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A change of lens: A call to compare media in China and Russia

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Abstract

This article makes what Western scholars call a “leap in the dark” by suggesting that, instead of comparing the “West” with the “Rest”, we should compare the “East” with the “East”- in this case the media in China with the media in Russia. We have identified three blind spots in previous comparative media research that have resulted in turning attention away from comparative study of China and Russia. These are: (1) ahistoricism; (2) misunderstanding the relationship between the state and the market; and (3) understanding national media and communication as closed and homogenous systems. We propose three remedies: (1) historicizing comparative media studies¹; (2) re-conceptualizing the relationship between the state and media markets; and (3) rethinking the dynamics between the global, the national and the media.

Keywords: Russia, China, comparative media research

¹ We use ‘comparative media studies’ as a well-established term in communication research, but we also want to emphasize the role of communication.

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Comparative research was once called the “extended and extendable frontier” of the communication field (Blumler, et al., 1992, p. 2). From *Four Theories of the Press* (Siebert, et al., 1956) to *Comparatively Speaking* (Blumler, et al., 1992), to *Comparing Media Systems* (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), the frontier has indeed been extended. According to Hanitzsch (2008, pp. 113-114), the paradigm that underlies *Four Theories* is that of the “US” and the “rest”, which was superseded in the 1970s by the new, “second stage” paradigm of comparative research, that of the “North” and the “South”, with the recognition of uneven communication between different parts of the world and the introduction of the concept of media imperialism. The mid-1980s saw the emergence of a third paradigm, that of the “West” and the “East”, which has retained its vitality to date, as exemplified by some of the most important works in this field (e.g., Esser & Pfetsch, 2004; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Hanitzsch, (2008, p. 114) further suggests that a new paradigm is already being born, that of the “West” and the “Global”. While we salute this, we argue in this article that one paradigm is still missing, that of the “East” and the “East”². Our aim is to justify this new paradigm, comparing what has not been compared before: media and communication in China and in Russia.

Although scholars have acknowledged the longstanding Western-centric orientation of comparative media research (e.g., Benson, 2010; Gunaratne, 2005; Hallin & Mancini, 2004;

² The East is used here metaphorically, as in “Go West, young man”, potentially opening up new opportunities. We are fully aware of the contended issues when using the “East”-“West” dichotomy. See, for example, Gunaratne, 2005, pp. 14-17. We are not arguing either that Russia, for example, has no European part. We are simply using the idea of the “East” to show that we still lack even the concepts we need for this kind of change or re-orientation of our research.

Hardt, 1988; Livingstone, 2003; Nerone, 1995; Oates, 2006; Sparks, 1998; Szpunar, 2012; Yin, 2008), aside from a few exceptions (Curran & Park, 2000; Downing, 1996; Gunaratne 2005; Hallin & Mancini, 2012; Sparks, 1998, 2008), insufficient effort has been made to correct this orientation. This bias manifests itself at the empirical level in terms of which cases are selected for comparison, at the methodological level in terms of how comparisons are conducted, and at the theoretical level in terms of what conceptual frameworks are utilized. As Spivak (2009) points out in her reflection on comparative literature, comparison is “never a question of compare and contrast, but rather a matter of judging and choosing” (p. 609). What to compare, and why, is always a critical decision that needs to be made in a reflexive manner.

Drawing attention to Russia and China is not a question of analysing two more cases within the existing frameworks, but will highlight the blind spots of the current research agenda and point to possible new directions. In the following we critically review previous theoretical work which we have found relevant to our argument that Chinese and Russian media should be compared, and go on to present empirical evidence (when available) to support our argument and to inform a future research agenda. We have identified biases in comparative research that will be redressed by means of three approaches to turning attention away from the West to look at these two “Eastern” countries. These approaches are: (1) historicizing comparative media studies from non-Western perspectives; (2) re-conceptualizing the relationship between the state and media markets; and (3) rethinking the unit of comparison below and above the national level.

