

[Sonia Livingstone](#)

Challenges to comparative research in a globalizing media landscape

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**Challenges of comparative research:
Cross-national and transnational approaches to the globalising media landscape**

Sonia Livingstone
London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)
s.livingstone@lse.ac.uk

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Abstract

This chapter argues that the process of globalisation means that comparative research is no longer a choice but rather a necessity. Since, also, the transnational critiques of cross-national research appear compelling, comparative approaches now require a sound theoretical and political as well as methodological underpinning. Using examples from media and communications research, I argue that approaches which seek to do away with the importance of ‘nation’ go too far, and that instead the role of the nation, as a unit of analysis, should be rethought in terms of a civic/democratic or civic republican model rather than either extreme of the ethno-cultural nation or the cosmopolitan ideal.

Introduction

How can, and how should, communication scholars formulate the scope and ambitions of their projects and their field in an age of globalisation? How can they address the intellectual, political and practical problems that ensue from working comparatively across countries and cultures? Once, most researchers formulated a research project appropriate to the media institutions, texts or audiences of their own country and shared the findings, in their national language, with their compatriots. Today, such an approach seems parochial, of uncertain relevance to the wider international effort to grasp the contours of a fast globalising and ever more mediated world. Yet although few would question the importance of globalisation, the rationale

and conduct of the comparative research designed to examine it remains insufficiently understood.

One notable trend is the growth in large-scale comparative projects, encouraged by universities, funding agencies, professional associations and international organisations alike. These multi-researcher, multi-cultural and often multi-method collaborations appear to spring up in response to the imperative of understanding the economic and cultural prominence of globalised media and communication phenomena. Prominent examples include the study of *Dallas* (Liebes & Katz, 1990) and other soap operas (Allen, 1995), *Disney* (Wasko et al, 2001), news (Sreberny-Mohammadi et al, 1985; Cohen et al, 1990; Jensen, 1998; Czeppek et al, 2009), *Big Brother* (Mathijs & Jones, 2004) and other reality television formats, *The Lord of the Rings* (Barker & Mathijs, 2008) and diasporic media (Silverstone, 2003).

Spurred on by the growth in transnational media and cultural phenomena, enabled by institutional support for international collaboration, and legitimated by the importance accorded to the media by the major social theories and theorists of modernity, such projects – indeed comparative work in general – are surely at the cutting edge of the field of media and communications. But, examined closely, these projects instantiate a range of designs, assumptions and working practices that may be better or worse suited to their ambitions. And, interestingly, there are some substantial unresolved disagreements about the most appropriate way to operationalise questions of global or transnational media when designing research projects.

This chapter contrasts two ideal types of research conception and design for comparative research in media, communications and cultural studies. First, I consider the cross-national comparison of carefully matched national case studies. Second, developed partly in response to the charge of *methodological nationalism* and lack of contextual validity levied at such studies, I consider the more open-ended, cross-border mapping of transnational media flows. Even though the epistemological and ontological principles underpinning each are quite distinct, even oppositional, in practice it can be difficult to classify published studies as following the precepts of one approach or the other. This difficulty is not, I suggest, as accidental as it may appear. Rather, the field of media and communications – its phenomena, questions and concerns – is still focused on clearly demarcated, tradition-bound, institutionally-integrated countries widely recognised and referred to by their self-identified publics, media and cultures. And, on the other hand, the field is also characterised by complex flows, contradictions and intersections that generate shared cultures and sub-cultures across borders as well as incomprehension, difference and exploitation within them. For theoretical, methodological and normative reasons, therefore, I advocate a reflexive reframing of the status of the category ‘nation’ rather than either its unthinking retention or its romantic rejection, as part of a wider analysis of globalising late modernity.

Comparative research – choice or necessity?

Twenty or thirty years ago comparative research of any kind was regarded as a choice open to researchers, but perhaps a somewhat esoteric choice that made life unnecessarily difficult. ‘Foreign’ countries, along with foreign media in unfamiliar languages and relevant to ‘other’ ways of life, all seemed rather far away. The easy

assumption that one's own country could be taken for granted as 'normal', hardly in need of contextual explanation, even illustrative of 'universal' phenomena, went surprisingly unquestioned. Although it is not my argument that all researchers should conduct comparative projects, it is my argument that whether one conducts a transnational, multi-national, or single-nation project, this should be a deliberate decision. Further, findings from one nation should no more be described as of universal relevance than should findings from multiple nations or cultures be insufficiently contextualised. As Hantrais (1999: 94) puts it, research must move from the 'context-free' to the 'context-bound' or, better, the contextually-grounded.

