On the challenges of cross-national comparative media research

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ON THE CHALLENGES OF CROSS-NATIONAL COMPARATIVE MEDIA RESEARCH

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On the challenges of cross-national comparative media research

Abstract

Funding bodies and policy imperatives increasingly favour comparative research. Stimulated also by the phenomena of globalisation and the concomitant rise of globalisation theory, researchers in media, communication and cultural studies increasingly find themselves initiating or invited to collaborate in multinational comparative projects. Given the growing prominence of comparative media and communications research, this article examines the claims made for such research in order to foster a more explicit and critical understanding of the research aims, process and findings. Adapting Kohn's (1989) four-fold typology of models for comparative research, a range of epistemological debates regarding cross-national comparison are juxtaposed with the practical experiences of media and communications researchers in order to reveal the key research decisions and their consequences for substantive conclusions.

On the challenges of cross-national comparative media research

Introduction

> 'All the eternal and unsolved problems inherent in sociological research are unfolded when engaging in cross-national studies. None of the methodological and theoretical difficulties we have learned to live with can be ignored when we examine critically such questions as what is comparative research, how we go about doing comparative work, and how we interpret similarities and differences in countries compared' (Øyen, 1990: 1).

> 'It [comparative research] can pose challenges to scholars' preconceptions and is liable to be theoretically upsetting… [But its contribution] is not confined only to testing, validating and revising existing theory. It also has a more creative and innovative role – opening up new avenues' (Blumler, et al, 1992: 8).

Cross-national comparisons are exciting but difficult, creative but problematic, as these contrasting quotations suggest. In the social sciences, cross-national comparisons are both attacked as impossible and defended as necessary. Within the field of media and communications, comparative research - defined as 'a study that compares two or more nations with respect to some common activity' (Edelstein, 1982: 14) - is much advocated (e.g. Blumler et al, 1992) and increasingly conducted. Funding bodies, policy imperatives, professional associations and publication outlets in the field all increasingly favour comparative research (Øyen, 1990). Yet comparative methodology is rather little discussed, with the consequence that too often research teams find themselves ‘reinventing the wheel’ or, worse, repeating the mistakes of others.[1]

Increasingly, the salience of globalisation is encouraging many communication researchers to address the transnational dimensions of cultural institutions, products, audiences and policies (Tomlinson, 1999). Each global media product, from *Big Brother* to the *Teletubbies*, from chat rooms to the changing news-room, invites a new cross-national project. In a time of globalisation, one might even argue that the choice *not* to conduct a piece of research cross-nationally requires as much justification as the choice to conduct cross-national research. This is both because the phenomena – industries, texts, audiences – of media and communications research reach across diverse countries and because basing a project in one country generates claims whose specificity or generalisability are indeterminate without comparable projects in other countries (Alasuutari, 1995). If the researchers fail to consider the extent to which the findings may reflect their national context, those reading the research reports will certainly find themselves asking how far the conclusions apply also in their own, or other, countries (Kohn, 1989).

Hence, this article examines the rationale for comparative research and the challenges and contradictions that it poses. What is the theoretical and empirical justification for cross-national research? How do we identify which taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life are culturally or nationally distinctive or common (Chisholm, 1995)? What are the ground rules for conducting comparative projects?

Advantages of comparison

We may begin by asking why researchers embark on cross-national projects. Clearly, comparative research may have many different aims (Øyen, 1990; Teune, 1990), and research must be precise about which of these aims it adopts. Aims include improving understanding of one's own country; improving understanding of other countries; testing a theory across diverse settings; examining transnational processes across different contexts; examining the local reception of imported cultural forms; building abstract universally applicable theory; challenging claims to universality; evaluating scope and value of certain phenomena; identifying marginalised cultural forms; improving international understanding; and learning from the policy initiatives of others.

Notwithstanding the diversity of these aims, each is achieved through the identification of similarities and differences. Yet, this is far from straightforward. Some argue that research should take for granted what is similar across countries, it being through differences that interesting national themes or key contextual factors are revealed (Peschar, 1984). For others, the search for differences only serves to exacerbate national stereotypes, overstating internal homogeneity while underplaying heterogeneity, ambiguity and borderline phenomena. On this view, one should search for similarities across countries, both so that stereotypes can be directly challenged and because similarities themselves require an explanation (Sarana, 1975). Yet, it may not seem exciting to seek out cross-national similarities, although it often seems 'safer'; differences, contrasts and surprises all make 'better' - rhetorically more engaging - stories.[2] Partly the difficulty of balancing similarities and differences is inherent in the making of comparisons *per se*, but partly the difficulty lies in the nature of the particular units – nations - being compared, as I consider below.

Nations as units

Indeed, it is increasingly argued that the nation is itself not a proper unit of comparison. Nations are far from self-contained, closed or homogenous but rather comprise multiple cultures, with diasporic and global trends making for a poor mapping of culture onto nation (Clifford, 1997). For Morley and Robins (1995: 1), ‘patterns of movement and flows of people, culture, goods and information mean that it is now not so much physical boundaries … that define a community or ‘nation’s “natural limits”’, while for Couldry (2000: 98), ‘cultural space can no longer be pictured primarily in terms of an order of separate, autonomous “cultures”’. Following Appadurai’s (1996) formulation in terms of transnational ‘scapes’ – mediascapes, technoscapes, ideoscapes, technoscapes and financescapes - analysis is required of flows and networks, not geographically located and bounded communities.