Historicizing comparative media studies

In comparative research, units of analysis are compared across time and space. As

Blumler, McLeod and Rosengren write (1992), comparative research implies the interpenetration of space and time, i.e., comparing geographic systems almost as if they were frozen in time, presenting them more like snapshots than like moving films (pp. 7-8). The frozen moment, while enabling comparison across spatial boundaries, connotes the withdrawal of temporality; that is, social phenomena that should be explained as the outcome of a historical process have “now been transformed into the explanation’s premise” (Harootunian, 2005, p. 24). Many comparative studies end up privileging space over time in their failure to account for the historical experiences that produce the frozen moment. Harootunian contends that such insensitivity to the mediation of time has led to the “transmutation of space into a non-place, without duration and context” (p. 29).

We argue that, by bringing Russia and China into comparative research, we would reactivate the temporal dimension in communication studies, and would do so for two reasons. First, the historical trajectory of media and communication in Russia and China diverge so significantly from the familiar “norm” of Western Europe and North America that any analysis focusing exclusively on spatial differences is bound to be inadequate. Also, despite the historical parallels and direct connections between Russia and China in their Communist eras, the two countries have embarked in recent years on very different routes and cannot be easily lumped together with the label of “post-communist”, which again freezes dynamic processes into static moments.

So how do we account for the past in order to better understand the present? Here we make two propositions. First of all, to historicize comparative research means to understand the varied arrangements of media and communication in respective historical terms rather than as the spatial variations of a universal model. The most obvious historical legacy that

connects Russia and China while also separating them from the “norm” of Western liberal societies is a period of Communism they share (d). Not only are there conceptual and historical parallels between Russian and Chinese media and communication, but also the “Chinese Revolution grew directly out of the Russian Revolution, and remained connected with it, as inspiration or admonition, down to their common moment of truth at the end of the eighties” (Anderson, 2010, p. 60). But, just as democracy takes various forms in different Western countries, we also need to ask whether there is only one form of Communism, or for that matter only one Communist media system.

It is our contention that the Communist legacy needs not only to be acknowledged in the cases of both contemporary Russia and contemporary China, but also to be differentiated between the two countries. What were the similarities and differences between Russian and Chinese media during their Communist eras? How did Lenin’s conception that the Party press should play the roles of propagandist, agitator and organizer lay the foundations for the paradigm of Party journalism in China, which foregrounds the “Party principle” as the essential guideline for journalistic practice? (Zhao, 1998, p. 19; Zhao, 2011, p. 209). Apart from the influence of the Communist press theory in general, there was a period in 1950s China of direct imitation of the Soviet Union, when news agencies and broadcasting were modeled after the Soviet system (Rantanen, 2007, p. 171). However, as Ferdinand (1991) points out, the convergence of Communist regimes in the post-revolutionary era lasted for only a brief period, when communist parties in different countries were all striving to “secure the foundations of the regime through centralization of power and the establishment of public ownership of the means of production” (p. xi). After the first period of consolidation, the absence of any prescribed plan for socialist development compelled the Communist parties in

the Soviet Union and in China to re-examine the ideas and lessons drawn from their earlier paths to power, which were rather different in the two countries. Especially after the break in diplomatic relations in 1960, when the Soviet Union withdrew all its advisers from China, the two forms of Communism increasingly diverged (Ferdinand, 1991). This fact has often been ignored in Western comparative media research, where Soviet and Chinese media have been analysed with reference to a single concept of Communism.

Now the situation is even more complex: China is still nominally a Communist country, while Russia is not. In fact, in China the CCP has carefully studied the “velvet revolution” that took place in some countries of the former Soviet Bloc and has been making every effort to prevent China from moving in the same direction. Brady (2008) observes that Gorbachev’s reform and its outcome was a strong warning sign for the CCP. From the CCP’s point of view, the reforms in the former Soviet Union “succeeded in dismantling or weakening various aspects of the bureaucratic structure, the official ideology, and the active role of the Party in the economy, yet provided nothing to replace them” (Brady, 2008, p. 177). In contrast, the CCP’s strategy has been to maintain the ideological control and to a large extent the legitimacy of the Party through reshaping the economy. Exactly how the CCP was able to do this while the Communist Party in Russia was not is beyond the scope of this paper, but here again historicized comparison will shed important light on the issue, as Anderson (2010) demonstrates in his essay comparing the trajectories of the two revolutions. Anderson did not, however, give much attention to the role that the media and communication play in mobilizing, containing or constituting the changes, and this is a gap that comparative media research can surely be expected to fill.

