Political Communications


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READER’S GUIDE:

Political communications focuses upon the transmission of information among politicians, the media, and the public. This chapter starts by outlining the logic of the comparative study of political communications. Two distinct approaches are identified; the older tradition utilized categorical typologies of media systems, reflecting the enduring features of the media landscape, exemplified by contrasts among state-owned, public-service or commercial broadcasting systems. This approach was useful during the modern era of communications, in the mid-twentieth century, but it has proved increasingly limited given the fragmentation and multidimensionality of contemporary channels during the third age of digital communications in the 21st century. Moreover categorical typologies are heavily normative and culturally-specific. Instead the chapter argues that today it is more satisfactory to use the growing range of disaggregated indices to compare multiple dimensions of political communications. The chapter proposes a sequential model of political communications and then uses indices to compare some key features of political communications worldwide – including contrasts in public access to communications, conditions of press freedom, and patterns of media ownership. The chapter concludes that categorical typologies of media systems should be replaced by more satisfactory and reliable disaggregated indices for classifying and comparing political communications in societies worldwide.
INTRODUCTION

The role of the mass media in democracy and development remains a contested topic. There is no agreement about the most appropriate normative standards which the media are supposed to meet, nor a consensus about how far these standards are achieved in practice. Should the news media serve as an agenda-setter, calling attention to urgent social needs and global problems? Or should they instead prioritise their role in providing entertainment and soft news for the broadest possible audience, allowing the free market to determine story coverage? Should journalists strive to maintain neutrality and balance across diverse partisan viewpoints, or should they be passionate and committed advocates crusading for causes? In fragile states, should reporters be watch-dogs critical of powerful interests, or consensus builders strengthening support for the government authorities and building national unity?

Understanding these issues is central to the comparative study of political communications. Political communications is an interactive process concerning the transmission of information among politicians, the media, and the public. The process operates downwards from governing institutions towards citizens, horizontally through linkages among political actors, and also upwards from public opinion towards the authorities. Newer technologies have merged diverse platforms but a conventional distinction can still be drawn concerning interpersonal communications (such as one-to-one discussions, say on door-steps, by email, or by phone bank connecting election workers and party supporters, or by constituents contacting elected representatives), within group networks (exemplified by local meetings, newsletters, weblogs, Tweets, You Tube uploads and Face-book postings), and mass communications through the media (typified by regional and national newspapers, radio and television broadcasts).

The earliest classical era of political communications evolved as representative democracies developed and the franchise expanded in Western Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries. Face-to-face interpersonal interactions connected citizens and politicians directly through election canvassing, town hall meetings, printed handbills and posters, and local rallies and candidate hustings. These channels were supplemented among the European elite by the printed word, including publication of occasional political pamphlets, newsletters, periodicals, journals, and newspapers. Railways expanded the opportunities for party leadership whistle-stop tours and facilitated the cheaper and faster distribution of daily newspapers among a growingly literate population, with commercial advertising reducing the price of mass-circulation papers and magazines. Telegraphs connected distant reporters with news-rooms and news wire agencies, first established by Associated Press in the mid-19th century, provided international news feeds from worldwide locations. The early twentieth century saw the
growth of wireless radios, used for leadership fire-side chats and the first party radio political broadcasts (aired by the British Broadcasting Corporation in 1924). Telephones revolutionized inter-personal communications and reduced the limits of distance. This era also saw technological advances in photography and wire transmissions which facilitated publication of realistic visual images, replacing engravings. During the interwar years, film documentaries and cinema sound newsreels covered events and breaking developments around the world.

The modern era of political communications, following the end of World War II, saw the rapidly expanding role of terrestrial television broadcasting, carrying both TV party political broadcasts on public service channels and commercial advertising on privately-owned TV networks. Inter-personal communications between local candidates, party workers, and citizens continued to play a vital role in door-stop campaigns, while the role of mass-circulation national and regional newspapers and magazines reached more educated and literate populations. By the mid-twentieth century, however, these resources were supplemented in post-industrial societies by the golden age of national and regional television and radio broadcasts carrying news and current affairs, as well as television party political broadcasts and advertising, with later decades experiencing the expansion of satellite and cable transmissions and channels.

The rise of the internet is widely regarded as demarcating the third age of political communications, focused on a wide range of digital technologies. Email services and networked computers had been available in scientific research circles for decades but technological advances, leading to the development of the first visual browser in the mid-1990s and the World Wide Web, have transformed political communications beyond all recognition during recent years. The developments include a fragmentation and proliferation of information sources available from the rapid expansion of interpersonal and group email and text messaging, search engines, the blogosphere, and the wealth of websites maintained by candidates, parties, government agencies and advocacy groups, the easy availability 24/7 of online newspapers and TV video news, and the popularity of social networking sites such as Facebook. Newspapers, radio and television are in the process of adapting to the evolving digital landscape, taking advantage of new opportunities such as smart mobile phones to diversify their means of transmission and their audience, although many also facing serious financial challenges through the loss of traditional sources of subscription and advertising revenues.

These changes are familiar to everyone living in contemporary affluent societies but it should be recognised that the third age of communications is part of a continuously evolving process. An
historical perspective suggests that many of the most popular political functions of the internet return to some of key features of inter-personal and group communications characteristic of the classical age of political communications, eroding the more centralized role of televised mass communications which predominated in the mid-twentieth century during the modern age. The newer forms of digital political communications usually supplement, but do not automatically replace, older forms; hence in contemporary election campaigns, personal canvassing by party workers continues alongside television broadcasts and party websites, widening sources of information and thus citizen choice. Moreover, as discussed later in this chapter, lack of access to newer information and communication technologies persist in many developing nations worldwide and election campaigns in these countries continue to rely primarily through traditional means of getting the message out, such as local rallies and inter-personal face-to-face contacts.

THE LOGIC OF COMPARATIVE POLITICAL COMMUNICATIONS

There are two distinct approaches to the comparative study of political communications. The older tradition focused upon developing and comparing categorical typologies of media systems, analogous to distinguishing and classifying types of regimes within each nation-state. This approach was most common during the modern era of communications, and it proved useful to delineate contrasts in the global landscape of radio and television broadcasting. This approach has proved to be increasingly problematic, however, given the fragmentation and multidimensionality of contemporary channels which have occurred in the third age of digital communications. Existing conceptual typologies are heavily normative and culturally-specific. Classification schemas remain descriptive and difficult to operationalize. Instead this chapter proposes that a more satisfactory research strategy uses the growing range of disaggregated indices to compare multiple dimensions of contemporary political communications, such as measures of press freedom, audience access, and media ownership and pluralism.