Hence, to the extent that the phenomena of interest are no respecters of national boundaries, it appears that significant intellectual compromises are built into cross-national comparisons. In defence of the nation as unit, one might counter that globalisation is an ongoing process which has not yet undermined the existence or the power of the nation and, in practical terms, many phenomena are still defined in national terms (national broadcasters, education systems, Gross National Product).[3] Still, it is ironic that, while the process of globalisation appears to encourage cross-national research, at the same time it undermines the legitimacy of the nation-state not only for political, economic or cultural purposes but also as a unit of analysis. Yet, notwithstanding the onward march of globalisation, it is surely still defensible to claim that nation-states continue to serve as convenient shorthand for distinctive histories, cultures and policy environments.[4] Given the tension between theories of media, culture, identity and globalisation on the one hand and the cross-national interests and frameworks of research funders, policy makers and research users on the other, any project seeking to conduct cross-national comparisons must surely argue the case for treating the nation as a unit, rather than simply presuming the legitimacy of such a research strategy.

The difficulties of cross-national research

Even if one can justify the decision to conduct cross-national comparative research, this does not mean that the way ahead is straightforward. Folk wisdom cautions against comparing apples and oranges. Anyone who has conducted comparative research will have been berated for attempting to compare unlike objects or categories, although Beniger (1992) counters this view, arguing that such caution is resulting in a regrettable narrowing of the imaginative claims which comparative analysis could and should generate.[5] Yet, critical responses to cross-national research are commonplace, not least from those who conduct it, reflecting some basic uncertainties over the feasibility of their ambitions. In published accounts, it is noticeable that the choice of research topic tends to be better justified than the choice of the comparative method. Similarly, although comparative research readily generates national findings together with some rather broad, perhaps global conclusions, the interpretative effort devoted directly to cross-national comparative analysis can be distinctly underwhelming, too often taking the form of nation-by-chapter reporting which leaves the making of comparisons up to the reader.

In attempting to unpack the issues involved in cross-national comparison, I begin by observing that although comparative research is indeed little discussed formally, it receives avid attention informally in conferences, discussion networks, etc. In researching this paper, I have become a careful reader of acknowledgements and footnotes, also contacting colleagues involved in comparative projects to invite 'the inside story'. I also draw here on my own experience of directing a 12-nation comparative project investigating children and young people's media use across Europe (Livingstone, 1998; Livingstone and Bovill, 2001).

In personal communication, comparative projects are described as 'exhausting', ' a nightmare' and 'frustrating', though also 'exhilarating' or 'stimulating', and such views occasionally leak out into the published accounts. For example, Wasko et al (2001: 342) conclude their volume on *Disney* by saying, 'we realize that collaborative research across cultures is fraught with difficulties'. Cohen et al (1990: 13) preface their volume on social conflict news by observing that 'this international collaborative effort was not easy'. In a notably honest and helpful account of the many pragmatic considerations and compromises involved in comparative research, Sreberny-Mohammadi et al (1985: 10) reflect on the gap between ambition and achievement, noting that 'in practice it proved impossible to develop agreed guidelines for such an ambitious undertaking' (see also Haddon, 1998; Livingstone and Lemish, 2001).

In short, the process of comparative research sets some significant challenges for those involved. This is particularly the case when comparison relies on multinational collaboration, exacerbated even further insofar as these cross-national collaborations are often multidisciplinary and multimethod.[6] Undoubtedly, one should not underestimate how much can be learned from colleagues from different cultures or what can be achieved given the combined creative intelligence of a diverse but focused group sharing their insights and energies. We must also recognise the benefits of increased travel and increased communication – notably via email – among research scholars in many parts of the world. However, on a very concrete level, cross-national variations in professional academic cultures can create difficulties. Researchers find themselves comparing not only their findings but also their theories and concepts, methodological preferences, research ethics, writing styles and publication strategies.

Moreover, cross-national collaboration confuses the boundary between the professional and the personal. It would seem that few comparative projects succeed unless the researchers involved become, to some degree, friends. They meet in different countries and spend the evenings together at leisure, often debating the contours of their everyday as well as professional lives. They must sustain good working relationships at a distance and over a considerable time, relying heavily on communicative (often, email) etiquette (including conventions of trust, courtesy, reciprocity, etc) as well as on the interpersonal skills of the project director. Researchers must reveal their difficulties with writing (including the crucial question of working in a foreign language and the inequalities introduced by the common resort to English as the *lingua franca*), they face inequities in funding, institutional support or ease of data collection, and they experience anxieties over the issues of data ownership and intellectual property that arise in collaboration.