Although today the conduct of a national study can still go unquestioned, its importance taken for granted especially in large countries (notably, although not only, in the US), the situation is changing fast. In small countries, the globalisation of the media and communication field accords national studies a new meaning, namely to overcome 'their' country's hitherto neglect in the international research arena, to add their national media phenomena to the kaleidoscope of national studies recognised in 'comprehensive' literature reviews of a media phenomenon worldwide. For a growing number of researchers worldwide, it is clear that comparative research in one form or another has become commonplace. In particular, the study of global and transnational media phenomena has moved from the margins to the centre of our field.

To stimulate a radical rethinking nearly two decades ago, in their opening chapter of *Comparatively Speaking*, Blumler, McLeod and Rosengren (1992: 8) employed the metaphor of the frontier, the explorer, calling for a 'leap in the dark'. Although aware that comparative research 'can pose challenges to scholars' preconceptions and is liable to be theoretically upsetting', they do not permit such upsets to justify avoidance, for 'only comparative research can overcome space- and time-bound limitations on the generalizability of our theories, assumptions, and propositions' (p 3). In the same volume, Beniger (1992: 35) put the case even more strongly, arguing that '*all* social science research is comparative', indeed, '*all* analysis is comparative', there is no alternative. And now the field of comparison is on a global scale. However, as I shall consider in this chapter, the inevitability of comparison does not make the nation-state the inevitable unit of analysis. After all, the primary reason for the rise of comparative research in media and communications concerns the transformation of our field of study from solely or largely national to transnational phenomena. The media are deeply implicated in the process of globalisation and are thus constitutive of modern society (Thompson, 1995; Beck, 2000; Krotz, 2007). It has become imperative to examine the transnational flows of media technologies, formats and specific texts, the rise of powerful institutional networks and media conglomerates and the practices of interpretative communities within and across national borders.

The effort to compare not only occasions excitement in theoretical, methodological and substantive terms, it also occasions new uncertainties about the relevance of research findings, the scope of media theory, even the legitimacy of our inquiry, as this volume attests. Put simply, it is no longer plausible to study one phenomenon in one country without asking, at a minimum, whether it is common across the globe or distinctive to that country or part of the world. Scholars implicitly if not explicitly write an answer to this question into everything they publish, just as they must ascertain the relevance to their culture or concerns of everything they read. To study

'the news' requires attention to whether one means British or Dutch news, local or European or even global news. To report on teenagers' social networking practices requires clarity over whether the findings apply only to teenagers in the researched country or whether they are expected also of teenagers in other countries, from Alaska to Zimbabwe. Each scholar is aware of the international literature and must, with more or less justification, position a new study within this, matching its similarities or differences to other studies, contextualising its particularities, qualifying or supporting theoretical claims as appropriate.

Conferences, electronic networks and mailing lists buzz with debates over these issues, along with calls for international collaborations, invitations to join cross-national projects and proposals to international funding agencies. In part, it must be said, this is because the academy itself is globalising, with academic work assessed for its status in the international more than any national arena. Our efforts are evaluated through English language publications in 'international' journals, along with their citation indices, through membership of prestigious professional networks, reputation and recognition in far-flung parts of the world, appeal to an international student market, and so forth. Although efforts to internationalise the academy are to be welcomed, it must be recognised that they introduce new risks, for there are many subtle difficulties associated with intercultural cooperation in addition to the obvious but substantial barriers of travel, language and expense (Livingstone, 2007).

Approaches to cross-national comparison

Traditionally defined as 'a study that compares two or more nations with respect to some common activity' (Edelstein, 1982: 14), the dominant approach to comparative research is cross-national. It employs a more or less standardised research design, replicated across countries and implemented through a coordinated collaboration among the one or more researchers from each country selected for comparison. As Blumler et al define it, comparison assumes 'two or more geographically or historically (spatially or temporally) defined systems' in which 'the phenomena of scholarly interest' are conceived to be 'embedded in a set of interrelations that are relatively coherent, patterned, comprehensive, distinct, and bounded' (1992: 7). For the dominant approach, this 'system' is the nation-state.