The second proposition we make to historicize comparative media studies is to focus on

processes of changes rather than being fixated on a teleological view of history. As Downing (1996) points out, a major limitation of Western media theories is that they evolve from and are used to explain a relatively stable political economy. The relative stability of Western societies gives the illusion that they represent the historical endpoint towards which non-Western countries are moving. Sparks (2008, 2010) uses the term *transitology* to refer to research that focuses on the transition of former authoritarian regimes towards the Western model of democracy. He calls this approach “a more sophisticated and scholarly version of the end of history” (Sparks, 2010, p. 558), since *transitologists* believe that, regardless of the history and characteristics of each authoritarian regime, the “twin process of democratic political change and the burgeoning of market economies” will lead transitional societies to the predetermined end of American-style democracy (Sparks, 2008, p. 9).

Russia and China defy the predictions of liberal teleology that all societies are progressing toward liberal capitalism, by taking two different routes away from the Communist era. While Russia started with political liberalization, which resulted in the Communist Party losing control, the Communist Party of China (CCP) has retained its political power and orchestrated the advancement of a “market economy with Chinese characteristics”. Russia is sometimes considered a democratic state, although qualifications such as “new” (Voltmer, 2008), “partial” (Potter et al., 1997), “illiberal” (Zakaria, 2003) “neo-authoritarian” (Becker, 2004) or “semi-authoritarian” (Toepfler, 2013) are often added before the word democracy.

At this historical juncture, the role of the media is more constitutive than instrumental. That is to say, media institutions are not only products or platforms of political struggles, they themselves actively take part in producing the dynamics of politics. In

countries where the hegemony of liberal democracy has become well established, we might be witnessing traditional ideological politics giving place to “the politics of trust” that is based on the specific policy package offered by different political parties (Thompson, 2005, p. 46). Hence mediated visibility is the key to the success of parties and politicians. Where the norm of media’s role in politics is heavily contested, however, media institutions may choose to build alliance with certain political forces by taking strategic position on the ideological spectrum. In Russia, as Burrett (2011, p. 216) writes, since 2000 President Putin has sought to increase state control over the national television, not merely as a means of influencing public opinion, but as a method of political domination over Russia’s elites. Some scholars have argued that in the 1990s the major national TV channels were playing more important role in democratic elections than political parties (Vartanova, 2012). We see this also in a stratified Chinese newspaper industry, where liberal-leaning newspapers like *Southern Weekend* (also known as *Nanfang Weekend*) are aligning themselves not only with the liberal faction of the Party but also with transnational elites in order to “play an increasingly important role in Chinese domestic politics” (Zhao & Xing, 2012, p.31). This is why Roudakova (2012) calls for a process-oriented comparative research which is more attuned to recognizing the *indeterminacy* of social changes. According to Roudakova (2012), a process-oriented approach would be more sensitive to both order-maintaining and order-eroding changes that are particularly useful in theorizing hybrid regimes. We would like to add that this could also be an effective approach to historicize comparative research, as it does not start with a prescription for the direction of change.

Overall, the history of media and communication in both Russia and China needs to be acknowledged not merely as a relevant past, but as a powerful context that shapes the present.

We simply cannot make conclusions based on one frozen moment, on the present without the past; any comparative study has to be historically contextualized, taking into account the similarities and differences in each historical period, and not labelling these periods simply as communism or post-communism, as if they were/are similar everywhere. Further, by focusing on frozen present moment, comparative research implies that the pace of change is similar everywhere, and thus the present becomes the future. This further increases the orientation towards the future, towards how things should be rather than how they are. As a consequence, there is no understanding that social and political change moves at different paces and not always forwards.

