

NETWORKING JOURNALISM STUDIES: TOWARDS A WORLD JOURNALISM SURVEY

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ABSTRACT Most scholars argue that cross-national research is indispensable for establishing the generalizability of theories and the validity of interpretations derived from single-nation studies. Another important aspect of comparative studies is that they force us to test our interpretations against cross-cultural differences and inconsistencies. In journalism studies, the advantages of cross-national research are obvious. While the empirical inquiry into news-making has generated a vast quantity of data, some of the more fundamental questions in journalism research remain largely unresolved: What shapes the news and the structures of journalism most? Is it politics, economy, or culture? How do the conventional Western values of objective journalism fit in with non-Western cultures? In this article, I would like to propose the creation of a “World Journalism Survey”, modeled after the World Values Survey, for a better map of the cultural differences in journalism practices around the world.

KEY-WORDS journalism studies, cross-cultural research, comparative studies.

Gearing up for cross-national research

During the last twenty years or so, comparative research has gained increased attention in journalism studies. The end of the cold war and the onward march of globalization gave a fresh impetus to the mobility of researchers. Scholars nowadays find many opportunities where they can meet with their colleagues from afar. At the same time, new communication technologies triggered the rise of global institutionalized networks of scientists, such as the journalism studies sections of the International Communication Association (ICA) and the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA).

In addition to this, awareness of journalism studies as a global field of inquiry has led to a number of international conferences exclusively centered on journalism: “Journalism Research in an Era of Globalization” (July 2-4, 2004 in Erfurt, Germany); “Thinking Journalism Across National Boundaries” (November 3-5, 2006 in Porto Alegre, Brazil); the “World Journalism Education Congress” (June 25-28, 2007 in Singapore); and another conference on “Comparative Journalism Research” planned for June 25-27, 2008 in Tasmania. Similarly, comparative communication research, its theoretical and methodological developments as well as its output have themselves become the focus of international conferences.

The burgeoning field of communication and media studies has witnessed the creation of new scholarly journals especially devoted to international and comparative research, including the *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research* (founded in 2006) and the *Journal of Global Mass Communication* (starts publication in 2008). Additionally, funding agencies have become increasingly aware of the virtue of cross-national research. It has become easier than ever before to acquire funding for international research projects. Unprecedented multi-national funding opportunities were created through the *European Framework Program for Research and Technological Development*; funding agencies like the Ford Foundation and the Volkswagen Foundation have set up international and interdisciplinary research grants.

Academic journalism education seeks to live up to this trend of internationalization by offering highly specialized degree programs, a process that particularly takes place in Europe. Five European universities, the Universities of Aarhus, Amsterdam, Wales and Hamburg together with the City University in London, introduced a jointly operated MA program in *International Journalism*. Master programs in *International Journalism* are also offered by the Cardiff University, Liverpool John Moore’s University and University of Central Lancashire. An MA in *Comparative Journalism* has been designed by the University of Wales, in *Comparative International Journalism* by the Goldsmiths University and in *International Media Journalism* by the Coventry University.

In light of the positive outlook given above I think it is time to explore the potential for a large and sustaining international research network in our field. Such an effort could take advantage of the rich

methodological heritage of other fields in the social sciences and humanities. In this paper I would, therefore, like to propose a cross-national panel of journalism surveys, a World Journalism Survey, modeled after the World Values Survey.

Why doing cross-national research?

Most scholars argue that cross-national research is indispensable for establishing the generalizability of theories and the validity of interpretations derived from single-nation studies. Another important aspect of comparative studies is that they force us to test our interpretations against cross-cultural differences and inconsistencies (KOHN, 1989; VAN DE VIJVER & LEUNG, 1997).