Thus somewhat paradoxically, the growth in cross-national research is on the one hand occasioned by the growth of globalisation but on the other hand it asserts the continued importance of the nation-state in framing its theories and methods. In conception and in practice, it tends to be more 'etic' than 'emic' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983), prioritising the top-down standardisation of concepts and measures in order to facilitate direct comparisons across nations over bottom-up interpretative contextualisation based on the particular meanings variously in use within each nation. Within this broad approach, we may locate three of the four models of comparative research identified by Kohn (1989a), for these each take the nation-state as the unit of analysis, thus drawing comparisons across the set of nations selected as its case studies. The three models can be distinguished on multiple grounds; most notably that each accords 'the nation' a different epistemological status and, therefore, each selects its cases according to a different rationale (see Livingstone, 2003).

First, the *idiographic model* of cross-national comparative research. This is the simplest, permitting the researcher to see their own country through the eyes of outsiders and to see other countries through the eyes of insiders; thus one is better positioned to determine what is distinctive (or not) about a particular country. In Kohn's terms, this means *treating countries as objects of analysis in their own right*; comparison is employed as a useful strategy for 'seeing better'. This model is thus fairly modest in aims, producing a structured, accurate and detailed description but offering little by way of explanation or theory. Examples of this model include Coleman and Rollett's (1997) *Television in Europe* and Cooper-Chen's (2005) *Global Entertainment Media* – both volumes which asked chapter contributors to profile their country according to a more or less standard set of headings (such as media history, media regulation and media content), hence the chapters are entitled 'Britain', 'Germany' and so forth. If explanation or theory is desired, this is left to the reader of the research who is implicitly charged with the task of reading across the different chapters to construct first an account of similarities and differences and then to test possible explanations against the information provided (for example, Cooper-Chen's introduction provides data on which countries could be compared, such as information freedom, cultural values and audience size).

Second, the *hypothesis-testing model* of cross-national comparative research. The most parsimonious model involves *treating countries as the context for examining general hypotheses*. Here the researcher hypothesises cross-national similarities, even universal phenomena, and then tests these hypotheses against observed findings from different countries. Although this is to assert general theoretical claims that hold across nations, advocates of this model may set out in a Popperian fashion to try to falsify these through an empirical openness to cross-national differences that may challenge or limit claims. No detailed description of the phenomenon in each country is required, although it may help to explain falsifying instances if and when they arise. An example is Goetz et al's (2005) *Media and the Make-believe Worlds of Children*, insofar as this four-country study of children's fantasy world identified similar 'media traces' (e.g. from *Harry Potter* and *Pokemon*) in each country. These in turn generated the hypothesis of 'world categories' (harmony and peace, supernatural power, royalty, etc.) framing the fantasies of children everywhere – although some findings of cross-cultural differences (more individualism in North American children's fantasies, more Confucianism in Korean children's fantasies) qualify this universalist picture.

Third, the *system-sensitive model* of cross-national comparative research. The third, most demanding model, centres on *treating countries as units in a multi-dimensional analysis*. Following the argument for 'system-sensitivity', the focus here is on explanation more than description, and the expectation is of cross-national differences more than similarities (Swanson, 1992). As Blumler et al (1992: 7) put it, 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'. The research task, therefore, is first to observe the pattern of similarities and differences across countries and then to explain this by testing the predictive power of external indicators that may account for how and why nations vary systematically. Hallin and Mancini's (2004) study of the relation between media and political systems, *Comparing Media Systems*, exemplifies this model (see also Jensen, 1998), as they

first identify robust and overarching dimensions of comparison (the parallelism between political and media systems, the independence of media from the state, the spread of press readership from elites to the masses, etc.) and then use these to identify and explain differences across countries, grouping these meaningfully so as to generate further hypotheses.

Distinguishing these models can guide researchers in making and justifying some key design decisions, one of which is country selection (Livingstone, 2003). It may sometimes seem that researchers choose to compare countries inhabited by colleagues who are also friends or who live in cities they are keen to visit or who they happened to meet at a conference. But clearly a formal rationale is required. If the focus is idiographic, it may be that any countries would suit, although arguably you can see your own country with greater subtlety if it is compared with similar rather than very different countries: comparing Britain and Germany can be very revealing, presumably because so much is common that observed differences help pinpoint explanatory factors at work. A comparison of Britain and China tends to reveal what is already obvious to the casual observer, and the explanation of even these differences requires so much contextual information as to become unwieldy. Hence Coleman and Rollett (1997) compared European countries, while Cooper-Chen (2005) selected countries from all continents but with the common factor that all were major broadcasting exporters. If, however, the aim is to test general hypotheses, there is value in selecting maximally diverse countries for this presents the toughest test case. In other words, if one finds the same phenomenon or the same relation among factors in very different countries, one may plausibly assert a general theoretical claim: hence Goetz et al's (2005) selection of the US, Israel, South Korea and Germany. Last, for a multi-dimensional analysis of national media or cultural systems, country selection is determined first by whether or not the key dimensions apply (i.e. only select countries in which these can be meaningfully measured) and, second, by selecting for diversity within this set of countries (i.e. include countries which are high and low on each dimension). For this reason, Hallin and Mancini (2004) restricted their study to Western democratic countries, thus ensuring that their putative explanatory dimensions could be meaningfully tested by maximising diversity within a common framework.

