Typology of Media Systems

Summary and Keywords

Typologies are a central tool of comparative analysis in the social sciences. Typologies identify common patterns in the relationships among elements of media systems and wider social systems, and serve to generate research questions about why particular patterns occur in particular systems, why particular cases may deviate from common patterns, and what the consequences of these patterns may be. They are important for specifying the context within which particular processes operate, and therefore for identifying possible system-level causes, specifying the scope of applicability of theories, and assessing the validity of measurements across systems. Typologies of media systems date to the publication of *Four Theories of the Press*, which proposed a typology of authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility and Soviet Communist media systems. Hallin and Mancini’s typology of media systems in Western Europe and North America has influenced most recent work in comparative analysis of media systems. Hallin and Mancini proposed three models differentiated on the basis of four clusters of variables: the development of media markets; the degree and forms of political parallelism; journalistic professionalism; and the role of the state. Much recent research has been devoted to operationalizing these dimensions of comparison, and a number of revisions of Hallin and Mancini’s model and proposals for alternative approaches have been proposed. Researchers have also begun efforts to develop typologies including media systems outside of Western Europe and North America.

Keywords: media system, typology, comparative analysis, journalism, media policy, political communication, measurement

The Function of Media System Typologies

Typologies of media systems have been fundamental to comparative analysis in media studies since the publication of *Four Theories of the Press* (1956). Systematic research developing and employing such typologies has expanded greatly since the late 1990s.

Typologies, in general, have been a central tool of comparative social analysis since Aristotle distinguished among democratic and oligarchic constitutions, as well as five varieties of kingship. A type concept, in general, involves a cluster of characteristics, or as St-
inchcombe (1968, pp. 43–47) puts it, a combination of values on different variables, that we conceive of as co-occurring in a regular and patterned way. Type-concepts and typologies are used widely in the sciences: elements in chemistry or diseases in medicine are examples of type-concepts. Type concepts and typologies in social theory identify patterns in social interaction and facilitate theorizing about why particular patterns occur and what their consequences are.

A system, in the most basic definition, is a set of interrelated elements. There are various forms of systems theory, but a basic element of the “systems perspective” is the idea that the elements of a system are defined by their relationships with one another, and therefore cannot be understood without reference to the whole pattern of relationships. A media system is thus a set of media institutions and practices understood as interacting with and shaping one another (see Hallin, 2015; Hardy, 2008, pp. 5–8). Media systems are embedded within wider social, political, economic, and cultural systems. Indeed, in many systems they may not be clearly differentiated; media may be a part of the state, for example, or of the internal structure of an ethnic group. Analysis of types of media systems is therefore often centrally focused on understanding their relationships with other social sub-systems. In practice, most comparative analysis of media systems has focused not on media systems in their totality but on sets of elements related to news media, political communication, and media policy and governance which are seen as particularly closely interrelated, excluding, for example, detailed analysis of cultural industries like the film, music, and video game industries, for which other sets of concepts might be relevant. This focus on the media-politics nexus is related to a tendency to assume that the correct unit of analysis for developing typologies of media systems is the nation-state, though other units of analysis are sometimes employed.

History of Research on Media Systems

The first typology of media systems was proposed by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm in *Four Theories of the Press* (1956). Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm argued that a communication system reflects the structure of the society in which it operates, and that this relationship is determined by philosophical assumptions about human nature, state and society, knowledge, and truth. They elaborated four “concepts of what the press should be and do,” as they expressed it in the subtitle of the book: the authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility and Soviet Communist theories.