In the broadest sense, all normative and empirical analysis of political communications is comparative, if this is understood to mean contrasting different units, including types of media channels (such as TV versus the internet), programme genres (e.g. news or soaps), or media effects (such as framing and agenda-setting). The heart of the comparative study of political communications, however, is conventionally understood to focus more narrowly upon contrasting spatial units, usually comparing nation-states but also, alternatively, local communities, media markets or global regions. Indeed given the rapid expansion of cosmopolitan communications and trans-border information flows, focusing
upon comparing single countries as the unit of analysis is increasingly problematic. A further distinction can be drawn between cross-national studies that use other places as a convenient way of testing propositions that would otherwise have been examined at home (for example, examining whether individual-level patterns of internet use in America are also apparent in Sweden or Germany), and more ambitious comparative research, seeking to understand how varying institutional contexts (such as those generated by different types of state regimes and political institutions, cultural regions, levels of development or media systems) shape processes of political communications. Through systematic comparison, scientific research about political communications aims to make descriptive or explanatory inferences based on empirical observations about the known facts, using transparent and public procedures, under conditions of uncertainty, to explain facts we do not know.

To do this, comparative studies of political communications can either adopt what John Stuart Mill identified as the logic of the ‘most similar’ strategy (apples with apples), seeking to analyse the mass media while ‘controlling’ for certain shared cultural, social or regime characteristics, such as studies comparing elections campaigns among member states within the European Union. Alternatively, research can follow the ‘most different’ strategy (apples with oranges), seeking to maximize contextual variations when identifying regularities in the phenomenon under examination, such as comparing press freedom among electoral autocracies and electoral democracies.\(^1\) Comparative research designs can also choose to focus in depth upon a few selected case studies, examining historical processes within a specific context; ideally illustrating broader theoretical frameworks and conceptual typologies. Contrasts can also involve a limited number of units. Or else studies can adopt large-N comparisons, using econometric techniques to identify regularities over space and time around the world. Most problematically, often ‘convenience’ frameworks are used, such as when comparing data from cross-national survey datasets, or from international networks of colleagues participating in a specific research project, without considering the consequences of the comparative framework for scientific inference. Yet the ability to generalize more broadly from any research design depends upon the way that the geographic units selected for comparison reflect a larger universe, just as survey research depends upon the rigour of selecting respondents from a random sample of the population. Research designs with a limited number of cases, such as studies of the culture of journalism comparing only a handful of countries, are particularly problematic in this regard, if the findings are interpreted, implicitly or explicitly, as representing the larger universe of, say, post-industrial societies.
The advantages of comparative research designs are many. This approach expands the contextual environments for observations, allowing reliable generalizations to be established. This process reveals parochialism and highlights the underlying causal factors taken for granted within any particular environment. Individual-level social psychological behavioural studies conducted within specific societies (such as the U.S.), commonly assume that certain general empirical relationships exist – for example concerning the impact of negative news on voter turnout, or agenda-setting effects on policy priorities. No matter how rigorous the research design and how sophisticated the analytical techniques, in fact attitudes and behavior within a single-nation may be heavily conditioned by a specific social, cultural and institutional context. Cross-national research is also invaluable for communications policy, by highlighting the impact of alternative interventions, strategies and programmatic reforms that can inform the decision-making process, adapting best practices to local needs.

The older tradition of comparative political communications focused upon developing and comparing typologies of media systems. But what should be included as an effective conceptual typology? In the modern era, the classification was relatively straightforward, based primarily upon patterns of state, public or private sector ownership of newspapers and radio and television broadcasting within each nation. One major challenge to this approach arising in the digital era is to define which units should be compared, since the media now includes multiple outlets – broadsheet and tabloid daily local and national newspapers, books and printed periodicals, radio and television programs available through terrestrial, cable, satellite and online channels, as well as the complex and ever-growing range of newer information and communication technologies that are merging delivery platforms. If I read online newspapers and watch TV programs through Hulu or equivalent, is this equivalent to experiencing these activities in the non-online world? Even the simple concept of ‘mass’ communications, which used to be exemplified by terrestrial broadcasts, has dissolved more recently with the expansion of interpersonal and group-to-group networks (are ‘blogs’ a form of mass communications or social networks?)

Moreover the concept of a media ‘system’ implies a relatively stable and enduring institutional arrangement with joined-up interaction among disparate parts. This notion becomes confusing where political communications are defined by several separate components, such as the predominance of public sector or commercial broadcasting, the degree of journalistic professionalism, or the existence of strong links between parties and newspapers, which may, in fact, be unconnected. Other concepts which are used in the political communications literature, such as ‘personalization’, ‘professionalization’,
‘game frames’ or ‘media logics’, are also commonly poorly defined and operationalized. Misleading conceptual classifications provide blinkers that hinder rather than help, by obscuring the real commonalities and contrasts in the countries under study, and by generating measurement errors by misclassifying cases.

**CONCEPTUAL TYPOLOGIES OF MEDIA SYSTEMS**

Visitors to countries such as the United States and Britain, Qatar or Syria, and Burma or the Philippines are quickly struck by the major contrasts in processes of political communications, whether comparing the capacity of the independent media to criticize the state, the structure of ownership and control of the broadcasting system, the penetration of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) in everyday life, the society’s degree of openness to global communication flows, or levels of media access by citizens. The study of political communications has long been interested in making sense of media environments across diverse societies and regimes, yet no consensus has developed about the most appropriate conceptual typologies useful for comparison around the globe. The absence of standard conceptual frameworks to understand media systems in this sub-field is in sharp contrast to those which have become established elsewhere in comparative politics, discussed in other parts of this volume, for example, the classic typologies used to classify party systems or electoral systems, patterns of power-sharing or power-concentrating democracy, and types of presidential or parliamentary executives. Even though each of these comparative concepts are constantly evolving and being modified, in the light of contemporary developments, they usually build upon a common foundation established decades earlier.

**Classic classifications of media systems: The Cold War models**

The origins of comparative work on media systems can be traced to the seminal *Four Theories of the Press* by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956). An early attempt to develop conceptual models describing how media systems functioned worldwide, the framework was heavily influenced by the Cold War era. The study theorized that media systems are embedded within their broader social and political context, although in practice they focused mainly upon the relationship between the state and the mass media. The authors suggested that media systems around the world could be classified into four main categories, each reflecting different normative values.

*Libertarian* media systems emphasize the importance of the press as a free marketplace of ideas without state interference or regulation, exemplified by privately-owned newspaper and commercial television networks in the United States. Ideally the legal and policy regulatory framework should be
conducive to freedom of expression, pluralism and diversity of the media. In this perspective, independence of broadcasting should be guaranteed by law, and the state should not censor or place unwarranted legal restrictions on the media.

*Socially responsible* media systems reflect many of the core values embodied in public service broadcasting predominant during this era in Western Europe. The British Broadcasting Corporation played a major role in shaping this perspective, where radio and television broadcasters are seen to have a mission, in the words of Lord Reith, to education and inform, as well as entertain, when serving the broader public interest. Moreover public service broadcasters also emphasize the need for programs designed to reach audiences with special needs, including children and young people, ethnic, national, and linguistic minorities, the disabled, and rural communities. Thus freedom of expression remains central to public service journalism but nevertheless in this tradition the state is acknowledged to play an important role by appointing independent broadcasting authorities to regulate and issue transmission licenses, with broadcasting revenues derived from television and radio license fees, as a way to supplement market-based commercial interests.