Challenges to the nation as unit of analysis

Although these three models are all widely employed in media and communications research, their common adoption of the nation as a unit of analysis engenders a range of critiques, putting their legitimacy under pressure, for 'the assumption in theories of globalization is that the nation-state is on its way out as a modern, central, political, and economic authority' (McMillin, 2007: 11). Or, as Robins (2008: 85) observes, 'the nation can never actually exist in the form of its ideal image of itself. It is always bound to be compromised by disorderly realities'. Thus many have joined in the critique of what Beck (2000) and others have called 'methodological nationalism' – the view in which 'the nation-state is taken as the organizing principle of modernity', whether naturally, historically or normatively (Chernilo, 2006: 6). This view is often criticised for assuming 'that humanity is naturally divided into a limited number of nations, which on the inside, organize themselves as nation-states, and on the outside, set boundaries to distinguish themselves from other nation-states' (Beck, 2007: 287).

In an age of globalisation the nation-state is no longer the automatic starting point for comparative research, for media and communications flow within and across nations (Rantanen, 2008). So, while for Cooper-Chen (2005: 8) it seems evident that, 'within a nation's culture, TV content is one of its most accessible aspects', others precisely contest this assumption of a single culture 'within' a nation, arguing instead that research should follow and analyse media whatever their geographical trajectory. Indeed, both theoretical and empirical work roundly challenges the assertion of 'a cultural map in which different cultures are both internally homogenous and bounded from other (external) cultures' (Robins, 2008: 120). It is now as implausible to regard media as 'representing' a nation, culture or identity as it is to ignore the fact that people may 'have dual citizenships and/or multiple affiliations that cross the boundaries of nation-states' (Rantanen, 2008: 32). Presentations of cross-national research can too easily minimise diversity within the nation, maximise diversity across nations and assume that, as Robins scathingly characterises, 'when "Turkish people" watch "Turkish television", they are doing so as a unified community plugging into a unified cultural space' (2008: 113).

In political terms, cross-national research is critiqued for inadvertently privileging the dominant norm over the norms of 'others', especially if one cultural form goes unmarked while others are marked out as different. Such ethnocentrism is unfortunately commonplace in much media and communications research, for example when conclusions are drawn as follows: 'The digital divide is reducing as the internet reaches the mass market, although it was always small in Sweden and remains large in India'. Here, it is presumed that the 'digital divide' is a universal phenomenon that occurs in any country once it gains internet access, and that 'we' (both writer and reader) do not live in the countries marked out as exceptional, for which 'different' explanations are needed. More contentious cases implicitly set up the US election system or its freedom of press as an already familiar democratic ideal and critique the systems of other countries insofar as they 'fail' to match up. Curran (2009) critiques Hallin and Mancini (2004) along these lines, claiming that their cross-national design blinds them to the 'imperial role' of the US in both financial and military terms, while also positing a misleading causal hypothesis (namely, social structure determines media systems) without allowing for possibility of its reverse.

Methodologically, cross-national research faces many difficulties. One is the problem of scale, for as studies encompass more and more countries, they may collapse under their own weight, struggling to coordinate, failing to achieve consensus and often not reaching publication. Another is the problem of standards, for cross-national projects often underestimate the degree of local variation in meanings, practices or contexts. Jowell's (1998: 175) stern injunction to researchers to employ 'stringent and well-policed ground rules for comparable survey methods' hints at the Canute-like fight against the inexorable tide of cultural diversity and mutual incomprehension. Contrast this with Hammersley and Atkinson's (1983: 7) critical observation 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 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*' (Peschar, 1984: 4, emphasis in the original). Or, as Robins (2001: 77) says, the focus on nation-states engenders 'a way

of thinking that tends to consider cultural complexity in terms of disorder and loss of coherence' rather than embracing and seeking to understand complexity in its own terms.