Re-conceptualizing the relationship between the state and the market

Benson (2010) points out that one crucial question that comparative research has so far failed to address is “the extent to which even an ‘expanding’ understanding of Western media (beyond the American paradigm) is adequate to fully account for the wide variety of media found in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe” (p. 615). Hallin and Mancini (2004), for example, develop a critical appraisal of the media in North Atlantic countries and point out the incoherence of the “Anglo-American”. Yet, as the authors themselves are aware, since their analytical framework is tied to their eighteen empirical cases drawn exclusively from the West, the basic concepts need to be re-examined in order to apply them to other cases (Hallin and Mancini, 2012). The four elements—media market, political parallelism, professionalism and state intervention—are identified as distinctive variables that affect the freedom and autonomy of the media. The assumption is that the degree of state intervention and political parallelism is negatively correlated with the level of media autonomy, while the development of media markets and professionalism has a positive

correlation with media freedom.

When it comes to studying the arrangement of media and communication in countries like China and Russia, however, it is the interdependence of the market and the state that is more important. First, the state needs a robust media market. In China, media marketization is a state-orchestrated project that was designed to reinforce rather than to undermine the legitimacy of the Party-state. When the economic reform of media started in the late 1970s right after the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese state was facing severe financial and political challenges. Through introducing commercialized financing and encouraging profit making of media organizations, the government was able to gradually shed off the significant fiscal burden of media subsidies. Politically, media commercialization was part and parcel of the overall economic reform, which was deemed by the CCP as the only way forward to retain its legitimacy. It was no coincidence that media marketization in China further accelerated under the government mandate in the early 1990s (Chan, 1993), when the Party-state again was trying to survive a legitimacy crisis in the aftermath of 1989 student movement and the economic stagnation of the 1980s. In this second wave of intensified marketization, both newspaper and broadcasting industries were encouraged to form consolidated media groups. It was expected that the more concentrated media structure would not only rationalize the allocation of communication resource and improve market efficiency, but also make it easier for the Party to exert centralized control (Zhao, 1998). Indeed, as scholars have pointed out, marketization has strengthened the power of the Party-state's propaganda machine by creating financially viable "Party Publicity Inc." (Lee, et.al, 2006).

In Russia and in China television is primarily owned by the state, but its revenues are dependent on advertising by private companies. The state needs the market, and cannot

maintain its ownership without private revenues. The state also has its own extensive media holdings and state news agencies have not changed their ownership structures (Becker, 2004; Rantanen & Vartanova, 1995). Further, as Vartanova (2012) observes, neither the Russian state nor the Russian public have supported clear and transparent rules for the media, as they have for other political and social institutions. However, Vartanova (2012, pp. 132-134) is able to identify three different stages in post-Soviet state-media relations, in each of which the state has played a different role. We can clearly see that it is not only the media that have changed, but the state as well. In Russia, all major television networks have come under the ownership of the state or industrial groups with close economic ties to the presidential administration (Burrett, 2011).

Second, when marketization took place in countries where the state used to control all the media outlets, the allocation of communication resource was the combined function of political power and market force. In other words, it is not about less or more state intervention to the extant media market. Rather, the market was only set up within the parameters determined by the state and the mechanism of state control evolves as media marketization develops.

In the case of China, it is almost impossible to talk about the state and the political party separately, and the role of the Party-state in the organization and regulation of the media is far more pervasive than “intervention” (Zhao, 2012). Over the years, the CCP has developed a sophisticated control mechanism, which is still evolving as both global and domestic media landscapes continue to change. The power of the Party-state is exercised at multiple levels. First and foremost it is direct political control of the orientation, resources and personnel of media production. In addition to general guidelines requiring the cultural industries to

contribute to “developing socialist advanced culture” and “maintaining a harmonious society”, directives addressing specific issues are frequently issued by the Party’s Department of Publicity and relevant state ministries. Control of the recruitment, promotion and firing of personnel is another effective means by which the Party deploys its disciplinary power (Zhao, 2008, pp. 28-30).

In Russia, following the period of disintegration of both the Russian state and the media system in the 1990s, the state has been able to reconsolidate its power since the start of the new millennium through “centralization, standardization of structure and selective isolation from global influence” (Koltsova, 2008, p. 62). Aside from direct state control, private media companies appoint top managers who meet with the approval of the state authorities.