*Authoritarian media systems* are those where journalists are subservient to the state, in the interests of maintaining social stability and national cohesion. For Siebert, Peterson and Schramm, this category was common in many developing countries where a more direct for of state control over radio and television broadcasting remained common, the commercial and non-profit sectors were under-developed, and the audience share of the independent media was limited. Lastly, the authors identified a distinct *Soviet Communist* model, where the role of the press was to serve as a collective agitator on behalf of the party (and thus the working class), although in many other regards this category overlapped with authoritarian systems.

In subsequent decades, the four-fold Siebert et al typology has come in for growing criticism but no consensus emerged about the most useful alternative classification to replace this framework. The original typology was heavily ideological, strongly favoring the libertarian model exemplified by the United States, and it was thus highly contested, rather than providing a more neutral categorization. This classification was widely used to compare countries during earlier decades but it has inevitably become dated over the years. The era of glasnost, and the eventually fall of the Berlin Wall, drove another nail into the coffin of the ‘Soviet’ model. The absence of theorizing about the wide range of media systems found in the developing world became increasingly apparent.
Commercial v. public service broadcasting

One alternative approach collapsed the four-fold Siebert et al typology into two categories of broadcasting systems found in post-industrial societies: one focused upon the more market-oriented commercial broadcasting industry, which developed in the United States and throughout much of Latin America (following the libertarian ideal). This can be contrasted with the alternative public service model of broadcasting (following the social responsibility ideal), which traditionally dominated contemporary Western Europe and Scandinavia. Increasingly, however, following the deregulation and privatization of telecommunications in the 1980s, many European countries have evolved towards a mixed or dual system of broadcasting, such as that long used in Britain, which combines both public service and commercial channels. Moreover the simple conceptual distinction between market-oriented and state-oriented media systems, as well as between commercial and public-service broadcasting, conceals important differences within each category. Even the core notion of ‘the press’ or ‘broadcasting’ is now becoming dated, given the great diversity of mass media outlets and the merger of alternative information platforms, such as the expansion of online newspaper websites and journalistic blogs, social media such as Face-book and Twitter, and YouTube news videos. The simple bright Cold War distinction between commercial versus state broadcasters has become increasingly fuzzy with the growing commercialization of European public broadcasting, and indeed the expansion of PBS and NPR in the United States; today many scholars cast doubt on the utility of the pure social responsibility and libertarian models.

Modern classifications of media systems: Comparing established democracies

One of the most ambitious recent attempts to replace the Siebert et al framework, attracting widespread attention, was developed by Hallin and Mancini. The authors restrict the focus to conceptualizing and classifying ‘media systems’ in eighteen established democracies and post-industrial economies within North America and Western Europe, emphasizing that this universe facilitates comparison of like-with-like. Thus they do not claim that these ideal types apply to developing countries and newer democracies elsewhere in the world.

The Hallin and Mancini classification focuses upon four major dimensions of media systems:

- The degree of state intervention in the media system, especially via public service broadcasting, as well as by legal regulation and subsidies;
The extent of political parallelism, referring to how far news media outlets are partisan or more neutral, and how far media systems reflect party systems;

The historical development of media markets, especially the legacy of this process for contemporary newspaper circulation rates; and

The extent of journalistic professionalism.

The authors argue that these criteria cluster together, at least loosely, into distinct types, suggesting a three-fold classification of media systems. They identify three models:

- A liberal model, which they suggest prevails in Anglo-American countries (Britain, the USA, Canada and Ireland), is seen as characterized by commercial media and market mechanisms.

- The democratic corporatist model, which is thought to prevail across the consensus democracies in northern Europe (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland), is regarded as emphasizing the links between commercial media and organized social and political groups, within the context of an active but limited role of the state.

- Lastly the polarized pluralist model, which they suggest typifies Mediterranean Europe (France, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain), integrates media into party politics, with a weaker commercial broadcasting sector and a stronger role for the state.

Hallin and Mancini conclude that, although the liberal model has dominated Anglo-American media studies, in fact the polarized pluralist model probably provides a more accurate description of journalism in many democracies. The typology has been adopted by other scholars to understand and explain contrasts within the post-industrial societies included in the original study – such as when analyzing the media landscape for journalistic cultures and election coverage. Researchers have also applied the ideas when analyzing the function of the media in other global regions and types of regime, such as in Russia and China.

Nevertheless, the Hallin and Mancini framework also suffers from several major shortcomings that limit the value of the conceptual typology. First, and perhaps most importantly, it is not apparent whether the four dimensions identified by Hallin and Mancini, -- state ownership, political parallelism, media markets and journalistic professionalism – form a cohesive syndrome that define the major contrasts found today among contemporary media systems in established democracies, still less in other
countries. Classificatory schema face two potential dangers: the Scylla of minimalism and the Charybdis of maximalist concepts. Minimalist or ‘thinner’ notions are elegant, parsimonious, and more open to precise operationalization, reducing the risks of overloading concepts and redundant elements. By focusing attention upon just a few elements of political communications, however, they risk thereby excluding certain potentially important aspect of the phenomenon under study. By contrast, maximalist or ‘thicker’ notions of political communications offer a richer and more comprehensive descriptive definition, providing greater conceptual validity, but at the same time these may be difficult to operationalize empirically with any degree of consistency and reliability. This makes it more challenging to replicate studies, an essential test of the robustness of any findings in the social sciences. Two major challenges arising from any conceptual framework include the problem of excluding certain important dimensions of political communications and difficulties of empirical measurement, leading to the misclassification of cases.

First, in terms of the sin of omission, certain essential dimensions of contemporary digital era communications are not incorporated into these models. Hence the framework emphasizes the importance of the historical development of mass circulation newspapers, which influences the contemporary structure of the news industry in different nations. Similarly the historical role of public broadcasting corporations, established during the early decades of radio broadcasting, continue to shape modern television. Nevertheless, if the models do not include the role of new information and communication technologies, which have to be included as part of any contemporary analysis of political communications. Even among affluent post-industrial societies, major contrasts are evident in the adoption of these technologies, from the general level of access and use of computers and the internet to the diffusion of mobile (cell) phones, text messaging, online social networks, blogging and TV teletext. Hence Eurostat estimates that in 2008 more than eight out of ten households had internet access in Sweden and the Netherlands, for example, compared with just four out of ten in Italy and one-third in Greece.10 The digital divide worldwide is, of course, even broader.

Similarly, although the roles of the state ownership and public subsidies of the media are regarded as important, there is little explicit acknowledgement of the importance of press freedom, and minimal comparison of the legal regulatory framework guaranteeing freedom of expression, press pluralism, and journalistic diversity. This may not be central when classifying media systems within established Western democracies, which generally share a common understanding of the importance of respecting guarantees for freedom of expression. But even within the European Union there are
significant differences in legal regulations, such as the stringency of libel and defamation laws, protection of journalistic independence, freedom of information rights, regulations designed to prevent ownership concentration, and the use of media subsidies. It has not been clearly demonstrated by Hallin and Mancini that issues such as political parallelism (press partisanship) are more useful than the degree of press freedom for classifying media systems.