Substantively, cross-national projects are difficult to manage. Despite the best efforts of researchers to respect local cultural distinctiveness, the imperative of drawing abstract conclusions means that cross-national projects can end up universalising, for similarities seem easier to observe than differences. For example, in Barker and Mathijs' (2008) study of the worldwide reception of *The Lord of the Rings*, although respondents came from 150 countries, and although chapters were authored by German, Australian, Dutch and Spanish scholars, the reader learns little of German, Australian, Dutch or Spanish or other audiences, and the interesting findings that emerge reflect the global audience's (singular not plural) fascination with what Liebes and Katz, in *The Export of Meaning*, called 'primordial themes' – friendship, belonging, journey, and the struggle of good and evil. Another difficulty is that observed differences seem hard to explain theoretically. As Hall (2003: 379) puts it, 'it is easy to posit functional relationships but difficult to establish their causal force relative to other factors'. One reason is that our theories largely address media phenomena rather than offering explanations for societal differences at large – and cross-national theories of value or infrastructure (e.g. Inglehart, 1997; Hofstede, 2001) are often regarded with suspicion. As a result, cross-national findings are vulnerable to the critique that claimed cross-national similarities neglect culturally distinct features and that cross-national differences draw on national stereotypes, overstate internal homogeneity, neglect ambiguous or cross-border phenomena, and tend towards the post hoc. When teaching Liebes and Katz' cross-national study of the reception of *Dallas*, I find that someone will generally suggest that the researchers misunderstood the Japanese rejection, or that Russians are not all obsessed with ideology, and so on.

The transnational alternative

Advocates of each and all of these three models of cross-national research might concede that some studies fall foul of the above problems, and yet they might resolve to conduct their research to higher standards, to avoid criticisms. But for others, the problems are sufficiently great as to force the conclusion that cross-national comparison is an inherently flawed enterprise, for 'societies and cultures are fundamentally non-comparable and certainly cannot be evaluated against each other' (Chisholm, 1995: 22). Hence Radway's (1988) call for radical contextualism in cultural studies, rejecting the standardised 'etic' approach in favour of the ethnographic 'emic', and McMillin's (2007: 15) concern that emphasis on the nation-state has unbalanced research in favour of macro structures to the neglect of the micro-level of lived experience. To contend that the nation is the wrong unit of analysis for comparative research is not necessarily to reject comparative research. Thus Kohn (1989a) describes a fourth model, the *transnational model* of comparative research. This, it seems, is on the ascendant, for it *treats countries as the locus for a global or transnational trend*.

Best suited for examining grand historical claims regarding the intertwined effects of globalisation, individualism, mediatisation and consumerism (Krotz, 2007) over decades or centuries, the transnational model is fundamentally concerned with

phenomena that cross local, national or regional borders. Although, inevitably, the research itself takes place in one or more countries, these are merely the locus but not the focus of the research. Instead, alternative objects of study or units of analysis must be postulated, and different theoretical and methodological strategies with which to research them. Appadurai (1996: 33-6) is perhaps the leading exponent of the transnational model. He argues for five vectors of social change, all important to media and communications, all of which escape the national: the ethnoscape (the shifting landscape of persons, identities, diaspora), the technoscape (the fluid, networked configuration of technologies), the financescapes (the disposition of global capital), the mediascapes (the distribution of information, images and audiences) and the ideoscapes (the ideologies and counter-ideologies which link images and ideas to the power of states). In a convergent late modern world, these 'scapes' intersect in what Castells (2000) called 'a space of flows', although we may distinguish them analytically.

Methodologically, such analysis invites what Marcus (1995) called 'multi-sited ethnography' – we must follow the objects of analysis (media, stories, peoples, innovations, even policies) wherever they take us, across whatever borders, in order to recognise, instead of marginalising, the emergence of new structures of power and cultures of appropriation or resistance, whatever their contradictions and complexities and however they may flow within and across borders. For example, Chalaby (2005) focuses on transnational broadcasting organisations as his unit of analysis, for it is precisely their business strategy that is to cross borders (Al-Jazeera, Star TV, Zee TV, RTL, Televisa, as well as AOL Time Warner, Disney, Bertelsmann, and so forth). Here too we may locate some of the multi-national studies cited at the outset, for their global objects – *Dallas*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Big Brother*, *Pokemon* – explicitly cross borders in a manner which intrigues researchers, and which demands that they follow the object wherever it travels. In addition to the passage of particular media forms or products, further units of analysis are also attracting attention. Particularly, some media cross borders 'under the radar', for example diasporic media (Silverstone, 2003; Georgiou, 2006) and alternative or community media (Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2006).