Vartanova (2012) calls the present Russian media model a commercialized statist model in which there is a strong relationship between the media, journalists and the state, legitimized by a shared belief in the decision-making role of the state (or of state agencies).

What also need to be emphasized are the important differences between the commercialized statist model of media in the two countries, due to the historical divergence mentioned in the previous section. Compared with the ruling party in Russia, the CCP still has not resolved the tension between operating a capitalist economy yet still calling itself Communist. Although recent leadership has resorted to rhetoric ranging from ‘harmonious society’ to ‘Chinese dream’ to circumvent the ideological contradiction, the party cannot turn its back against the socialist and revolutionary legacy, which is bound to disrupt any perfect alliance between the political and business elites.

Overall, the misunderstanding of the relationship between the state and the markets seems to be an Achilles heel of comparative studies so far undertaken by Western researchers in

media and communication studies. This is the point whereas normative assumptions about an ideal situation masquerade as a depiction of how things actually are. In fact, the assumed antagonistic relationship between the market and the state is so deeply rooted in Western thinking that it not only overshadows any analysis comparing the “West” with the “East”, but also results in bias in understanding Western media themselves, as many scholars of critical political economy have pointed out the instrumental role that the state takes in expanding the private interest of media companies (e.g. Curran, 1977; Calabrese & Briziarelli, 2011). Hence shifting our focus to countries like China and Russia offers an opportunity to better understand not only what the “West” views as the Other, but also the “West” itself.

Rethinking the dynamics between the global, the national and the local

In most comparative studies, the nation-state is taken for granted as the starting point of analysis, which explains why the label “cross-national” is sometimes synonymous with comparative research (Livingstone, 2003). Beck (2005) criticizes the *methodological nationalism* in social theory for impeding our understanding of important phenomena that are not bounded by the arbitrary context of the nation-state. In media and communication research, from *Four Theories of the Press* to *Comparing Media Systems*, taking the nation-state as the default analytical unit results in losing sight of developments below and above the national level. Although this is not always made explicit, comparing media systems mostly implies that (1) the media within a national boundary are largely homogeneous; (2) the media are defined in national terms, even if we can see various combinations of the local, national and global media inside one country. It also tends to concentrate on the old media and media institutions often ignoring non-institutional forms of communication from below (e.g., Rantanen, 2005, Rantanen, 2013). We contend here that, by examining the cases of Russia

and China, we can see more clearly that media systems and nation-states do not always go hand in hand, that media systems are not completely determined by national political systems and that all forms of communication are not systematized.

First, Russia and China are both vast countries where spatial and temporal differences within national boundaries should not be ignored. Even though both countries have a statist tradition of centralizing control over the media, especially during the Communist era, neither time nor space are fully controlled. As Harootunian (2005) reminds us, there always exist “simultaneously differing forms of temporalization within a single space, despite the nation-states’ effort to obliterate them” (p. 25). In China, the modernization project has been an uneven process across the urban and the rural, the coastal areas and the hinterland. Media ecology in a global metropolis such as Beijing, Shanghai or Guangzhou is very different from that in second-tier cities in the hinterland. In calling for a geographic turn in Chinese media research, Sun (2010) also highlights the reconfigured scales of media production, consumption, representation and regulation as the result of uneven modernization. Given “the dramatic disparities between north and south, east and west, coast and inland, and finally, but most importantly, rural and urban” (Sun, 2010, p. 540), it is increasingly difficult and deceptive to talk about a single national media system. Ma (2001) uses the concept of “satellite modernities” to refer to the sites that mediate between global networks and developing localities. Well-connected global cities like Shanghai and Hong Kong are “reproducing, hybridizing and domesticating simplified imaginations of the developed West, which less developed cities and territories in the same regions also consume” (Ma, 2012, p.291). From this perspective, cities or regions may be more productive sites of analysis than the nation-state.