Lastly, in terms of problems of measurement error, the evidence presented by Hallin and Mancini remains descriptive, drawing upon their reading of selected historical cases, limiting how far the classification can be replicated in other studies on a reliable basis. The difficulties of measuring concepts such as press parallelism or journalistic professionalism can lead to the misclassifications of some specific cases which in turn sows doubt about the overall value of the schema. For example, the schema classifies the UK media system as a liberal system, similar to the United States. Yet on many key aspects both cases seem dissimilar. The classification remains impressionistic, allowing room for alternative judgments about specific cases. For example, the British dual commercial-public service media system is classified by the authors as Anglo-American, but McQuail points out that Britain may have far more in common with the North European model, given the strong role of BBC public service broadcasting, rather than with the more commercially-dominant American television market.¹¹ Since the 1950s, Britain has had a dual system of broadcasting, dominated by the standards and ethos established by the British Broadcasting Corporation, with the commercial sector heavily regulated to maintain high standards of public broadcasting. American television, aside from PBS and C-Span, is predominately commercial. As Scammell and Semetko note, ‘It [Britain] shares with the U.S. a commitment to free markets, freedom of speech, and self-regulation as the guiding principles for newspapers. It shares with northern Europe a history of highly partisan newspapers and regulated television markets, dominated by well-funded public service broadcasters.’¹² Thus arguably media systems in Britain and the United States have little in common. And if it is accepted that the conceptual logic is faulty in these particular cases, this raises broader doubts about other classifications, for example whether there are indeed closer similarities between Germany and Norway, or between Germany and France, Italy or Spain. In general, without any rigorous process for testing the classification independently, whether by establishing certain standardized indicators or a set of explicit decision rules, typologies remain fuzzy, impressionistic and unscientific. To resolve these issues, it is important to operationalize and measure the core concepts in any classificatory schema of media systems to test how far the different dimensions actually cluster together in meaningful ways – and to examine the systematic consequences arising from any differences.
DISAGGREGATED INDICES OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATIONS

Rather than categorical typologies, therefore, it is more satisfactory to turn to disaggregated indices which capture several specific features of political communications and which facilitate global comparisons. A growing range of empirical measures have become available in recent years but which indices are most relevant? The selection still requires a normative and conceptual framework. During the 1970s and 1980s, heated debate surrounded claims about the ideal roles and normative standards which are appropriate for evaluating the performance of the media in the public interest. Libertarians have argued for minimal state interference in the media as the necessary condition for an environment that can support democracy. Others have emphasized that the construction of a media environment requires a more proactive role by the state—in providing infrastructure, funding public and community broadcasting, and ensuring the most appropriate regulatory environment. Arguments came to a head in international debates surrounding publication of the McBride Commission report, Many Voices One World (1980), triggering a major rift within UNESCO. During this debate, some representatives argued that the media needed to assist in the task of nation-building and supporting government authorities in developing societies and fragile states. The commission called for democratization of communication and strengthening of national media to avoid dependence on external sources, such as a handful of international wire services. By contrast, other countries emphasized that the proposals conflicted with the need for media independence and freedom of expression. The rift eventually led the United States and UK to withdraw official membership and resources from UNESCO during the mid-1980s, deeply damaging the organization. In recent years, however, a broader international consensus has emerged about the role of the media in both development and democratic governance. This new agreement, led by UNESCO, has helped to encourage common normative standards for evaluating media development, strengthening integration among multiple initiatives designed to strengthen the media among many donor agencies, international organizations, NGOs and national stake-holders. The agreement also spurred the need for more adequate empirical indices and data to compare patterns of media development and to diagnose needs.

To understand and compare the roles and functions of the media in different societies worldwide, and the shared normative standards, the process of political communications can be divided into six major components, involving the communications infrastructure, the regulatory environment, the structure of media ownership, the skills and capacities of the journalism profession, the contents of political communications, and the effects of communications (see Figure 1). Each of these dimensions
can be understood separately but they can also be organized analytically as a sequential process which ranges from the most general context (relating to the technological infrastructure available for communication in each society, such as the availability of broadband and wireless connectivity) to the most specific (concerning the diversity of contents available through the press and broadcasting and the impact of media messages on citizens). The framework can be summarized and applied to several disaggregated empirical indices which allow us to compare and illustrate important contrasts in political communications worldwide.

(Figure 1 about here)

**Communications infrastructure**

The first component of the process concerns whether the *communications infrastructure* in any society has the capacity to support diverse, independent and pluralistic media. Ideally the technological infrastructure should maximize opportunities for media distribution and for public access, including for marginalized communities. This includes public access both to traditional media, including local, regional and national radio, television and newspapers, as well as to newer information and communication technologies, including mobile telephones, computers, and the internet. Where substantial sections of the population are excluded from universal access, then this generates social inequalities, for example where the internet does not reach rural areas, where radio broadcasts fail to serve minority linguistic communities, or where illiterate groups lack access to information from the printed press. Basic lack of essential public utilities can greatly hinder development of the media sector, for example in societies lacking a reliable continuous supply of electricity, let alone the investment in broadband connectivity, wi-fi, and computers.

**Access to the internet**

Has access to the new and old media gradually widened to include most of the population in developing societies or do deep-rooted inequalities persist? During the 1990s, many interpretations of the digital divide envisaged the necessity of distributing personal computers and wired broadband connections (DSL, cable) to access the internet and email – and thus the need for reliable electricity sources, keyboard skills and computer literacy, landline telephone infrastructure, and the like. But recent years have witnessed important technological innovations in this field that have reduced some of the technological hurdles to information access in poorer societies, by-passing some of the obstacles. This includes the availability of wind-up radios, solar power batteries, wireless connectivity (WiFi, WiMax), $100 rugged laptops, internet cafes, community telephone and Internet centers, and cell
phones with data services, email, and text messaging. All these development may help to close the global digital divide. At the same time, some observers suggest that the core inequalities in information poverty have persisted and may even have deepened. Post-industrial societies and emerging economies that invested heavily in advanced digital technologies have reaped substantial gains in productivity. This may encourage them to build on their success and expand this sector of the economy still further. Moreover it still remains the case that, beyond isolated pockets of innovation, many of the poorest societies in the world continue to lack the basic infrastructure and resources to connect their rural populations to global communication networks and markets.