Noting how a nation-state approach renders these media phenomena marginal if not invisible (along with the diasporic audiences and communities that engage with them), Robins (2008) urges attention to the 'transcultural imagination' (see also Hepp, 2009). By this means, he hopes to bring into focus those collective imaginaries experienced by individuals wherever they may live in a way that transcends, even transgresses, national borders, as he illustrates in his research with Aksoy (2000) in relation to Turkish television audiences within Europe. Looking more widely beyond media and communications, Beck and Sznaider (2006: 15) propose 'transnational regimes of politics', 'transnational spaces and cultures of memory' as alternative units of analysis for a globalising age, claiming that these demand a renegotiation of the 'basic rules and basic decisions' of social analysis. To delineate the contours of these, since they do not precisely map onto national or regional borders, in a project on mediated cultural identities in Europe, Uricchio (2008: 12) describes an effort 'to seek out sites where these various tensions were writ large ... to embrace the tangible fault-lines, fissures, and ruptures that seemed to emblemize the larger European dynamic'. In practice, this led to a focus on cities, prime locations for 'tangible fault-lines', usefully challenging 'the usual organization of narrative elements' in academic

writing by generating new taxonomies, alternative points of similarity and contrast (p 16). As Georgiou (2006: 296) observes, a major cosmopolitan city such as London or New York demands an approach that recognises 'shades of difference which cannot be contained in specific cultures'.

Classifying research in practice

As varieties of research burgeon, clarity over ontological and epistemology designs is not always forthcoming (Hall, 2003; Hoijer, 2008). In practice, comparative projects examining global media phenomena are not as easy to classify as the clash between cross-national and transnational perspectives might suggest. In studies of *Disney*, *Big Brother*, *Pokemon* or *The Lord of The Rings*, are the researchers comparing market conditions, textual versions or cultural appropriations in each nation-state? Or are they following media as they flow around the world, across countries and cultures? In Liebes and Katz's (1990) *Dallas* project, it seems that first they treated the *nation as context of study*, in Kohn's terms, testing the abstract hypothesis of cultural imperialism across national contexts selected for maximal diversity and using a standardised methodology. But having failed to support the cultural imperialism thesis, they turned to an 'emic' approach, uncovering how audiences appropriated the text in accordance with cultural frameworks as part of a complex and dynamic transnational negotiation, certainly not the straightforward 'export' of meaning.

In another example, it is only with hindsight that I can classify the strategy we followed in *Children and their Changing Media Environment*. We first generated detailed country profiles (Kohn's *nation as object of analysis*). We then tested certain abstract hypotheses in all countries, for example concerning age trends, gender differences and socioeconomic inequalities in uses of media (*nation as context for general hypotheses*). Having found cross-national differences, we then sought system-related factors by which they might be explained (*nation as unit in multi-dimensional analysis*). Overall, the comparison of old and new media was concerned with a global process of technological innovation and appropriation spreading across all countries while acknowledging diversity and difference within them (*nation as locus for transnational trend*) (Livingstone & Bovill, 2001). A similar exercise conducted with many comparative projects would reveal a similar convergence in practice. Often the reader of comparative research must hunt hard, perhaps unsuccessfully, to locate a researcher's core assumptions regarding units of analysis, country selection, balancing 'etic' and 'emic' concerns, and so forth. Even though lack of epistemological or ontological clarity (Hall, 2003) need not result in poor research *per se*, clarity remains desirable for purposes of both exposition and critique: this is what we sought in accounting for the 21 country project, *EU Kids Online* (Livingstone & Hasebrink, 2010).

The key issue addressed by this chapter, and thus the problematic on which I conclude, is the status of the nation itself as the unit of comparative research in the media and communications field. Intriguingly, and despite the arguments against methodological nationalism, the nation appears difficult to transcend (Chernilo, 2006). Researchers still work in their own countries, despite the many flights to attend conferences and the even more numerous international emails. The nation remains a core organising principle for research funding and assessment, and for research dissemination, policy making and public engagement. Shifting the unit from nation to

region, as many European scholars now do, does not solve the problem, for 'the EU is in a constant state of flux: its constitution, its institutions and even (indeed, especially) its borders are as inherently unstable as its political, economic and regulatory complexion' (Charles, 2009: 9). Most obviously, media remain national in important respects, still strongly shaped by national histories, cultures, economies, politics and language, the current 'globalization fever' notwithstanding (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002: 321).