Koltsova (2008) critiques the dominant notion of the nation-state in media and communication studies that presupposes “the coincidence of the territorial, political, ethnic, and cultural boundaries of the entity they seek to describe” (p. 53), which is a predominantly Western European phenomenon. Such a narrow understanding cannot account for the cultural and ethnic complexity in many non-Western countries. Vartanova (2009, p. 110) observes that Russia’s present “media system” is very different from the pyramid model of the Soviet period. With the emergence of regional and local markets, the horizontal structure of the Soviet media system has been partly replaced by a more vertical structure. In Russia, television is still the main national medium reaching most of the population, no matter where they are located, but there is no longer a national press. There is also a huge discrepancy between the big cities and the countryside in terms of access to media and communications. One could even argue that both Russia and China are too large to have a single media system, but actually have many, or sometimes no system at all.

Second, nation-based comparative analysis is further called into question when we take into account the negotiation between local, national and global forces in configuring media production and consumption. From the global popularity of reality TV (Waisbord, 2004) to the increasingly transnational production of Hollywood (Miller et al, 2005), the ways in which media production and distribution are organized are less and less confined within national boundaries. Erni and Chua (2005) raised the intriguing question of how the whole idea of “domestic media” is challenged, “when local media producers themselves have actively sought to emulate, and sometimes create, ‘culturally pirated versions’ of western production codes and programming?” (p. 2). The Chinese film industry is an example of this phenomenon. Ever since China, in the late 1990s, re-opened its film market to first-run

Hollywood movies on a revenue-sharing basis, Hollywood has become the model of successful film making that the domestic film industry tries to emulate. Typical Hollywood strategies, from aggressive marketing campaigns to the pursuit of visual spectacles, from cross-promotion to product placement (Wasko, 2003), have been adopted by Chinese filmmakers. Needless to say, the adaptation of the Hollywood model by the Chinese film industry is mediated by other key factors such as state and local audiences, but if we confine our analysis to the nation-state, we miss a significant dimension of power that shapes the media landscape.

On the other hand, during different historical periods, “domestic” media in China and Russia developed global outlook and ambition that went beyond national boundaries. We need to remember that both Russia and China have an obvious advantage in their size and thus a huge domestic media market that supports a middle path between export reliance and import substitution (Lin, 2006, p. 263). The Soviet Union was a formidable exporter of films, of television and radio programmes to former Communist countries, itself practicing a version of media or cultural imperialism—not through the ownership of media, but through its political presence in other communist countries. After the collapse of the state-owned media system there was a period of decline in film and TV programme production, but today the Russian film and TV industry has again become a significant player (Rantanen, 2002, pp. 86-87). While US-produced films still dominate the Russian market, the market share of domestically produced films has increased significantly. As Vartanova (2009) observes, today Moscow’s media executives have more in common with their counterparts in London, Paris and New York than with similarly titled executives in Russia’s outer provinces (p. 98).

Taking into account the size of Russia and China and their integration into global

capitalism, we face a situation where many earlier theories, such as those of media imperialism and de-colonialism, that start with methodological nationalism do not catch the complexity of the relationship between the local, the national and the global. As Erni and Chua (2005) point out, “a general situation has existed in the field for over four decades, whereby western methodologies and epistemologies have been largely accepted as guiding lights and “the local” was accepted as the recipient or the context of their glow”(p. 2). However, more often than not, the guiding light only illuminates very limited areas, while leaving in darkness much of China and Russia.

Digital media further calls into question the validity of nation-based analysis. In contrast to China, the Internet in Russia is currently not being systematically filtered. Many consider Russia as a relatively closed regime that pursues an open Internet policy (Toepfl, 2013; Oates, 2013; Etlings, et al, 2010). While Putin was able to put through a series of measures that tightened the control of political censorship over the mass media, and in particular over television (Koltsova 2006), the Internet has so far remained officially uncensored. Therefore compared with China, Russia perhaps has more political space for activism, and Internet activism in Russia is probably more connected with social movements in other parts of the world (Yang, 2014). In China, however, the Internet is a vibrant domestic communicative space despite heavy censorship. The considerable difference between political discussions online and that in mainstream traditional media, as well as the highly contested and at times fragmented nature of online discourses themselves further challenge a national understanding of a “media system”.