These and other differences are too often discovered through the failure to anticipate their significance, so that such trivia as enjoying or deploring national variation in food, timekeeping or the weather only mark the beginning of the complex relational issues involved in comparative research. In short, comparative work relies not only on time, funding and mutual interest, but also on good will, on trust, and on what Hochschild (1983) terms ‘emotional labour’ or ‘feeling management’. In cross-national research, the dictates of such emotional labour are neglected at considerable cost.

Cross-national research – impossible yet necessary

The difficulties of comparative research are not merely practical, however. Rather, comparative research faces some significant epistemological challenges. A common complaint from critical scholars is that cross-national research produces ‘measurement out of context’, it asserts methodological and/or theoretical universalism at the cost of recognising cultural specificity; they argue further that in practice comparative research often results in viewing ‘other’ nations through a Western lens. On the other hand, if research methods and findings are so thoroughly contextualised that the meaning of any term or measure is understood only within its unique context, there can be no criteria by which to make comparisons in the first place. As Chisholm (1995: 22) puts it, ‘societies and cultures are fundamentally non-comparable and certainly cannot be evaluated against each other’. Similarly, Steier (1991: 175) asserts that ‘understanding another group … strictly in "its own terms", while respectful of the integrity of any "culture", is nevertheless impossible'. Hence, if 'privacy' in Japan means something so different from 'privacy' in America that it is meaningless, for example, to design a questionnaire examining the impact of the internet on personal privacy and apply it in both countries, then how shall we escape the relativist quagmire and conduct comparative research?

While some argue that cross-national research is impossible, for others it is necessary. Beniger (1992: 35) promotes comparison as a matter of principle, arguing that '*all* social science research is comparative', indeed 'all analysis is comparative', there is no other kind (see also Blumler, et al, 1992). Implicitly or explicitly, research uses conceptual categories that assert distinctions (whether in terms of nation or social group or institution or medium or time). And research claims necessarily compare across categories, identifying what is unique or contrasting, atypical or widespread.[7] Following this argument leads one to question to legitimacy of single-nation studies. In news research, for example, Cohen et al (1990: 42) rightly protest that, 'culturally unconditioned statements are made both about the content of television news and about the social functions it serves, as if they applied everywhere'. The implication is that we can no longer simply study 'the news' without qualifying whether we mean British news, or global news or the news in Eastern Europe. Not only is clarity required, but lack of clarity often permits dominant communities to make the blithe assumption that what holds in one country will surely hold elsewhere (Edelstein, 1982; Wasko, et al, 2001), as geographically, economically and linguistically marginalised research communities have rightly complained.[8]

Models of comparative research

Given the apparent impossibility and yet surely also the necessity of cross-national research, one may wonder how the research community can and does proceed in practice. Although research practice is often less than explicit regarding its use of the comparative method, I suggest that much research can usefully be categorised according to the typology developed by Kohn (1989). I should note, however, that many of the observations I make in this paper were derived from research experience and only later fitted into this framework. For clarity of presentation I shall first outline Kohn's typology and then develop it so as to capture and, I hope, elucidate, some of the experiences, decisions and dilemmas faced by media and communications researchers in undertaking comparative research.

Kohn identifies four approaches to cross-national comparison within social science according to their primary focus as follows.

1. Nation as object of study. Here the aim is idiographic, to understand particular countries for their own sake, comparison providing a useful means of determining what is distinctive about a country. A fair number of comparative projects fall into this category, comparison being used as a strategy for 'seeing better', rather than in order to draw more general comparative conclusions. In this sense, comparative research has rather modest aims, and so may be adopted by those who endorse the 'comparison is impossible' position.

For example, Coleman and Rollet (1997) present an account of television in each of several European countries. Each component chapter focuses on one country, and while readers may use such a volume solely for information on their own (or any one other country), the project is comparative mainly insofar as each contributor was required to address a series of common topics. However, any direct comparative analysis is left to be undertaken by the reader, reading across the chapter sections on 'advertising' or 'funding' or 'regulation', the authors themselves having mainly collaborated to provide the resources for such comparative analysis.

2. Nation as context of study. This model tests the hypothesised generality of findings across nations in order to support claims regarding an abstract or universal phenomenon. Like model one, these projects may be modest in their attempt to capture the complexity of each country compared, although they are rather more grand in their ambition to test the hypothesised universality of a particular phenomenon, pooling data from many countries to show how a theory applies in each one of those countries.

For example, Dahlström (1989: 41) concluded from their comparison of 14 European countries that 'the national reports … all bear witness to the importance of families and kinship relations with respect to reproduction and no evidence is given for declining functions'. In the media and communications field, Rogers' (1995) theory of the diffusion of technological innovation, a theory which hypothesises a standard S-shaped diffusion curve as a model of the typical acquisition path for each new medium, has been widely tested in – and often found to apply well across - very different countries around the world.

3. <u>Nation as unit of analysis</u>. In this model, given the prior identification of a number of measurable dimensions along which nations vary (e.g. gross national product, unemployment rate, etc), systematic relations are sought among these dimensions, each nation thereby serving as one unit or data source. This model can be seen as a multidimensional version of model two insofar as an abstract, cross-national theory is sought and tested. However, this theory also seeks to understand the diversity of different national contexts, achieving this by re-presenting the specificity of each country using a common conceptual language (i.e. in terms of the interrelations among the multiple dimensions on which each country is compared).