In journalism studies, the advantages of cross-national research are obvious. While the empirical inquiry into news-making has generated a vast quantity of data, some of the more fundamental questions in journalism research remain largely unresolved: What shapes the news and the structures of journalism most? Is it politics, economy, or culture? How do the conventional Western values of objective journalism fit in with non-Western cultures? Does the increasing dissociation of journalism from the political system in all cultures lead to reliance on economic rationalities? Does a common professional culture exist in “the West”, in Asia, in Europe, or anywhere else? Is there actually a class of “cosmopolite” journalists (REESE, 2001:178) who share a common occupational ideology and understanding of journalism?

These and other demanding research questions notwithstanding, conceptually and methodologically deliberate research projects with a truly international scope are still the exception rather than the rule. Among the studies that have stood the test of time is the UNESCO-inspired Foreign Images study that involved 29 countries (SREBERNY-MOHAMMADI, NORDENSTRENG & STEVENSON, 1984) as well as the five-nation study of Patterson and Donsbach (1996) and, most recently, the Hallin and Mancini (2004) book “Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics”.

The limited number of true cross-national research projects in the field of journalism studies may have to do with the fact that this kind of research is difficult to conduct, while it often requires extensive resources in terms of time, manpower, funding and infrastructure. Collaborative research is sometimes described as “exhausting”, “a

nightmare” and “frustrating” (LIVINGSTONE, 2003:481). Researchers may be frustrated by country-specific differences in methodological and procedural habits, particularly preferred modes of data collection, sampling methods and acceptable response rates (JOWELL, 1998:170). Most agree that cross-national research, by its very nature, demands greater willingness to compromise than a single-nation study (HANTRAIS & MANGEN, 1996:10).

International research does also face many epistemological and methodological challenges: *First*, when very different systems or time periods are being analyzed, the extent of the differences may overwhelm meaningful comparison (BLUMLER, MCLEOD & ROSENGREN, 1992). *Second*, researchers often understate heterogeneities within the cultures being compared when focusing on differences between the units of analysis, but sometimes variances within cultures may be greater than variations across cultural boundaries (ØYEN, 1990). *Third*, the so-called Galton's Problem may arise from the fact that differences and similarities, for instance between Great Britain and the United States in terms of message content or professional values, can be thought as “caused” by the respective national cultures or as the result of diffusion across cultures (SCHEUCH, 1990). *Fourth*, researchers have to establish equivalence in terms of concepts, methods and administration as well as language and meaning (e.g. the verbalization of questionnaire items; VIJVER & LEUNG, 1997). *Fifth*, many cross-cultural studies produce “measurement out of the context” by assuming methodological and theoretical universalism (LIVINGSTONE, 2003:482). *Sixth*, cultures are often evaluated through the lens of the researchers' different cultural value systems. Therefore, the only way to overcome ethnocentrism in research is through collaborative action, but this strategy often requires an existing international network of researchers.

Three forms of organizing international research

In the most general sense, organizational forms of international research can be classified according to the way concepts and research instruments are constructed and applied in diverse cultural contexts:

In the *safari* approach, a single researcher or team from one country is carrying out research at least partly in a different cultural context (HANTRAIS & MANGEN, 1996: 4). In most cases, researchers compare their own countries to other nations. Esser (1998) and

Köcher (1986), for instance, have compared journalists and editorial organizations from Great Britain and Germany, while Wu, Weaver and Johnson (1996) investigated the professional roles of Russian and American journalists. It is not uncommon for research to be entirely conducted in a foreign context, exemplified by the study of Hanitzsch (2006) who has surveyed journalists in Indonesia. The major problem of safari research is that it too often leads to interpretations that lack context. Investigators are equipped with a different cultural experience and tend to see, more or less consciously, other cultures through the prism of their own socialization. Although the perspective of an outsider can sometimes be an advantage and help contextualize culture-specific findings, many facets of a culture can only be understood and properly interpreted from within.