The authoritarian theory, they argued, grew out of the absolutist states that prevailed in most of Europe when the printing press was introduced. It was based on the premise that the maintenance of social order depended on centralized state authority and required state control or guidance of communications media. Historically, they argued, this has been the most common model of communication system. The libertarian theory developed in the United States and Britain, was based on the liberal philosophy expressed by writers such as John Milton and J. S. Mill. It was based on the premise that truth should be determined in the “marketplace of ideas,” and that the state should stand aside to allow
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individuals freely to exchange ideas. The social responsibility theory was a modification of the libertarian theory, articulated in the United States and Britain in the years just before the publication of *Four Theories*. It was based on critiques of the libertarian theory which stressed inequality of access to media in the age of large-scale media industries and the possibility that propaganda could overwhelm the rationality on which enlightenment philosophy was based. The social responsibility theory advocated correcting the deficiencies of libertarianism through professionalism, self-regulation, and limited state intervention. The Soviet Communist theory was understood as a variation of the authoritarian theory, in which the state—which incorporated media directly rather than leaving them in private hands—used the media as a tool of social transformation, rather than merely restricting them to prevent disruption of social order. Siebert, Peterson and Schramm considered the Nazi media system to be similar to the Soviet in many ways.

*Four Theories of the Press* has justifiably been subjected to intense criticism over the years. It was based on limited empirical analysis and a small range of cases, and its applicability to systems other than the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union was very limited. It was heavily influenced by the dichotomous thinking typical during the Cold War. Its focus on the contrast between the Soviet system and “our own” (p. 144) liberal system left little room for the actual variation of media systems across the world. It also left considerable ambiguity about whether the typology was really a typology of theories of the press—that is of philosophical or ideological systems—or of actual media systems as institutional structures and patterns of interaction. While it announced that “to see the differences between press systems in full perspective,… one must look at the social systems within which the press functions,” it quickly narrowed that question, proclaiming that, “in the last analysis the difference between press systems is one of philosophy (p. 2).” The latter perspective resulted in the *Four Theories of the Press* presenting media systems as homogeneous and static, since a single philosophic orientation was assumed to guide every element of the system at all times.

For a long time, *Four Theories of the Press* dominated the limited body of comparative research on media systems, though efforts were made from time to time to revise their typology or propose alternatives, as for example by Altschull (1984) and Picard (1985). Curran (1999) proposed a typology of European media systems based on the way they combined collectivist and market-based approaches, distinguishing among centrally regulated media markets (Britain), mandated markets (Netherlands), regulated markets (Sweden), and mixed systems that would combine public, civic, and market sectors, which were being discussed in Eastern Europe early in the transition from Communism. Sustained research on types of media systems began to take off in the 2000s. Curran and Park’s (2000) anthology, for example, brought together empirically based studies of a wide range of media systems, and it used a common technique to produce a rudimentary typology, distinguishing between democratic and non-democratic, and between neo-liberal and regulated systems, to produce a four-fold classification.
Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) *Comparing Media Systems* set the tone for most post-*Four Theories* research on types of media systems. Hallin and Mancini (2004) analyzed eighteen liberal democracies in Western Europe and North America and argued that three distinct patterns could be identified in the development of Western media systems. The differentiation of these models was organized around four main dimensions of comparison:

1. The development of media markets;
2. The degree and forms of political parallelism, that is, the extent to which the structure of the media system parallels the divisions of the political party and interest group system;
3. Journalistic professionalism; and
4. The role of the state.

Using these dimensions, Hallin and Mancini identify three patterns in the development of Western media systems, which they refer to as the North Atlantic or Liberal model, the North-Central European or Democratic Corporatist model, and the Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist model. The Liberal model is characterized by a dominant role of commercial media: limited state involvement, consistent with the general liberal tendency in political economy; lower (but varying) levels of political parallelism; and a relatively high level of journalistic professionalism. The Democratic Corporatist model is characterized by strong development of mass circulation newspapers, rooted both in commercial and in party newspapers; a history of high political parallelism associated with the role of media connected to parties and organized social groups; a positive role of the state in promoting a pluralistic media system, parallel to the strong welfare states in these systems; and a strong development of journalistic professionalism. The Polarized Pluralist model is characterized by a media system that is more closely tied to the political world than to the market, with high political parallelism; a press that addresses politically active elites more than the mass public; a relatively interventionist role of the state; and a lower level of journalistic professionalism.