For example, concerned with 'communication flows across national borders', Jensen's (1998:2) *News of the World* project aimed to 'examine a wide range of news forms and cultural contexts in order to allow for maximum variation, which might, in turn, facilitate theory development' (p.2). On this approach, diversity is sought but then, through application of a standardised methodology, integrated into a common theoretical framework, such constructs as citizenship, power and identity theory being implicitly understood as transnational, even universal. Jensen thus develops a thematic comparison that deliberately combines top-down and bottom-up constructs to capture the differential positioning of audiences from different countries in relation to international news. Where Jensen's model emerges from the comparative process, Cohen et al's (1990) five-nation study of news hypothesises *a priori* relations among key variables, similarly comparing nations in relation to transnationally-meaningful dimensions such as journalists' values, government influence or industry competition.

4. <u>Nation as component of a larger international or transnational system</u>. Exemplified by theories of cultural dependency, imperialism and globalisation, this approach compares nations insofar as they are (assumed to be) systematically interrelated due to some underlying process (e.g. capitalism). Like model three, therefore, this model permits a complex account of each national context or system, but here an external explanation is sought in terms of a larger hypothesised transnational or global process rather than an internal one of relations among the key dimensions defining each national context. An extreme version of this model argues for the transnational or global level while ceasing to assert the validity of the national.

For example, Allen (1995) justifies his comparative volume on the soap opera by arguing that this genre is itself a *global phenomenon*, firstly because each nation's soap opera shares a common serial narrative structure, and secondly because audiences around the world watch both their own and each other's soap operas. Taking a broad-brush, ethnographic approach, Allen uses a global analysis of cultural 'flows' to explore the diversity of the genre and to bring other (especially Latin American) narrative traditions into visibility. The result is a bottom-up, contextual account of national specificity, albeit framed by the general theory of cultural globalisation.

As should be apparent, each of these models of comparison prioritises particular aims, follows distinct conceptual and methodological principles, and so facilitates different kinds of findings and explanations. Let me unpack some of these issues in order to clarify the decisions integral to comparative research.

Key issues for cross-national research

Selecting countries for comparison

Surprisingly, little formal attention is paid to the question of country selection, leaving researchers open to the charge of generating *post hoc* justifications for what are in reality somewhat *ad hoc*, convenient or serendipitous decisions regarding country selection. For example, Cohen et al (1990) introduce their cross-national study of social conflict in television news by describing how, after presenting their national findings at an international conference, they issued an open invitation to extend the study cross-nationally. Fortunately, this resulted in the inclusion of nations that varied on key dimensions identified *a priori* as predictive in their model. Even so, Cohen et al express concern that the five nations compared lacked sufficient variation, for the universal dimension they had hypothesised to be important proved less explanatory than nationally specific factors.[9]

If we contrast Kohn's four models of comparison, it is evident that the question of which countries are included is crucial, requiring some careful deliberation. Most simply, depending on the countries compared, findings will centre more on similarities or on differences. Hence, a research project which spans continents, comparing vastly different countries, may have difficulty identifying the fine-grain differences which research on similar countries will reveal. Conversely, comparing similar countries, perhaps from the same geographic region, may miss the bigger picture of transnational differences. The lens one chooses to apply depends on the research question asked.

Arguably, if one is treating each nation as the *object of study*, comparing fairly similar countries may prove most useful, particularly if informing policy is the object (Teune, 1990). Such studies tend to present findings on each nation side by side, perhaps even researched by parallel teams, and are typically bounded by regional limits, thereby referring to – though not always theorising – a putative common cause (e.g. O'Donnell, 1999; Silj, 1988; Weiten et al, 2000).[10] Rather less common, doubtless because it is perhaps the most methodologically, though not necessarily theoretically, ambitious, some comparative projects following the first model (*nation as object of study*) do not restrict themselves to one region but rather attempt comprehensive, even global, coverage (e.g. Sreberny-Mohammadi et al, 1985).[11]

If one is studying the generality of a finding across nations – model two, *nation as contest of study* - selecting countries so as to maximise diversity along the dimension in question allows one to explore the scope or universality of a phenomenon (e.g. Rogers, 1995). As already noted, this second model is, at least in relation to comparative dimensions, a simpler version of model three, for here the dimensions of comparison – and so the criteria for country selection – are multiplied, permitting a more insightful account of the countries concerned. Projects designed in accordance with *model three* would select countries in order to capture diversity within a common framework. Since the use of multiple dimensions invites a conception of the relations among them, model three tends to support theory-building through the development of a common framework, this specifying a pan-national conception of the meanings of the multiple dimensions (e.g. Jensen, 1998). Lastly, projects which conceptualise the nations to be compared as *components of a transnational system* will select countries by seeking to maximise range and diversity *per se* (e.g. Allen, 1995; Wasko et al, 2001).