In the *application* approach, researchers replicate a study originally designed for another culture and apply it to their own context. This means researchers “borrow” their concepts, research designs and research instruments from other studies, drawing on their own work or that of others, and apply it to a different cultural context, perhaps after making some adjustments to the original research tools. Most of the time, however, investigators use only parts of the original instruments. Examples are two surveys of journalists conducted in Brazil (HERSCOVITZ & CARDOSO, 1998) and France (MCMANE, 1998) which relied on Weaver and Wilhoit’s (1991, 1996) measurement of the journalists’ perceptions of media roles. The essential disadvantage of such a strategy is that the original research design and instruments were developed for a particular cultural milieu and cannot easily be transplanted to another context. The high valuation of the conventional ideology of “objective journalism” even in Asian and African countries may well be a result from asking questions that were originally designed for the West. The normative expectations of the professional model may not only have molded the questionnaire, but they might also have shaped the answers (JOSEPHI, 2006: 584).

While the above research strategies could be subsumed under a category that Halloran (1998: 45) termed “research imperialism”, the *assembly* approach stands for the truly collaborative development, application, evaluation and publication of research. Of course, one could argue that the rapid advance of communication and information technologies have made comparative research easier than ever before. It is possible to do large cross-national content analyses of

news texts that are accessible via public and commercial databases (e.g. *LexisNexis*), while reasonable telephone flat rates make it possible to conduct massive international surveys without leaving the country. Furthermore, the development of data assessment tools and computing capacities allows the processing of enormous cross-sectional data sets in virtually no time. However, the assembly approach has a value of its own. It should be the principal venue of international research as it is the only way to ensure proper execution of research and interpretation of findings. In journalism research, only a few studies have lived up to these standards, including the Foreign Images study (SREBERNY-MOHAMMADI, NORDENSTRENG & STEVENSON, 1984), the “Media and Democracy” study of Patterson and Donsbach (1996) as well as Berkowitz, Limor and Singer’s (2004) comparison of American and Israeli journalists.

Nevertheless, as noted above, collaborative research is costly, time-consuming and requires a sometimes large network of researchers. One effective way to create opportunities for cross-cultural journalism research would be through an omnibus study that is collaboratively designed by researchers from diverse cultural contexts and which is carried out on a regular basis. In this respect, journalism researchers can take their cues from other disciplines where this kind of research has a long tradition. One example is the World Values Survey.

The World Values Survey

To date, the World Values Survey (WVS) has carried out four waves of representative national surveys of the values and beliefs in more than 80 countries on all six inhabited continents. According to its own mission statement, the study is intended “to help social scientists and policy makers better understand worldviews and changes that are taking place in the beliefs, values and motivations of people throughout the world” (see www.worldvaluessurvey.org). Historically, the World Values Survey grew out of a study launched by the European Values Survey group in the early 1980s. When the European Values Survey carried out surveys in ten West European societies, it evoked such widespread interest that it was replicated in 14 additional countries. Today, the main driving force behind the World Values Survey is Ronald Inglehart at the University of Michigan who coordinates the surveys outside Western Europe.

The global study of values and beliefs is coordinated by the World Values Survey Association (WVSA), a non-profit organization in which each national group has full authority over self-organization but only one vote when decisions are taken by the WVSA. General assemblies are being held at least once every two years. All members of WVSA have to sign a document in which they agree to WVSA data sharing protocols and a code of professional ethics and practices. Each participating group gets immediate access to the data from all other participating societies as long as they provide their national survey data to the overall organization.

The collaborative work is steered by an executive committee with six elected members. The committee is responsible for the recruitment of new members, the organization of meetings and workshops, the promotion of publications and dissemination of results. It also raises funds for central functions and assists member groups in their fundraising. Additionally, the executive committee coordinates each round of WVSA data collection, including questionnaire design, data archiving and distribution and determines the timing of the next wave. In terms of funding, each national team is responsible for its own expenses, and most surveys are financed by local scientific foundations. However, in cases where local funding is not possible, the executive committee makes an effort to obtain central and supplementary funding.