[Figure 2 about here]

Despite a substantial surge in access to mobile cell phones with data services, the available evidence on the distribution of internet users suggests that the relative size of the gap between rich and poor societies worldwide has widened in recent years, rather than narrowed. Figure 2 illustrates the trends in access to the Internet from 1990 to 2007, based on data from the International Telecommunications Union measuring the average number of users per 100 inhabitants in each society. The graph compares high, medium and low income economies worldwide, based on per capita levels of GDP, with data from the World Bank measured in constant international dollars at purchasing power parity. The graph illustrates the restricted size of the online population from 1990 until 1996, when use suddenly accelerates steadily and rapidly in high income nations, continuing in the series until 2007, when the majority of the population living in these countries is online. Nevertheless substantial variations remain even among these nations; for example, within the European Union only one fifth of all households in Bulgaria and Romania were connected to the internet in 2007, compared with more than three-quarters of all households in such countries as the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark. The graph shows that the diffusion of the internet among middle income economies accelerated later than in richer nations and most of these societies continue to lag far behind in internet connectivity. By 2007, the latest year for which figures are available, just over one quarter of the population (29%) was online in middle income societies, compared with almost twice as large a share of the population (58%) in high income societies. In rapidly-growing emerging markets that are large consumers and producers of ICT goods and services, such as Brazil, China, Russia, South Africa and India, internet access and email has spread most widely among the professional urban middle classes, often by data services via smart mobile cell phones rather than by traditional computers.
By contrast, despite these trends, the populations living in the least developed societies around the world, such as Mali, continue to lack internet access, including connectivity via computers with fast broadband connections as well as data service cell phones. The starkest contrasts are in Africa and Asia. Thus, the International Telecommunications Union estimates that fewer than five out of every 100 Africans used the internet in 2006, compared with one out of every two people living in the G8 nations. As Figure 2 illustrates, according to ITU estimates, internet use has expanded only modestly in low income societies during recent years, increasing from 0.06% of the population in 1997 to 6% a decade later. This is a large proportional increase, but the absolute level remains low. Access is gradually growing in most poor nations; places such as Mali, Benin and Burkina Faso are not untouched by these developments, but they lag far behind the rapid rate of diffusion of PCs, laptops and smart phones with fast wireless and LAN broadband connections common in most affluent post-industrial nations, along with the related digital technologies through I-pods, Tivos, PDAs, and similar devices.

Access to land-line and cellular telephones

Access to the internet used to be limited by the availability of personal computers and the need for dial up connections through landline telephones. This represented a major bottleneck; in particular state controlled telecommunication monopolies in Central and Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia often failed to provide universal services to many remote rural areas, and the demand for land lines lagged far behind supply. Today WiMax and WiFi connections have reduced the need for land-line connections for internet access, and the surge in the use of mobile cell phones, many of which provide data services, has been dramatic. Nevertheless, although mobile cell phones have reduced the barriers to internet use, and although they represent a cheaper technology, they have not totally eliminated global inequalities in internet access or in telephony. The global disparities between rich and poor societies show a familiar pattern, with affluent countries expanding connectivity at the fastest rate. Figure 3 shows the trends in the per capita number of total telephone subscribers from 1975-1999, the latest available year for the annual time-series, combining both fixed landline and mobile cellular subscribers. The comparison shows the substantial disparities between high and low income economies, which gradually widened during the 1970s and 1980s and then expanding rapidly during the 1990s.

[Figure 3 about here]

Since then, however, these disparities may be changing, as the number of fixed telephones lines in OECD countries largely stabilized from 2000-2006, while the number of land lines grew in developing societies. Moreover the spectacular growth in mobile cellular phones has transformed the market.
The 2008 World Summit on the Information Society reports that there were 3.3 billion mobile subscribers at the end of 2007—an increase of more than a billion users during the two-years since 2005. India, Brazil, Russia, and China each added many millions of users. Mobile cell phones are important for inter-personal communication and for extended social networks, especially in developing societies that lack the infrastructure for reliable and affordable landline telephones. Cell phones with data services facilitate email, SMS texting, gaming, music, photo and videos, and mobile access to websites, by-passing the need for keyboard skills and expensive computing equipment. With small screens and limited speeds, however, they are most useful for brief information updates using the internet, such as for checking weather, bank accounts, flight departures, social networks, email, or map directions, and they are still not as flexible, effective, or fast as personal computers and laptops for surfing the internet for an extended period of time. Nielsen Mobile, tracking usage in 16 countries, found that in mid-2008, nearly 40 million Americans (16% of all US mobile users) used their handset to browse the web, twice as many as in 2006, as higher speed connections and unlimited data packages spread. The UK, Italy and Russia were the next highest in usage. But in Indonesia, Taiwan, India, and New Zealand, for example, less than 2% of mobile subscribers used their phone handset to surf the web. Moreover Nielsen Mobile found that while PC users surfed about 100 individual websites sites per month, mobile users visited about 6 domains. The most popular websites were Yahoo Mail, Google Search and The Weather Channel. Data connections speeds will be faster with third generation (3G) connections, once network footprints for this service expand.

It is also difficult to estimate the exact number of individual customers who have mobile phones, since many people have duplicate SIM cards as noted earlier. The ITU estimates that mobile penetration is now over 100 percent in Europe. Nevertheless even with the aggressive surge in cell phone, global disparities in access persist. In the poorest countries, such as Burundi, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, and Niger, for example, in 2007 less than 3% of the population subscribed to a mobile phone. On average, in 2007 there were 152 telephone subscriptions per 100 people in high income societies (including fixed and mobile accounts at home and work), compared with 31 in low income societies. Again, poorer developing countries have indeed expanded their telephone connectivity, but they started from a very low base, and the absolute gap between rich and poor nations has grown over the last three decades.
Access to radio, television and newspapers

How do these trends compare with the diffusion of radio and television sets (whether connected via terrestrial, cable or satellite signals), as well as the circulation and sales of newspapers? Figure 4 illustrates comparable trends from the mid-1970s until 2003 in the per capita distribution of television sets. As an older technology, it might be expected that the diffusion rate should be flatter over time than for new ICTs, and indeed this is what the trend indicates. In high income societies, from 1975-2003 the average proportion of television sets roughly doubled, from 31 TVs for every 100 people in the population to 60 TVs. Today TV penetration has reached saturation levels in advanced industrialized societies; almost all households in these countries have a TV set. Middle income societies saw a tripling in the per capita number of TV sets, rising from 8 in the mid-1970s to 24 per 100 people in the population in 2003. But both absolute and relative inequalities in access persisted; in low income societies, there were only 6 television sets per 100 people. The absolute global gap, (summarizing the difference between the proportion of television sets in low and high income societies) almost doubled from about 30 percentage points in 1997 to 53 points in 2007. The extent of these global disparities are often under-estimated by observers based in media-rich nations. UNESCO estimates that worldwide about one quarter of all households have a television set today. Emerging economies such as Turkey, China, and Mexico have made rapid gains in acquiring these consumer durables; about 84% of all households in lower middle income societies have TVs, up by 20% from the previous decade. By contrast, among low income societies, on average only 15% of all households have a TV set, and even today less than 5% of homes have access to TVs in countries such as Uganda, Burma, Rwanda, and Ethiopia.