Methodological standardisation and the origin of categories

The discussion of country selection raises a more fundamental question for comparative research regarding the origin of conceptual categories or dimensions and the implications for methodological standardisation. Many comparative researchers address the challenges of comparison by standardising their methodology and research tools, devoting considerable attention to strict equivalence in measurement procedures through such techniques as the back-translation of survey instruments, as well as ensuring transparency by including questionnaires and coding schedules in the final publications. The difficulties of comparative research, on this view, stem from the exacting task of ensuring comparability of measures and in applying standardised forms of analysis. For this reason, many comparative projects conscientiously record their fall from grace, noting compromises in sampling, translation, data collection, etc.

However, not all are persuaded by this practical resolution to the problem of comparison. In accordance with the familiar etic versus emic debate, some support the emic position by arguing that the more one sets out to control the process of data collection, the more validity is sacrificed.

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

Defenders of methodological standardisation respond by arguing that even if the cultural significance of and response to, for example, the digital divide, varies cross-nationally, one can still reliably collate the facts and figures on information and communication technology access across population sectors. This response tends to support a mapping of etic/emic onto the use of quantitative/qualitative methods. Hence it may be asserted that comparative research works best for quantitative methods. Surely, the argument goes, quantitative data can be straightforwardly collected, coded and analysed in accordance with universal conventions of sampling representativeness, reliability and statistical testing? Although these researchers may concede that the validity of cross-national data is sometimes questionable, they would nonetheless claim that it is qualitative methods that face the real challenge of comparison, for these data are context-dependent, reliant on the local knowledge of the researcher, and their transcripts are even written in different languages.[12] Yet there is something of a biased perception here regarding the practicalities involved. Why does comparing focus groups across different cultural and linguistic communities seem self-evidently more challenging than the often unspoken but surely equally demanding task of translating questionnaires, ensuring consistency of survey procedures or determining how a measurement of 75% in country A compares with one of 68% in country B?

Relation between data and theory

There are no easy answers here. Those who believe it is straightforward to compare quantitative research cross-nationally fall into what Edelstein (1982) scathingly calls the trap of 'comparison by consensus', or what Swanson (1992) calls a 'pre-theoretical' approach, achievable only through active avoidance of the epistemological issues at the heart of comparative research. Although a significant proportion of researchers will continue to defend methodological standardisation as the answer to the problems of comparative research, such an enterprise can be successful only insofar as objective, culture-free (or culturally universal) data are available.[13] Even then, Swanson, Edelstein and others would counter that even if the data can be said to be directly comparable, cultural divergence must of necessity reappear at the point of interpretation and theory. Hence, Swanson argues for a 'metatheoretical' approach that seeks to theorise the categories and concepts central to interpreting comparative data. In this, he offers one of several overlapping approaches that have been developed to prioritise the role of interpretation within a systematic theoretical framework.

System sensitivity and the place of interpretation

Is it possible to construe emic and etic approaches as complementary rather than oppositional? As Hoftede (1998: 19) notes, 'the first without the second gets stuck in case studies that cannot be generalised, the second without the first in abstractions that cannot be related to real life' (Hofstede, 1998: 19).[14] In an explicit attempt to achieve such a convergence, Jensen's (1998) comparative news project identified emic concepts imminent within each culture studied which were then incorporated into an abstract model whose theoretically-driven, etic dimensions could be applied across cultures. In this latter respect, though not the former, Jensen follows Swanson's (1992) preferred 'metatheoretical' solution, adopting a common theoretical framework that identifies abstract concepts or dimensions along which different countries can be positioned and so which can capture national variation in the relations among the dimensions analytically. The squaring of the circle occurs to the extent that these dimensions convincingly assert 'conceptual equivalence', even though literal equivalence may be impossible for reasons of language or context (Edelstein, 1982).

This approach is consistent with what Blumler, McLeod and Rosengren (1992: 7) term 'system-sensitivity'. They argue convincingly that:

> [comparison] 'is not just a matter of discretely and descriptively comparing isolated bits and pieces of empirical phenomena situated in two or more locales. Rather, it reflects a concern to understand how the systemic context may have shaped such phenomena'.[15]

The stress on a systemic analysis differentiates Blumler et al's position from an ethnographic or contextualist position (e.g. Radway, 1998), for although they share with the emic approach the critique of decontextualised comparison, Blumler et al presume that the dimensions or features of the system will be comparable across countries, albeit that their instantiation in any one country will be particular to that country.[16]

So, to make valid comparisons, one must not only identify appropriate dimensions of comparison but also identify the relation each plays with respect to other dimensions in each country studied. Morrow and Brown (1994) reframe this task as one of replacing a statistical modelling (or variable analysis) approach in favour of social theorising (concerned with interpretive-structural interpretations and generalisations). Thus they argue that:

> ‘statistical analysis constructs a certain kind of “subject” within sociological discourse – the member of an aggregate – whereas more theoretically oriented analyses construct the “subject” as the participant in one form of social organisation or another’ (p.209).[17]

Interestingly, Morrow and Brown (1994: 218) add a critical spin to this position, mirroring Lazarsfeld’s (1941) distinction between critical and administrative schools of communication research, when they argue that:

> ‘The logic of statistical generalisations has more of an affinity with the interests of social engineering, rather than social theorising. Whereas the latter is geared towards the intensive explication and comparative generalisation of aspects of the social world, the former is geared toward the construction of multivariable modelling intending “prediction” of variances… From a critical theory perspective the fundamental difficulty with using statistical analysis is that it is based on the relations between variables, while explicative and comparative analyses, as we have presented them, are based on discerning structural relations within and between mediations – relations that turn on the dialectic between human agency and social structure’.