Hallin and Mancini’s models are similar to what Max Weber (1949) called “ideal types” in the sense that individual cases—particular national media systems—are seen as corresponding with the ideal types only imperfectly. Weber described an ideal type as a concept formed by “the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present, and sometimes absent concrete individual phenomena (Weber, p. 90).” He went on to add, “it has the significance of a purely ideal limiting concept with which the real situation or action is compared and surveyed for the explication of certain of its significant components (Weber, p. 93).” Models of this type, then, are conceptual tools for comparative analysis of concrete media systems. They are not conceived as the actual phenomena under study, or as the final product of comparative analysis. They highlight both common and divergent patterns between media systems and raise questions about why particular groups of systems may be similar in certain ways, or why a particular case may resemble others in many ways but deviate from a common pattern in one respect or another. Hallin and Mancini thus conceive of...
some systems as mixed systems with respect to their models. They see the United King­
dom, most notably, as a mixed case sharing important characteristics of both the Liberal
and Democratic Corporatist models, and France as sharing characteristics of the Polar­
ized Pluralist and Democratic Corporatist models.

Hallin and Mancini also make the argument, in contrast to Siebert, Peterson, and
Schramm, that media systems are not homogeneous, that different institutions or seg­
ments of a media system may operate according to different logics, depending on such
factors as their market structure or the particular history of their formation. It is common
in Europe, for example, for the print press to be characterized by both commercialism
and political parallelism, while television is characterized by a large public service sector
and a norm of neutrality and internal pluralism.

Hallin and Mancini’s analysis builds on typologies employed in earlier research on West­
er political and economic systems—distinctions, for example, between moderate and po­
larized pluralist party systems (Sartori, 1976); between consensus and majoritarian politi­
cal systems (Lijphart, 1999); and between liberal and democratic corporatist patterns in
policy-making (Katzenstein, 1985). Much of their analysis is concerned with showing how
the historical contexts and political structures analyzed in political science and sociology
are related to the development of media systems.

Another approach to developing typologies is represented by Downey, Mihelj, and König
(2012) who, rather than developing a typology out the empirical analysis of particular
cases, derive a typology from normative theories of the public sphere, distinguishing
among liberal representative or liberal elite, participatory liberal or republican, and dis­
cursive or deliberative models of the public sphere. They then develop measures to opera­
tionalize the key distinguishing characteristics of these models and assess the degree to
which particular media systems reflect the ideal types—finding that they are generally
mixed and not homogeneous, with tabloid and quality newspapers, for example, fitting
different models.

Most typologies assume that media systems can be analyzed at the national level. This
level of analysis usually makes sense, particularly in the analysis of news media and me­
dia policy, which are typically closely tied to national political institutions (it would be less
applicable to the analysis of cultural industries). Media systems are composed of sub-na­
tional units, however, which may vary considerably, and they are also located within
transnational structures that may have considerable influence. Other units of analysis are
therefore possible, as in the case of Chakravartty and Roy’s (2013) comparison of media
systems at the state level in India.
Revisiting Hallin and Mancini’s Analysis of Western Media Systems

Hallin and Mancini’s *Comparing Media Systems*, as many critics noted (e.g., Norris, 2009), did not present much in the way of empirical verification for the proposed typology, particularly quantitative verification based on standardized measures across the different cases. Since the publication of Hallin and Mancini’s work, a considerable amount of research has been devoted to operationalizing their analysis and, more generally, to developing measures that would permit the systematic analysis of patterns of difference among media systems and their consequences. Some of these analyses involve proposed revisions of their typology, or proposals for alternative typologies.

Brüggemann, Engesser, Büchel, Humprecht, and Castro (2014), for example, assembled a set of empirical measures to operationalize important components of Hallin and Mancini’s four dimensions, gathered data on 17 of their original 18 cases (excluding Canada), and did a cluster analysis to identify empirical patterns of similarity and difference among the cases. On the basis of this analysis, they argue that three of Hallin and Mancini’s four dimensions—political parallelism, journalistic professionalism, and the structure of media markets—which they operationalize in terms of the inclusiveness of the press market—can be described as unidimensional, but that the role of the state involves three distinct dimensions: the strength of public broadcasting, ownership regulation, and press subsidies. Their cluster analysis and a subsequent analysis using Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) (Büchel, Humprecht, Castro-Herrero Engesser & Brüggemann, 2016) produced four clusters of cases, rather than Hallin & Mancini’s three. These include a Southern cluster which corresponds closely to Hallin and Mancini’s Polarized Pluralist model and a second cluster, with varying number of cases, depending on the analytical method, which corresponds more or less with Hallin and Mancini’s Liberal model. The cases associated Hallin and Mancini’s Democratic Corporatist model are broken into two clusters. Brüggemann et al. attribute the distinction between these two clusters largely to differences in the role of the state: “Northern” systems have strong press subsidies but little ownership regulation while “Central” countries, Germany, for example, have the reverse. The division of the Democratic Corporatist cluster persists in their second analysis, but the groupings of cases shifts.