[Figures 4, 5 and 6 about here]

Radios are one of the most important ways that people in developing societies learn about the world, particularly coverage of news and current affairs, talk shows, and popular music transmitted locally by non-profit community radio stations. Figure 5 shows that with this older electronic technology, the rate of diffusion is less dramatic than for TVs, telephones or the internet. In high income societies, there is an increase in the number of radios as a proportion of the population, but this rise stabilized in the 1990s as the market became saturated. From 1975-1999 the proportion of ratios tripled in medium income societies, from 7 to 25 per 100 people. A modest rise in the availability of radios also occurred in low income societies, but according to the latest available figures, on a per capita basis, almost five times as many radios are available in rich as in poor societies.
Access to newspapers

UNESCO also gathers statistics on the number of outlets and the distribution, circulation and sales of printed daily newspapers and periodicals. When standardized on a per capita basis, the trends illustrated in figure 6 show that this is the only media where there has been growing convergence between high and low income societies. But this is not due to a significant expansion of readership or circulation figures in the low or medium income countries; it reflects an erosion of newspaper circulation figures in the high-income countries ever since the mid-1980s (predating the rise of online newspapers on the internet). Even with this closure, the gap in newspaper circulation between rich and poor nations remains substantial. Multiple readers may compensate somewhat for the contrasts in sales and circulation, but on a per capita basis, one newspaper per 100 people is sold in low-income countries, compared with 26 per 100 in rich countries. Rising levels of literacy in developing societies have not substantially increased sales of daily papers. Evidence comparing the distribution of published books and periodicals show similar disparities.

Therefore we can conclude that recent years have seen the dramatic growth of digital information and communication technologies associated with the rise of computers and the internet, facilitating the use of text messaging, email and website, and spread even farther through smart cellular mobile phones and communal technology kiosks. Despite these developments, the gap between rich and poor nations in access to all major forms of information and communication resources remains substantial, as does the digital divide within societies. The World Bank estimates that in 2005 there were more than ten times as many mobile telephone subscribers in high-income countries as in low income countries. While television sets are present in almost all households in Europe and the United States, only one in seven households have a TV in low income nations. In 2006, less than 5 out of every 100 Africans used the Internet, compared with an average of one in two inhabitants of the G8 countries. In developing societies, access to printed media (daily newspapers, magazines and books) is limited by enduring problems of illiteracy and the cost of these products, as well as by language barriers. All these factors combine to generate severe information-poverty in poor nations, making these societies and especially their rural populations increasingly marginalized at the periphery of communication networks. The least developed and poorest countries are often the ones that are most isolated from modern communication and information technologies, and thus cut off from the knowledge economy, without the telecommunications infrastructure needed for landline telephones in many homes and businesses. Many rural areas in these societies also lack a regular supply of electricity.
and, where reliable power is available, limited access to television sets and computers restricts connectivity via the television and the internet.

The regulatory environment

Beyond infrastructure, the second sequential component of communications processes concerns the regulatory environment, based on the policies, laws and administrative decisions regulating political communications within each country, including how far journalists and the general public are free to express criticism of those in authority, whether in the public or private sectors. This understanding is based on a classical liberal and human rights based understanding of the role of the media. Thus freedom of expression was recognized as a core component of the United Nations’ 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” (Article 19) Freedom of expression is widely seen as underpinning other fundamental freedoms, such as the right to vote, to form political parties, to exchange political ideas, and to scrutinize public officials. The mass media are crucial to freedom of expression as they provide the public platform through which this right is effectively exercised within any community.

One approach to assessing the degree of freedom of expression has compared rights contained in written constitutions, and whether countries have passed Freedom of Information laws.29 These measures are an important part of an open society, but they remain limited, however, because what matters for the actual degree of press freedom is the implementation of such rights or legislation, more than their existence as a legal formality. The Kyrgyz republic, Russia and Colombia have Freedom of Information laws, for example, while Uzbekistan’s constitution guarantees freedom of speech and the press, but this does not mean that in practice journalists are safe from imprisonment or intimidation in these countries or that these regulations have proved effective in promoting partisan balance in the news, freedom of expression and publication, or transparency in government.

[Figure 7 about here]

Broader comparisons outside of Europe suggest that legal regulations are a critical dimension for comparing and understanding political communications. The regulatory environment can be best compared using detailed national reports provided by human rights watch organizations, the detailed comparisons produced for 80 countries in Africa, Europe, Eurasia, and the Middle East by the Media
Sustainability Index by International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), and global composite indices, including the annual Freedom of the Press index provided by Freedom House and the Worldwide Press Freedom index by Reporters sans Frontières (Reporters without Borders).

The Worldwide Press Freedom Index is constructed to reflect the degree of freedom journalists and news organizations enjoy in each country, and the efforts made by the state to respect and ensure respect for this freedom. The organization compiled a questionnaire with 52 criteria used for assessing the state of press freedom in each country every year. It includes every kind of violation directly affecting journalists (such as murders, imprisonment, physical attacks and threats) and news media (censorship, confiscation of issues, searches and harassment). It registers the degree of impunity enjoyed by those responsible for such violations. It also takes account of the legal situation affecting the news media (such as penalties for press offences, the existence of a state monopoly in certain areas and the existence of a regulatory body), the behavior of the authorities towards the state-owned news media and the foreign press, and the main obstacles to the free flow of information on the Internet. The Worldwide Press Freedom Index reflects not only abuses attributable to the state, but also those by armed militias, clandestine organizations, or pressure groups that can pose a real threat to press freedom. The survey questionnaire was sent to partner organizations of Reporters sans Frontières, including fourteen freedom of expression groups in five continents and to the organization’s 130 correspondents around the world, as well as to journalists, researchers, jurists and human rights activists. A 100-point country-score can be estimated for each country.

This index can be compared with the results of Freedom House’s annual index of Press Freedom. This measures how much diversity of news content is influenced by the structure of the news industry, by legal and administrative decisions, the degree of political influence or control, the economic influences exerted by the government or private entrepreneurs, and actual incidents violating press autonomy, including censorship, harassment and physical threats to journalists. The assessment of press freedom by Freedom House distinguishes between the broadcast and print media, and the resulting ratings are expressed as a 100-point scale for each country under comparison.

Figure 7 illustrates the estimates provided the global indices showing strong correlations across both measures, despite differences in their construction and measurement. Thus as Figure 7 illustrates, long-standing autocracies, including North Korea, Cuba, Libya and Burma, score exceptionally poorly on freedom of expression, located in the bottom left hand quadrant. In Burma for example, in late-September 2007, thousands of monks and civilians took to the streets of Rangoon in a week-long
uprising against the Burmese government. In response, the military junta shut down the Internet, arrested or intimidated Burmese journalists, and severed mobile and landline phone links to the outside world. A Japanese video journalist from AFP news was shot dead. Cameras and video cell phones were confiscated by soldiers. The official Division for Press Scrutiny and Registration pressured local editors to publish stories claiming that the unrest was organized by ‘saboteurs’. In the immediate aftermath of these events, thousands of monks were said to have been arrested, but after the media clampdown no images of these events were published in the domestic and international news. Even in less turbulent times, critical coverage of the Burmese junta is restricted in domestic news media, silencing negative stories about the military leadership. Citizens are punished for listening to overseas radio broadcasts. Nor are these isolated instances of state control of the airwaves. Although Burma is an extreme cases, regularly ranking near the bottom of worldwide annual assessments of press freedom produced by Reporters sans frontières and Freedom House, human rights observers report that many other states routinely deploy techniques designed to suppress independent journalism, manipulate and slant news selectively in their favor, and limit critical coverage of the regime. Thus for example China has liberalized the newspaper industry and yet it still exerts strict censorship in access to search engines and websites such as Google. A more comprehensive classification needs to include contemporary autocracies with severe limits on freedom of expression, independent journalism, and human rights, exemplified by the diverse cases of Zimbabwe, Syria, and North Korea; as well as examining whether journalists play a distinctive function in electoral autocracies and electoral democracies. By contrast, many countries with moderate experience of democracy have a mixed record of freedom of the press, with considerable variations illustrated in Figure 7 among countries such as The Philippines, Mexico, El Salvador and Turkey. Finally countries with the longest historical experience of democracy, such as Denmark, Belgium, Australia and Ireland also have the greatest media freedom, in the top right-hand quadrant, according to both indices.