Contextualisation

How can research 'discern structural relations within and between mediations', and can this be integrated with the 'construction of multivariable modelling', often demanded by funders, policy makers and certain academic disciplines adjacent to media and communications (e.g. economics, political science)? Bohman (1991) argues that research must seek to identify the various contexts in contention for interpreting participants' actions and to understand what makes sense to the participants themselves, both of which inevitably draw on the implicit knowledge of participants and so require the researcher to be a native, not an outsider. He then argues that contextualised interpretation must be complemented by rational interpretation, for this latter performs 'the methodological functions that contextual interpretation cannot fulfil… rational criticism focuses on the unresolved differences between the interpreter's and the actor's points of view and carefully compares and evaluates them' (1991: 143).[18] In short, contextualised interpretation requires the researcher to draw on insider knowledge, while rational interpretation requires the researcher to draw on outsider knowledge. Alasuutari outlines a similar resolution, in which one must simultaneously make the familiar strange (through becoming an outsider) and make the strange familiar (through becoming an insider (1995: 135).

Integrating these forms of knowledge is challenging for any research design, but comparative research makes explicit the challenge that is more usually left implicit while simultaneously exacerbating the scale of the challenge. In practice, comparative research combines the insider and outsider perspectives through either or both of two strategies: several researchers, each local to a particular research context, come together to compare interpretations; or, 'outside' researchers visit and immerse themselves in multiple locales. Whichever strategy is adopted, the trick is to keep the insider and outside perspectives in dialogue, and this in turn returns us to the experience of conducting comparative research, for successful integration of frameworks relies on good interpersonal communication as well as on intellectual analysis.

Conclusions: linking principles and practice

As we have seen, comparative research is challenging because one must balance and interpret similarities and differences while avoiding banalities and stereotypes. It is difficult on an experiential level, because of its pragmatics and politics – which countries to select, who is left out, who speaks the dominant language, who funded the research, and so forth. And, even setting aside the interesting and growing problem of the validity of the nation as a unit (for cross-national comparisons surely presume its validity at least in pragmatic terms), what is really at stake is a series of epistemological issues which at their most stark pose researchers with the contradiction between the apparent impossibility and the urgent necessity of comparison.

In attempting to understand the attraction and the difficulties of comparative research, this article has juxtaposed a range of epistemological debates with the ambitions and experiences of media and communications researchers. This revealed several defensible models or routes forward, and it would be inappropriate here to conclude in favour of one over the others. Different scholars will make different choices, where these should depend on their theoretical orientation and, crucially, the research question (more, say, than on the commonplace mix of serendipity and habit). Perhaps the most appropriate conclusion, then, is that cross-national research should make informed and explicit choices regarding its approach to comparison - country selection, methodological standardisation, origin of categories, reporting style, and so forth. Kohn's purpose, after all, in mapping these four distinct models of comparative research, was not to argue for one over others, but precisely in order to invite researchers to explicate and justify which one they adopt.

Let me conclude by organising each of the distinctions and approaches to comparative research discussed in this article (primary focus, rationale for country selection, approach to methodological standardisation and origin of categories, relation between data and theory, system sensitivity and use of contextualisation) in terms of these four overarching models, as shown in Table 1.

---- Insert Table 1 about here ----

No mapping is perfect, of course, as can be seen through any particular example, but I would still contend that the organisational effort behind this table is helpful. To illustrate with a well-known example, in their examination of the cross-cultural reception of the American prime-time soap opera, it would appear that *Dallas*, Liebes and Katz (1990) primarily follow the model of *nation as context of study*. Thus they test the abstract hypothesis of cultural imperialism across cultural contexts selected for the maximal diversity in relation to the originating American culture (the closest being the Californian audience, the furthest being the Japanese audience). A standardised format for domestic viewing and focus groups was adopted, and audience reception was analysed in terms of the (etic – here, 'primordial') categories of the text itself. As their critics have observed, the project provided rather little detailed contextualisation of the different groups to account for observed differences, tending to homogenise the groups, polarise their differences and give little account of the local cultural system, although the importance of local factors was stressed. This is to oversimplify, of course, for one of the key strengths of the *Export of Meaning* project was its openness to the insights of alternative comparative models. Hence, the reception analysis also produced a range of (emic) insights that – notwithstanding the evident economic and marketing advantage of American audiovisual exports - revealed the limits of the cultural imperialism thesis. Indeed, by uncovering a range of culturally-dependent negotiations, framings and interpretations of specific narratives, themselves invited by the openness of the soap opera genre, the researchers drew on cultural theories of globalisation and localisation, thereby incorporating the alternative comparative model, *nation as part of a larger transnational system*.[19]

