming sensitive and open to the many universalisms, the conflicting contextual universalisms' (Beck and Sznaider, 2006: 13). Or as James Bohman (1991: 143) argues, we must combine both contextualised interpretation, which requires the researcher to draw on insider knowledge and rational interpretation, which requires the researcher to draw on outsider knowledge. For Beck, the key move is to replace the nation-state with an alternative unit of research – he suggests 'transnational regimes of politics', 'transnational spaces and cultures of memory' (p.15) and he invites us to renegotiate the 'basic rules and basic decisions' of social analysis.

Thus I, and many others, continue to conduct cross-national research, though taking to heart at least some of the insights and critical reflections of the transnational approach.

I want to conclude by suggesting that one reason why we remain concerned with particular countries or regions, and engage with national funding and policy bodies, is because we're becoming more normative – neither satisfied to be either talking to ourselves in our ivory tower or to be purely critical if that means being positioned on the sidelines. Witness the current interest in the mediated public sphere, in media literacy, media ethics and the crises facing journalism, in the call for action research, critical engagement not disengagement with media policy and regulation, in the prominence of so-called evidence-based policy. And when it comes to engagement, we still must speak to national actors (journalists, policy makers, governments) most often, and international actors on occasion.

So how should we regard this normative national frame? Kevin Robins compares three interpretations of the nation, as follows.

- At one extreme is the ethno-cultural nation – the conception of nation that maps identity and culture onto nation. It promises to resolve today's problems of belonging, trust and efficacy by defending a homogenous imagined community of obligation and commitment. But its problem is the rising global flows, diversification and transnational migration, which undermine the revisionist history that prioritises stability, continuity and coherence.
- At the other extreme is the notion of the nation as 'a community of communities', embracing diversity and difference, celebrating contrast and flux, perhaps approaching a cosmopolitan multiculturalism within and across borders. But this



approach works better as a critique of the ethno-cultural frame than as a positive account of society - both institutions and lifeworld.

- Third, sitting in between, is the notion of civic nationalism – in which Robins includes Habermas' 'constitutional patriotism' (Robins, 2001: 82): a conception of nation that rejects the myth of cultural homogeneity and belonging and replaces it with a political and administrative culture that affirms, or should affirm, social and cultural rights and inclusivity – this is essentially, a rather cool, non-visceral assertion of citizenship.

With this in mind, let's ask again how we explain media and communications phenomena across countries?

- Most commonly, I suggest, we tend to explain patterns of difference according to the ethno-cultural nation. Different interpretations of the same television programme, different diffusion paths for a new communication technology – are related to intrinsic cultural factors - religious or other values in public and private spheres, myths and narrative traditions, historically embedded conventions of authority and trust. Yet the critiques of this model rightly undermine these efforts - hence the often hesitant, homogenising or evasive conclusions drawn in comparative work.
- Another answer is not to explain, rather to observe diversity, to describe its flows and operation, even its drivers and consequences, but not necessarily to explain why a phenomenon takes one form in one country and another elsewhere. For the community of communities approach, it's the overall kaleidoscope that's interesting, and highlighting this can be a political end in itself.
- Third, and my preferred option, we might retain caution in attempting to explain cross-national differences but not be satisfied with simply charting the patterns observed. Instead, we can focus on using our findings to inform the policies or structures that can bring about change. Comparative findings may reveal advantages enjoyed in one country that could be fought for in another. They may reveal inequalities in one country that another has eradicated. They may legitimate certain policy priorities over others, or provide an argument to motivate certain policy actors.

This may sound rather strategic, but the ideals that motivate such an engagement with normative theory and policy do draw on a grander vision, whether we frame this as methodological cosmopolitanism or global civil society or a European public sphere (e.g. Schlesinger and Kevin, 2000). They emphasise the importance of strengthening social and digital inclusion, communication rights and new forms of mediated citizenship (see Cammaerts, 2006; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2008). This is an agenda we can pursue more coolly, more collaboratively, I think, identifying common ground, recognising difference, and taking advantage of national, transnational and international opportunities for social change.

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