Towards a World Journalism Survey

In journalism studies, the values and beliefs of “news people” have become central to the understanding of how the news is being created. From the pioneer work of McLeod and Hawley (1964), who developed a professionalism index for journalists, the study of Johnstone, Slawski and Bowman (1976) until the more recent surveys of journalists (see WEAVER, 1998a) – the journalists’ backgrounds and worldviews certainly belong to the most intensively researched areas in communication and media studies. However, while it would be useful to compare the data from the various national surveys to contextualize our often culture-specific knowledge of the way the news is produced, the theoretically and methodologically diverse perspectives behind these studies makes the interpretation of similarities and differences “a game of guess work at best” (WEAVER, 1998b: 455).

These shortcomings notwithstanding, an effort to establish a research-driven global network of journalism scholars does not exist – at least in the era that followed the *Foreign Images* study (SREBERNY-MOHAMMADI, NORDENSTRENG & STEVENSON, 1984). Given the much better potential for scientific cooperation (globalization, communication technologies, funding priorities, etc.) and a growing and rapidly institutionalizing community of researchers, the creation of a “World Journalism Survey” seems feasible and highly overdue.

I would like to propose such a World Journalism Survey (WJS) modeled after the World Values Survey. It could be an omnibus study carried out on a regular basis, perhaps every five years. Every wave of surveys should be coordinated by an executive committee whose members will be democratically elected by all participating national teams. In terms of institutional affiliation – if this would be desirable – the World Journalism Survey could be hosted by the Journalism Studies Divisions of the International Communication Association. Further options for cooperation should be explored with other organizations in the field (e.g. the International Association of Mass Communication Research, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, International Federation of Journalists), with local organizations (e.g. the Brazilian Society of Journalism Researchers, journalism sections of national communication associations) and major international journals (*Ecquid Novi*; *Journalism Studies*; *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism*).

Each national group of researchers should apply for funding to cover its own survey. For coordination and planning as well as in cases where the acquisition of local funding seems difficult (e.g. in developing countries), the executive committee will approach major funding organizations for central funding. All national groups will have access to the entire data set, provided they make their data available to the other teams within a specified time limit.

A global study of the worldviews of journalists that deserves this name would, of course, require a research instrument that is specifically designed for cross-national use and collaboratively developed involving scholars from a wide array of cultural contexts. Such an attempt is currently being undertaken by the project “Worlds of Journalisms”, in which researchers from Brazil, China, Germany, Indonesia, Russia, Uganda and the United States develop a research instrument for the context-sensitive measurement of journalism

cultures across nations, organizations and groups of journalists.¹ However, the coordinating executive committee would only provide a core instrument which should be identically applied – after careful translation – to all countries participating in the survey. Each national group would be free to include additional variables as long as it does not corrode the validity and reliability of the core instrument, and perhaps after some coordination with the executive committee.

I believe that a World Journalism Survey could give a fresh impetus to the field of journalism studies. Not only would it establish a rich and unparalleled pool of data that is comparable across cultures and over time, it would also create opportunities for a global exchange of thought. Furthermore, a World Journalism Survey would help disseminate the state of the art methodology for design and analysis of social surveys and build a sustaining network of journalism researchers all over the world.

NOTES

- 1 Other examples are the 22-nation survey of Splichal and Sparks (1994), studies that compare news content across European countries (BLUMLER 1983; GUREVITCH LEVY & ROEH, 1993), the “Global Monitoring Project” (SPEARS & SEYDEGART, 2000) as well as the comparisons of Germany with Great Britain (ESSER 1998; KÖCHER, 1986) and the United States with Germany (QUANDT ET AL. 2006), Russia (WU, WEAVER & JOHNSON, 1996), China and Taiwan (ZHU, WEAVER, LO, CHEN & WU, 1997) and Israel (BERKOWITZ, LIMOR & SINGER, 2004). The Foreign Images study was replicated in the 1990s by Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi and Robert L. Stevenson on a sample of 38 countries (WU, 2000).
- 2 More information about the project “Worlds of Journalisms” can be obtained from the author at th.hanitzsch@impz.unizh.ch.

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