In the end, however we determine and defend our choices in cross-national research, we should resist the fantasy that by this means a complete, comprehensive account can be produced. Such ambitions are particularly challenging given the contradictory trends currently dominant in the field of media and communications. On the one hand, research is gripped by the ethnographic turn, emphasising contextualised interpretation, insider accounts and critical or social theoretical work (e.g. work on globalising forces, hybridising identities, sub-cultural resistance, etc). On the other hand, media and communications research is attracted to and funded to conduct multi-national comparisons involving large-scale standardised data collection in order to advance administrative or policy goals (e.g. work on diffusion of innovation, the digital divide, information flows). Although addressing the tensions involved is beyond the scope of this article, my aim has been to shed light on the ambitious intentions, intellectual pleasures, considerable anxieties, strong critical reactions and equivocal conclusions which both motivate and undermine the conduct and evaluation of comparative research at a time when such research is greatly on the increase.

Table 1: Models of Comparative Cross-National Research in Media and Communications

Nation as …				
	Object of study	**Context of study**	**Unit of analysis**	**Part of larger system**
Primary focus	Idiographic – understand each country in own terms	Test abstract hypothesis or dimension across countries	Seek relations among dimensions of national variation	Interpret each country subject to transnational system or process
Country selection	Compare any, all or similar countries	Maximise diversity on one dimension	Diversity within a common framework	Maximise diversity on all dimensions
Methodological standardisation	Optional	Favoured	Favoured	Optional
Origin of categories	Emic	Etic	Etic (or, etic plus emic)	Etic plus emic
Data/theory relation	Pre-theoretical: descriptive, mapping	Metatheoretical: hypothesis-testing	Metatheoretical: theory-building, modelling	Metatheoretical: theory-elaboration
System-sensitivity	Weak	Weak	Strong (focus on internal system)	Strong (focus on transnational system)
Contextualisation	Strong (but not cross-nationally comparable)	Weak (except as used in post-hoc explanations)	Strong insofar as captured by comparative dimensions	Strong (balancing local and global)

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Endnotes

[1] The absence of publications addressing the principles and practicalities of comparative research in media and communications is curious, both when compared with debates over cross-national research in sociology (e.g. Szalai and Petrella, 1977; Kohn, 1989) and, even more widely, in anthropology (e.g. Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983), and when compared with the recent rash of books on research methods in the field of media and communications, in which every step and helpful research tip for conducting a content analysis or running a focus group is discussed and shared.

[2] While not all researchers would follow McNeill (1985) in interpreting similarities and differences in causal terms - treating cross-national research as a naturalistic experiment on a

grand scale - it is disappointing when the mere description of similarities and differences is considered an end in itself rather than the basis for theory.

[3] Given that many comparative projects rely on secondary statistics, as collected by national governments, there is strong pragmatic justification for treating the nation as unit, even though problematically nations almost invariably measure key indicators according to different, and not always explicit, assumptions and even though these tend to mask within-nation variation. Nonetheless, if indicators of wealth or internet penetration are available only on a nation-by-nation basis, then comparative research on the digital divide will have to use these data along with the cultural assumptions they carry.

[4] Even more pragmatically, reference to the nation facilitates the research reporting in terms familiar to research users: public service broadcasters wish to hear how other countries resolve similar problems so as to inform national policy while Unesco wants to know which countries have a more or less biased press so as to direct its intervention.

[5] Hofstede (1998) agrees, arguing not merely that scientific inquiry should, precisely, concern itself with the comparison of apples and oranges, but also more specifically and, perhaps, contentiously, that comparing apples with oranges is only effective as long as we ‘possess a fruitology, a theory of fruits’ (p.17).

[6] It is rare in multinational comparisons for a single researcher or national team to conduct the research in all nations, partly because of the difficulty of sufficiently understanding the context of another country. One such instance is O'Donnell's (1999: 2) analysis of 'all new domestic soaps and *telenovelas* which have emerged in Europe since 1990'. A single-authored project, this permitted systematic application of a common explanatory model across countries; however, the practicalities of huge time commitment and multilingual expertise rule this out for most scholars.

[7] For Hammersley and Atkinson (1983: 14), those who take a reflexive approach to research must be even more committed to comparative research, for comparisons offer the best route to implementing a reflexive approach, providing a means of testing the limits of theories, comparing the outcomes of diverse research strategies, and examining the role of the researcher by varying their relation to the field under study. Although reflexive methods are yet to be thoroughly debated in media and communications research, many procedures have been identified within anthropology, including acknowledging one's role as observer, writing in the first person, forcing an awareness of the translation process so as to de-privilege the researcher's views, foregrounding an ethical concern of respect for the culture being studied, seeing research as a co-constructive process, etc (Clifford and Marcus, 1986).