Sociologically too, the notion of the nation persists, however ambivalently, being neither wholly inadequate nor finally obsolete. For Kohn (1989b: 94), the status of the nation is, in part, an empirical matter. As he says, 'we learn something about the importance or lack of importance of the nation-state by discovering which processes transcend national boundaries and which processes are idiosyncratic to particular nations or to particular types of nations'. In other words, to compare nations is not necessarily to commit the 'sin' of methodological nationalism, provided it is an explicit strategy not to presume the nation's importance but rather to test it. In the field of media and communications, we can point to illustrative instances of successful media projects that fit all four types of comparative model as well as their various combinations – for example, studies of 'glocalisation', which ask how a global media phenomenon is appropriated in diverse national contexts (Robertson, 1992), arguably seek a hybrid position between the cross-national and transnational.

That the nation is hardly defunct is a point Beck recognises when he moves the argument away from an attack on its very existence and towards *methodological cosmopolitanism*. This, he says, 'implies becoming sensitive and open to the many universalisms, the conflicting contextual universalisms' (Beck & Sznaider, 2006: 13). Or, as Bohman (1991: 143) argues, we must combine both contextualised interpretation, which requires the researcher to draw on insider knowledge and rational interpretation, which requires the researcher to draw on outsider knowledge (see also Marcus, 1995). These are indeed desirable requirements for any research project, but they do not in and of themselves obviate the continued value of the nation as unit of analysis.

Reframing 'the nation' in media and communications research

I have argued that, albeit now jostling for place with the supranational and transnational frames and notably changed in its significance because of globalisation, the nation remains a valuable analytic category in media and communications research. This is not to claim it as a fundamental category, and certainly it cannot be regarded simplistically. Further, it should be understood neither in essentialist terms nor in normative terms. In other words, it is insufficient as an account of that which falls within its borders or in marking a distinction against what lies beyond them. It is also, I suggest, beyond the remit of media and communications research to advocate the normative value of the nation in general (one might say the same regarding the alternatives - imperialism, cosmopolitanism, universalism). In this final section, therefore, I propose a reflexive, self-critical and strategic reframing of the nation as an analytic and methodological category in media and communications research as part of a wider repertoire that also encompasses the sub- and trans-national. To that end, I draw on Robins (2001) useful comparison among three interpretations of the nation,

focused on *ethnos*, *cosmos* and *demos* respectively, in order to recognise the merits and dangers of each and, ultimately, to favour the third.

In the '*ethno-cultural*' conception of nation, primordial conceptions of ethnic identity and culture are mapped onto the boundaries and history of the nation. This promises to resolve contemporary problems of trust and efficacy by defending a homogeneous imagined community of belonging and commitment. But its focus on solidarity as the essence of the nation faces the problem of rising global flows, diversification and transnational migration that undermines its revisionist history prioritising stability, continuity and coherence. Notwithstanding its problems, it seems that patterns of difference observed in media and communications tend to be interpreted according to the ethno-cultural nation. Cross-national patterns in media consumption, interpretation or diffusion, for instance, are each mapped onto such intrinsic cultural factors as religious or other values in public and private spheres, myths and narrative traditions, or historically embedded conventions of authority and trust. Yet the critiques of this model rightly undermine these efforts, hence the often hesitant or vague explanations offered by such comparative work, and the difficulty, even inappropriateness, of drawing on this approach in grounding a new project from the outset.

Conceptions of the *cosmopolitan nation* or nation as *community of communities* embraces diversity and difference, celebrating contrast and flux so as to recognise – and often to advocate – a cosmopolitan multi-culturalism within and across borders. In media and communications, it sometimes seems that researchers following this approach find it sufficient to observe diversity, characterising the apparent swirl of media cultures across place and time without necessarily accounting for why particular phenomena take root in some places and not others. Arguably, for the community of communities approach, it is the overall kaleidoscope that is interesting and significant, although this may not develop theory very far. Indeed, this approach is more effective as a critique of ethno-cultural approaches and, indeed, of their opposite (i.e. universalistic approaches, whether deliberate or unthinking) than it is in offering a positive account of particular societies and the role of media and communications in shaping and being shaped by them.

