

## Paolo Mancini on the value of comparative research for studying new media and populist politics



*With controversy over election upsets and the spread of fake news, the media's role in politics is currently under the spotlight in more than one country. International comparative media systems research has developed significantly in the last decade as a tool for studying the relationship between media and politics. In an interview conducted on December 2, 2016, LSE MSc student Michael Moss asks Professor Paolo Mancini of the Università degli Studi di Perugia what 'new' media means for the field, whether media systems are implicated in the rise of 'populist' politics and about the role of academic research in informing*

*policy.*

### What is the value of studying media systems comparatively?

More and more I believe that – not just on the field of media – comparative research is important to understand reality. There is a wonderful statement by Giovanni Sartori, an important political scientist. He says that someone who knows just one country, doesn't know anything. That means that if you only know your own country, you are not able to understand your own country. You have to compare your own country with some other reality to better grasp your own reality. The more I do research the more I find this is true.

Let me give you an example. We are carrying out research into media and corruption and we are comparing seven countries in Europe: Italy, the United Kingdom (UK), France, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Latvia. It came out that there is an enormous difference in the way in which media in each country cover the issue of corruption. If I look only at British corruption, it looks natural that this is the way media have to cover corruption. However, a lot of media coverage about corruption in the UK is about corruption in other countries. While if I look at Hungary or Romania, it is on national corruption. If I compare the coverage of Romania, Slovakia and France to the coverage of the UK, then I can understand a lot about how media works in the UK, how corruption works in the UK and how media work in Slovakia. So it is an absolute necessity to go comparative to understand your own reality.

We did the study *Comparing Media Systems*, which was a comparative study, and since then I am more and more persuaded that to understand one single reality you have to compare that reality with something else. So [comparative study] is an epistemological way to do research and to understand how society works. I am persuaded that it is an important tool.

***Comparing Media Systems* was published in 2004, the same year that Facebook launched. How does 'new' media impact on our ability to study media systems comparatively?**

Let me say two things. Firstly, in *Comparing Media Systems* we didn't pay any attention to 'new' media. It took us nearly seven years to write this book and when we started to work on it in 1997 'new' media did not exist (or had just appeared). Also when the book was finished, 'new' media was not as important as it is today.

Secondly, if I look at the situation today, I don't see any important comparative research on 'new' media. There is a lot of research based on single-country 'new' media but very little research comparing 'new' media in different countries. Why is that? For different reasons: First of all because research on 'new' media has original data. It is much easier to get data for 'new' media than to get data for legacy media. So you don't have to look at other data because there is enough

to interpret for your own country. This is a problem. There is a little research. Secondly, comparative research on 'new' media is more difficult than comparative research on legacy media. Because there are so many 'new' media you have an enormous amount of big data. How can you work comparatively on big data? This has been done very rarely because it is difficult. I think there are methodological difficulties but also real difficulties in carrying out research on 'new' media comparatively. I have not done it because I am not a specialist in 'new' media.

However, it would be very interesting to look at the level of [political] partisanship of legacy media. How is the level of partisanship in Mediterranean countries (polarised pluralist countries) reflected in 'new' media or is it reflected at all? It would be very interesting to look at the way in which 'new' media reflect legacy media or not. You have to do this comparatively because otherwise you are not able to measure the level of political parallelism in legacy media and 'new' media. It would also be very interesting to establish whether political parallelism was a product of legacy media or whether it is still a problem in 'new' media. It could show that political parallelism is something that is seated in the political culture of a country. Probably yes, it is situated in the political culture of a country that worked up to twenty years ago and still works in 'new' media today.

**One of the central themes of your research is the relationship between media, politics and electoral campaigns. To what extent, if at all, are media systems implicated in the rise of populist politics in the United States and Europe?**

Thanks for this question. I like it a lot. It allows me to express my opinion on the issue of populism. I do not like the word populism. Everyone today in Europe wants to work on populism because it is fashionable. I think that this fashion is a consequence of the development of media systems because the development of media systems – both legacy media and in particular television but also 'new' media – allows politicians to address citizens directly. Without passing through the mediation of journalists, wire services or political parties, politicians today are able to address citizens without a party or political organisations. Look at Trump. Trump ran against his own Republican Party and won the election because he was able to address citizens directly. And to address citizens directly you have to talk their languages, to talk about their own problems.

However, I don't think that what we call populism today is the old populism. It is something completely new. It is a consequence of the enormous development of media systems that are no longer mediated through social structures: the media, the journalists, political parties and so on.

When we invented the word populism there were strong political organisations and there were leaders that were against those already-existing organisations. Today's situation is completely different. You don't need organisations anymore; you can talk to citizens directly. So I would prefer to talk of 'populist-style' rather than of populism. Populism is a discourse and a style of communication. It is crowded with populist ideas but not necessarily. It is a way for someone to address citizens. Can we use the word populism that was invented for something that took place fifty or sixty years ago and apply it to today's situation? I am not sure about that. Maybe we have to invent a new word to address the specific way in which politicians address citizens directly.

However, I think that what we call populism today – even if it is not the right word- is the direct consequence of the enormous development of legacy media, primarily television but also 'new' media. It is both a product and a consequence. So yes, what we call populism today is directly linked to the media.

**Your current research is on media and corruption, and forms a part of the European Commission's project *Anticorruption Policies Revisited: Global Trends and European Responses to the Challenge of Corruption (ANTICORRP)*. What is the role of academics and academic research in supporting policy development?**

Hard question. I am pessimistic about that. When I started my academic career, one of the catch-words was to address and involve policy-makers in our research findings. The issue is that policy-

makers, officials and politicians live in a completely different world. They have completely different needs and are under the pressures of different elements compared to us.

So what can we do? Our mission can be indirect. We can build up a culture, a culture of legacy. But I don't think that our research will be directly able to effect the positions of policy-makers, politicians, officials and so on. We live in two different worlds affected by different needs and pressures. We work with different logics. Our role is important but in indirect ways. We can construct a general culture and framework of cultural assumptions on which decisions can be based. And then, little by little, it may be that our findings can have an effect, but not directly. Even with regard to the project *Anticorruption Policies Revisited*, I don't think that it will have any direct influence on policy-making making in Europe. But probably, little by little, something will pass from us to policy-makers.

*This post gives the views of the author and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

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