The structure of media ownership

The regulatory environment is closely related to the next step in the sequential communication process, the structure of media ownership, which includes the direct and mediated channels of communication available in each society, including traditional mass media and new ICTs. To maintain media pluralism and diversity of media suppliers, ideally the legal and policy regulatory framework should prevent monopoly ownership and control. Regulations should also promote and encourage diversity in the availability of alternative technologies of transmission (radio and television broadcasts,
newspapers, and the internet); ownership sectors (public, private, and community media); media outlets within each sector and; levels of dissemination (supranational, national and sub-national); information sources (such as news agencies); contents (such as news and cultural programmes); and target audiences (such as by income, gender, age, language and cultural identities).

Monitoring the degree of media pluralism and diversity is a challenging task with the available data, not least because overlapping patterns of commercial ownership and control often lack transparency. The most comprehensive study comparing the degree of state intervention in major media firms, covering almost 100 nations, was estimated by Simeon Djankov and colleagues at the World Bank. The study focused upon the five largest daily newspapers in each country, as measured by share in the total circulation of all dailies, and the five largest television stations, as measured by share of viewing. The study identified the ultimate controlling shareholder for each media outlet, and calculated the market share for state/publicly owned and privately owned media outlets in 1999. The results of the comparison in Figure 8 show that most newspapers are privately-owned; only a few countries, such as Belarus, Chad, Cameroon and Egypt, have a large share of state-owned papers. By contrast, however, the audience share for state or public service television channels varies substantially worldwide, including among established democracies. Hence the United States and many Latin American countries, with a tradition of commercial broadcasting, have a minimal audience share for public broadcasters but the audience for public service television remains strong in many other countries which have deregulated telecommunications, such as South Africa, Switzerland, India and Denmark, as well as Britain.

[Figure 8 about here]

The main danger to pluralism and diversity arising from media ownership patterns is where citizen access is restricted to one or two television channels, constituting monopolies or oligopolies, thereby limiting consumer choice. The case of Syria illustrates the role of the state in limited freedom and pluralism. In this country, the government own and control much of the media, including the daily newspapers, Al-Thawra ("The Revolution"), Tishrin, and the English-language Syria Times, while the Baath party publishes Al-Baath. There was a brief flowering of press freedom after Bashar al-Assad became president in 2000. The normally staid government newspapers cautiously started to discuss reform and democracy. For the first time in nearly 40 years, private publications were licensed. The new titles included political party papers Sawt al-Shaab and Al-Wahdawi, and a satirical journal. But within a year, under pressure from the old guard, the president cautioned against over-zealous reform, a
subsequent press law imposed a new range of restrictions, and publications could be suspended for violating content rules. Criticism of President Bashar al-Assad and his family is banned and the domestic and foreign press is censored over material which is deemed to be threatening or embarrassing. Journalists practice self-censorship and foreign reporters rarely get accreditation. Reporters without Borders documents common abuses: “Journalists and political activists risk arrest at any time for any reason and are up against a whimsical and vengeful state apparatus which continually adds to the list of things banned or forbidden to be mentioned. Several journalists were arrested in 2006 for interviewing exiled regime opponents, taking part in conferences abroad and for criticizing government policies. They were subjected to lengthy legal proceedings before the Damascus military court that, under a 1963 law, tries anyone considered to have undermined state security.”

Critical journalists outside the country write for the Lebanese or pan-Arab press, such as the Beirut daily Al-Nahar, and the influential London daily Al-Hayat, as well as contributing to Al-Jazeera and other regional satellite channels.

Syrian TV, operated by the Ministry of Information, operates two terrestrial and on satellite channel. It has cautiously begun carrying political programs and debates featuring formerly "taboo" issues, as well as occasionally airing interviews with opposition figures. Syria also launched some privately-owned radio stations in 2004 but these were restricted from airing any news or political content. With an estimated 1.5 million internet users in Syria by 2007, the web has emerged as a vehicle for dissent. In the view of Reporters Without Borders, however, Syria is one of the worst offenders against internet freedom as the state censors opposition bloggers and independent news websites. Human Rights Watch notes that the government of Syria regularly restricts the flow of information on the internet and arrests individuals who post comments that the government deems too critical.


The capacity and skills of the journalistic profession

Beyond diversity of media ownership, an effective independent press also depends upon the skills and capacities of the journalistic workforce, such as whether professional training is widely available, whether independent press councils protect journalists and monitor professional ethical standards, and whether media monitoring organizations and human rights watch groups based in civil society help to protect freedom of expression, pluralism, and diversity. Professional training strengthens the skills and expands the capacities of journalists and broadcasters, and it is particularly
important to provide equal opportunities in both training and employment for women and marginalized groups. Although widely recognized as important for media development, and a major focus of donor aid and technical cooperation, nevertheless the extent of journalistic professionalism is challenging to monitor and measure cross-nationally with any degree of reliability. Some comparative surveys of news professionals are gradually expanding to fill the gap here, monitoring journalists’ attitudes, role orientations, background and experience.38 These supplement some proxy aggregate indicators, for example concerning the number of journalism-training departments and the accreditation processes used in tertiary education in different countries.

The contents of the news media

Diversity of media ownership is important in part because this is seen to underpin diversity of contents, although the two are far from synonymous. Ideally the media should serves as a platform for democratic discourse, with the contents reflecting and representing the diversity of views and interests in society, including those of marginalized groups. Of course, the media are widely recognized as an essential constituent of the democratic process and as one of the guarantors of free and fair competitive elections.39 But the idea of the mass media as a platform for democratic debate embraces a wide variety of overlapping functions.40 Principally the media can be seen as a watch-dog over the powerful, expanding transparency in both the public and private sectors. Journalists and reporters can strengthen good governance by promoting public scrutiny of those with power, exposing corruption, maladministration, and corporate wrongdoing. The media can also serve as an agenda-setter for policy issues, strengthening government responsiveness, for example by highlighting social needs in complex humanitarian disasters and calling international attention to emergency relief.41 Journalists and commentators can function as advocates of certain issues or causes—as social actors in their own right. The media can also function as gate-keepers, providing balanced coverage of politics and elections.42 Beyond this, media outlets are channels through which citizens can communicate with each other, acting as a facilitator of informed debate between diverse social actors and encouraging the nonviolent resolution of disputes. The media can also serve as a national forum, a means by which a society can learn about itself and build a sense of community and shared values, a vehicle for cultural expression and cultural cohesion. The media disseminate stories, ideas, and information and act as a corrective to the “natural asymmetry of information” between governors and governed and between competing private agents.
Understanding how far media coverage of politics does reflect these different functions is a major challenge for researchers and unfortunately systematic and rigorous cross-national data, based on content analysis of a representative range of media outlets and a random sample of stories, is extremely scarce. As a recent comparative study of campaign coverage by Strömbäck and Kaid notes: ‘There do not seem to be any standardized instruments and coding instructions. The unfortunate end result is that it is often difficult to compare the election news coverage across borders, and although the terminology used is often similar, the extent to which the empirical results are comparable is often uncertain.’