[8] Bilateral comparisons are particularly likely to fall into this trap. Typically a comparison of one's own country with another, these tend to focus explanations of difference on the 'other' – 'foreign' – country; with more countries, and with multi-national research teams, the comparative process becomes more reflexive so that one's own country becomes more readily and reciprocally 'othered'.

[9] Similarly, when designing *Children and their Changing Media Environment*, I was puzzled by unanticipated requests to join from researchers in countries as diverse as Taiwan, India and Canada as well as by countries who felt left out of a 'European' comparison (e.g. Norway, Greece). Criteria for country selection were therefore formalised in terms of (1) policy-relevance (a European comparison to inform a European audio-visual agenda); (2) practicality (more countries exponentially increasing project management requirements); and (3) 'value-added' (more EU countries increasing the range of national findings but not necessarily enhancing emergent comparative findings).

[10] For example, in their comparison of television across European countries, Wieten et al observe, 'there is so much that unites the character and evolution of television in Western Europe, yet television within each country has its own particular features' (2000: ix). Similarly, Coleman and Rollet (1997: 5) justify their comparative volume on *Television in Europe* by claiming that 'television is inseparable from the development of Europe since the Second World War'. Implicit here is the claim that comparing across a meaningfully-defined (i.e. regional) set of countries reveals their underlying *common origin*, here Western European television history and its associated political economy and culture, and so one may address a common policy framework.

[11] For example, UNESCO funded Sreberny-Mohammadi et al (1985: 9) to conduct an 'international inventory of foreign news reporting' in the context of the 1970s' demand for a New World Information and Communication Order. The project assessed the discrepancy between actual and ideal representations of foreign countries in 29 countries around the world, where actual representations were taken to indicate national political or economic conditions and

where ideal representations were defined by universal notions of truth and freedom from bias, claims to universality being common though not necessary in a comprehensive approach.

[12] After all, data files of numbers can be collated, circulated and analysed across different countries, transcripts written in different languages cannot; SPSS works for anyone with a computer but QSR-Nudist and Altas-ti are restricted to the Latin alphabet; and so forth.

[13] One might here propose employment figures, computer sales, telephone time logs, etc, although each would be subject to scrutiny by the critics of cross-national comparison.

[14] Hofstede's (1998: 17) own resolution is to require comparative researchers to address three fundamental issues before embarking on their project: 'The nature of the criteria for comparison; to what extent nations are a proper unit for such a comparison; and the functional equivalence of the nations concerned with respect to the criteria considered.'

[15] Hofstede (1998) argues similarly that in comparative research it must be demonstrated that the units being compared are functionally equivalent with respect to the criteria being used. While such abstract categories as values can be considered functionally equivalent, he claims that institutions – the family, school, authority, and, we might add, public service broadcasting, the soap opera genre or the child audience – are unlikely to be, undermining cross-national comparison. The onus is thus on the researcher to establish the meaningfulness of their comparisons, using different methods and at more than one point in time.

[16] For example, in our comparative project on children and media in Europe we compared time spent with a range of media (Livingstone and Bovill, 2001). Time, measured in minutes and hours, is equivalent everywhere, but the meaning of time spent with television depends on disposable (or available) time and what one does with the rest of one's time. And disposable time

for children varies cross-nationally, depending on the length of the school day, bedtime, participation in after school activities, etc, all factors that one cannot 'hold constant' but which can be compared cross-nationally. The challenge was to find a defensible way of comparing countries for their children's (disposable) time spent with media, in order to interpret statistical differences in time spent with media.

[17] To illustrate, children - conceived of as members of an aggregate - can be surveyed for the hours they spend watching television, and children from different countries can be compared in this respect. But what do these comparisons mean? If questions of interpretation enter the frame, which they must, then it must also be recognised that children are participants in forms of social organisation – cultures of childhood, education systems, the family – and so cannot be simply compared across countries without taking such systemic factors into account.

[18] When Bohman (1991) describes such a process of comparing and evaluating, notwithstanding the difficulties of the process, such advice surely seems sensible and balanced, leading one to wonder why such polarised claims about comparative research – as impossible, as fundamentally flawed – are in vogue. Part of the problem is that cultural scholars seem to have become nervous of taking 'outsider' (or rational-critical) perspective, perhaps fearing that it nullifies the insider's perspective or that it imputes to the research subject a state of false consciousness should these perspectives conflict or maybe that it reveals a failure of reflexivity on the part of the researcher.

[19] In *Children and their Changing Media Environment*, the research strategy involved three parallel phases. (1) Following the model of *nation as context of study*, the project used standardised methods and etic categories to test the generality of demographic trends (gender, age, social status) across Europe. (2) Following the model of *nation as part of larger*

transnational system, the project sought evidence for the transnational processes of late modernity (privatisation of leisure, individualisation of lifestyles, globalisation of media products and audiences), this requiring a more bottom-up, qualitative, contextualised approach. (3) Following the model of *nation as unit of analysis*, the project related standardised measures on key dimensions of social and cultural comparison along which the selected countries differed, in order to examine how children's media use was systematically related to different national contexts.