In between these extremes is the *civic/democratic nation*, the notion of nation as *demos*. Robins (2001: 82) terms this *civic nationalism*, and he includes here Habermas' (1998; see also 1994, 2006) notion of *constitutional patriotism*. While eschewing ethnic solidarity as an integrative force, not least for its conservative and potentially prejudiced assumptions that tend to impose intra-national homogeneity and ignore cross-national similarities or flows, a degree of integration – descriptive and normative – is acknowledged to adhere to the political institutions and administrative culture of the nation. Emphasising neither the importance of belonging nor, necessarily, the merits of transcending the nation, this rather cool, non-visceral assertion of citizenship recognises pragmatically that, for historically particular reasons, nation-states have emerged as the dominant means by which 'access to resources, rights and to the institutions of political participation' (Tambini, 2001: 196).

Thus analysis of media and communications on this approach focuses on such issues as social inclusion or exclusion, of the instantiation (or otherwise) of social, cultural and civic rights and obligations and of the relation between media institutions (e.g.

public service broadcasting, the online civic commons, freedom of speech) and media cultures. Regarding some research projects, one may even agree with Hantrais (1999: 97) that the choice of nation as unit of analysis 'is relatively easy to justify in studies where the criterion for inclusion is their membership of an international organisation, such as the European Union (EU), the Council of Europe, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)', and so forth. This is not, disingenuously, to pass responsibility for a research design to the funding body or target of dissemination; rather, it is recognise that these organisations have power, they institutionalise structures and processes that may shape the object of study, and they operate with categories and policies that may be amenable to theoretical critique and evidence-led recommendations. Nor is it to celebrate these institutions and the civic/democratic spaces they enable or impede; if the nation-state has its critics, so too do the international and supranational agencies that, in a globalising world are beginning to overtake them – for these are, arguably, less competent, less legitimate, certainly less participatory even than the still-powerful civil and political organisations at the national level, including governments (Habermas, 1998).

It may be observed that each approach to the nation suggests a methodology for comparative research. In the ethno-cultural approach, maximal difference in countries or cultures may serve best, although thorough contextualisation is required to understand what the observed findings mean. In the cosmopolitan approach, key spaces of intersection, crossing points or zones of tension and contrast provide a way in, with the nation merely a locus for research fieldwork. For the civic/democratic approach, nations may be selected according to their shared institutional characteristics (as in Hallin and Mancini's selection of Western democracies) or, for Habermas and others, because of their common institutional structure or role (such a shared membership of the EU). Here contextualisation, while vital for interpreting findings and avoiding misunderstandings, is not necessarily more important than standardisation, for it is in cross-national, standardised terms that a supranational organisation such as the EU operates. For example, one might examine the connections between certain supranational parameters (for example, GDP, population density, internet penetration, media ownership), organisational sites of power (key actors, legal frameworks, structures of accountability, modes of democratic participation) at national and supranational levels and, last, the object of research itself (for example, freedom of expression in the press, inequalities in broadband access and consumption, patterns of children's internet use). Although primordial structures of ethnic identity and values may underpin observed connections, and although transnational flows of people or media will undoubtedly complicate and qualify observed connections, neither of these need be central to an analysis of the civic institutions and practices of democratic nations. Nor need this approach make blind or unthinking assumptions about the primacy or homogeneity or boundedness of the nation. The nation-state, as an analytic category has, I have argued, an established settlement with a long legacy and considerable reach but, to be sure, an uncertain future.

Finally, it should be noted that while each approach offers a different way ahead for critical research in media and communications (Cunningham, 2003), it is the civic/democratic approach that most concertedly conducts research not only to understand but also to inform, advise and even influence media and communications stakeholders and policy makers. Comparative research is particularly useful here in

identifying how matters could be and are variously arranged otherwise, thereby permitting critical engagement in terms understood by policy makers – via the discourse of best practice, lessons learned, transferable knowledge, and so forth. Since in the civic/democratic approach, countries are selected for their common national or supranational civic structures of power, research recommendations can be constructively directed; consider the use of research, often comparative, in supporting arguments for strengthening social and digital inclusion, communication rights, voices from the margins, freedom of information and new forms of mediated citizenship, among others (Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2006; Hamelink & Hoffmann, 2008; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2008). This is, I suggest, a comparative agenda to be pursued collaboratively within the media and communications field, premised on both identifying common ground and also recognising difference, and on targeting structures of power in order to take advantage of both national and transnational opportunities for social change.

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