More cross-national content analysis is gradually becoming available, for example concerning media coverage of elections to the European Parliament, and party messages embodied in election manifestoes, but nevertheless the communications sub-field lacks far behind the availability of standard cross-national datasets available for decades in electoral studies and voting behaviour.

**The effects of media coverage of politics**

The last step in the sequential communication process focuses upon understanding effects, particularly a wealth of research analyzing the primary impact of political communications upon political knowledge and cognition, cultural attitudes and values, and political behavior. This literature draws upon many theoretical perspectives but three approaches, in particular, have attracted widespread attention. Thus *agenda-setting* theories suggest that the news headlines inform us about which issues deserve attention on the policy agenda. *Framing* theories emphasize that reporting shapes the context and background used to comprehend and interpret the workings of government authorities, political institutions and the policy process. Moreover the process of *priming* is thought to influence which standards are used evaluate these actions. Each of these processes has been extensively studied to understand how citizens respond to political communications, and, in turn, how they seek to influence the political process. Most of the research has been based upon single countries, especially the United States, but a growing comparative literature is also emerging, for example comparing the role of agenda setting of specific events, such as natural or humanitarian disasters, on public opinion about salient issues in different countries. Others have compared the effects of exposure to commercial versus public service television in different societies on political knowledge, and the impact of cosmopolitan communication across national borders on cultural values.

In general, however, the comparative study of the effects arising from the communication process remains underdeveloped. In 1975, for example, a review of the literature could only identify a few cross-national studies on comparative political communications. Blumler and Gurevitch concluded
that the subfield was ‘in its infancy’, lacking a shared consensus about the core theoretical focus, as well as an accumulated body of empirical studies.\footnote{44} Two decades later, they observed that work continued to remain patchy, although the study was progressing to ‘late adolescence’.\footnote{45} Since then, the comparative literature has undoubtedly grown substantially, including cross-national studies of the structure, contents and effects of the mass media, especially within the European Union and among younger democracies. Despite these encouraging signs, many books continue to follow the older Grand Tour travelogue tradition (‘if its chapter 4, it’s Belgium’) by presenting national case studies in separate chapters, loosely integrated around some common organizational subheadings.\footnote{46} By contrast to equivalent subfields in comparative political science – and more than three decades after Blumler and Gurevitch’s original plea – arguably comparative political communications has still not reached mature adulthood. It has not yet established a range of theoretically sophisticated analytical frameworks, buttressed by rigorously tested scientific generalizations, a common lingua franca and shared concepts, standardized instruments and archival datasets, with the capacity to identify common regularities that prove robust across widely varied contexts.\footnote{47}

**CONCLUSIONS**

Therefore comparative studies of political communications are a growing sub-field, but in general much previous work has often been hampered by poor conceptualization and measurement, with the main categories used to classify media systems reflecting the modern era characteristic of post-industrial societies during the mid-20th century, but far from adequate to compare the complex, fragmented and multi-platform digital environment of the third age. The traditional distinction between commercial and public service broadcasting has become diluted today, with convergence caused by the deregulation, commercialization and proliferation of channels now available in European societies, as well as the spread of transnational media conglomerates.\footnote{48} A broader lens that goes beyond the role of mass media in post-industrial societies and in established democracies is necessary to compare political communications around the world.
Figure 1: Nested model of steps in the political communication process and normative standards for media development

COMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE: supports diverse media and widens public access

REGULATORY FRAMEWORK: promotes freedom of expression and protects the independent media

MEDIA OWNERSHIP: regulatory policies prevent undue concentration of media ownership and control

JOURNALISM PROFESSION: strengthens the skills and capacities of journalists and broadcasters

MEDIA CONTENTS: reflects a broad diversity of views and social interests

MEDIA EFFECTS: upon citizen knowledge, cultural attitudes and behavior
Figure 2: The global gap in access to the internet, 1990-2004

Notes: Societies worldwide are classified by per capita GDP in constant international $ Purchasing Power Parity. Low income = less than $1999 per capita income. Medium income =$2000-14,999. High income = $15,000+. Sources: International Telecommunications Union; The World Bank World Development Indicators 2008.
Figure 3: The global gap in telephone access, including cellular, 1975-1999

Notes: Societies worldwide are classified by per capita GDP in constant international $ Purchasing Power Parity. Low income = less than $1999 per capita income. Medium income = $2000-14,999. High income = $15,000+.

Figure 4: The global gap in access to television, 1975-2003

**Notes:** Societies worldwide are classified by per capita GDP in constant international $ Purchasing Power Parity. Low income = less than $1999 per capita income. Medium income =$2000-14,999. High income = $15,000+.

**Sources:** Arthur S. Banks *Cross-national time-series dataset 1815-2007*; The World Bank *World Development Indicators 2008*. 
Figure 5: The persistent global gap in access to radio, 1975-1999

Notes: Societies worldwide are classified by per capita GDP in constant international $ Purchasing Power Parity. Low income = less than $1999 per capita income. Medium income =$2000-14,999. High income = $15,000+.

Figure 6: The eroding global gap in access to newspapers, 1975-1999

Notes: Societies worldwide are classified by per capita GDP in constant international $ Purchasing Power Parity. Low income = less than $1999 per capita income. Medium income =$2000-14,999. High income = $15,000+.

Figure 7: Press freedom worldwide, 2005

Note: For the measures of press freedom, see the text. ‘Experience of democracy’ is a summary and standardized index calculated from the Freedom
Figure 8: Comparing media ownership patterns

Note: The estimated audience share of state owned newspapers and television channels.

FURTHER READINGS


WEB LINKS

Committee to Protect Journalists

www.cpj.org

Freedom House.

www.freedomhouse.org

Index on Censorship

www.indexoncensorship.org

International Federation of Journalists

www.ifj.org

International Telecommunications Union, including cross-national statistics on technological diffusion.

www.itu.int

UNESCO: The official website of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

www.unesco.org


www.freedominfo.org.


See the UNESCO Media Development Indicators (MDI) framework endorsed by the Intergovernmental Council of the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) at its 26th Session (26-28th March 2008).


ITU World Telecommunications/ICT Indicators Database. www.itu.int


UNESCO. The latest available year of all these estimates is 2005. www.UNESCO.org