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that the biases propagated by previous comparative media

studies have dominated research since World War II and prevented us from taking account of significant changes in Russia and China. We have critically reviewed previous studies and suggested a radical departure from the previous models used in comparative studies. Not only are we calling for better historically contextualized understanding of two largest countries in the world per se, we also believe that they offer unique opportunities to reflect on limitations of the dominant framework in comparative research. The change in geography does not *as such* change our thinking if we do not simultaneously open it to different sets of new concepts. While extending the geographical scope (“going East”) of our research, we need to remove the spectacles we wear when carrying out research on Western media. Continuing to wear these spectacles tends to result in using an idealized Western model to measure the past and present of countries outside the “West”. In this article, we have critically reviewed earlier concepts and theories applied to comparative research in general and question their applicability when new avenues of research are opened. Indeed, there is no point to add new countries to the list if it only means applying the same concepts trying to force empirical materials support them.

We have identified three major limitations of the dominant framework that a China-Russia comparison could help redressing. First of all, our emphasis on historicizing comparative research goes beyond calling for historical analysis only. Contemporary media and communication landscape of Russia and China needs to be studied within their respective historical context. As much as we tend to take “frozen moments” for the convenience of comparison, the present can never be severed from either the past or the future. It is our proposition that on the one hand, we need to compare and contrast the relevancy of key historical legacies such as communism and statism in Russia and China. On the other hand,

we should be wary of the teleological view that assumes whatever the divergence is at the moment, the two countries are transitioning toward the same historical end point. Ong (2011, p. 11) uses the concept of worlding to identify the projects and practices that “instantiate some vision of the world in formation” (see also Spivak, 1999). On the most general level, this is one of the key issues in our article. By picking two countries that do not fit in with the existing model, we hope to activate a view of history that foregrounds changes and processes.

Our second point is narrower, that comparing Russia and China would help re-conceptualizing the relationship between state and market in shaping the institutional arrangement of media. We point to evidence that indicates the power of the state as well as interdependence between state and market in both countries. Such re-conceptualization not only sheds light on media in other non-Western countries, but also reveals the serious limitation of the dominant framework, which takes for granted an antithetical relationship between state and market, even in explaining media in Western liberal countries. The third issue that we examined has to do with the validity of a systematic view of media and the analytical units for comparison. Once we acknowledge the stratification of media and communication below the national level, especially in large and diverse countries like Russia and China, we cannot help wondering if smaller units such as a city or a region are needed when conducting comparative research. In the meantime, both media institutions and communication activities are spilling over national boundary to interact with supranational or global forces, which again point to the problem with only comparing national media systems.

We are fully aware that this article is only the starting point for a new research agenda. We have raised more questions than we can adequately address in one single article. So why do we need what Sassen (2009) calls “digging in the shadows cast by blinding illumination of

canonical works and master categories” (p. 115)? One of the reasons for the general reluctance of academics to go beyond the comfort zones of their own expertise, derived from their ‘own’ countries, is that comparative research is conducted to a considerable extent as if “out of (one’s own familiar) bounds”—or at least “across bounds”, or involving a “leap in the dark”, into the relatively unknown (Blumler et al., 1992, pp. 7-8). A profound qualitative analysis requires the researcher to be, at least to a certain extent, an expert on every country involved. To study countries without any previous knowledge of them and claim that studying more than one country at a time somehow internationalizes one’s research raises an important issue about the de-colonization of academia. Shome (2009, pp. 714-716) makes an important comment on de-Eurocentrism and de-Westernization. According to her, neither of these necessarily translates into decolonization of knowledge, politics or imagination.

In our view, de-Eurocentrism and de-Westernization are not enough, but we also need to decolonize communication research by making comparisons between non-Western countries as legitimate as comparisons between the “West” and the “Rest” currently are. This would mean that comparisons between countries like Russia and China would no longer be considered “leaps in the dark” or “digging in the shadows”, but would have the place they deserve in comparative communication studies. More than this, concepts and theories can surely be open enough to allow us to carry out research with open eyes instead of wearing spectacles that only magnify what is near. The world is changing, and comparative research needs to become more cosmopolitan before it again fails to see the changes taking place in the world.

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