The divergence of the findings of Brüggemann et al. from Hallin and Mancini’s original analysis in part probably reflects change over time and raises important questions about how to account for it. Portugal, for example, clearly fit the Polarized Pluralist model in the 1970s, and Netherlands the Democratic Corporatist model in that period, and both have clearly moved, since then, in the direction of the Liberal model. One of the functions of typologies, as Sartori points out, is to permit the mapping of those kinds of changes, and the next task clearly is to explain them. The splitting of Hallin and Mancini’s Democratic Corporatist cluster into two groups of cases on the basis of differing roles of the state is consistent with other work in comparative politics, which often distinguishes between social democratic and liberal corporatist systems, and suggests an important revision of the
original framework. At the same time, the fact that many cases move around between Brüggemann et al.’s two analyses, using different methods, suggest that we should be careful about moving quickly to theoretical conclusions based on particular quantitative studies, which inevitably are selective in the variables they include and the particular indicators of those variables they employ, as well as being tied in most cases to a particular moment in time. One question about this kind of analysis is whether the resulting clusters should be interpreted as distinct *types* in the sense that Weber or Sartori used the term—which implies that the patterns of similarity and difference have deep underlying historical or structural roots—or if they should be seen simply as empirical as clusters of what might be mixed cases.

Esser and Umbricht (2013) looked at the content of political journalism in six of the countries analyzed by Hallin and Mancini, coding newspaper stories for measures of opinion orientation; “objectivity”—that is a hard-facts style and an adherence to norms of “balance”; and negativity in the representation of political actors. They used correspondence analysis, a statistical technique that represents the similarity or difference of the cases in spatial terms. Their analysis produced a triangle fairly similar to the graphic representation in Hallin and Mancini’s analysis, with the U.S. press in one corner, representing what the called a “rational analysis” style of news, with critical, but fact-based reporting and opposing viewpoints; the Italian press in another corner, representing a negative, conflict-oriented, and opinionated style; and Germany and Switzerland, two countries from Hallin and Mancini’s Democratic Corporatist model or Brüggemann et al.’s Central cluster, with a journalistic style that includes both news and opinion, but separates them, and is less negativistic than the Italian. As in Hallin and Mancini’s analysis, Britain and France appear as mixed cases, but their positions shift, with France lying between Italy and the United States, and Britain between the German-speaking countries and Italy.

Considerable new research has also focused on assessing whether, as Hallin and Mancini argued, there was a tendency toward convergence of media systems toward the liberal model, with increased commercialization and the adoption of common professional norms. This research has shown a complex combination of tendencies, but in general has documented that differences among media systems remain persistent. Partisan media, for example, remain persistent in Southern Europe (Albaeck, van Dalen, Jebril, & de Vreese, 2014; van Kempen, 2007), while many Northern European countries, as Aalberg, van Aelst, and Curran (2010) put it in a study of the supply of news and current affairs programming on television, remain “strongly resistant ... to subordinating the needs of democracy to profit-making” (p. 267).

**Typologies of Media Systems Beyond the Western World**

*Four Theories of the Press* purported to offer a universal typology, but its empirical basis lay almost exclusively in three cases, the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union. Hallin and Mancini’s *Comparing Media Systems* confines itself to Western Europe and
North America. Efforts to theorize about types of media systems beyond the Western world are still in their initial phase, but important contributions have been made in recent years.

Efforts to develop typologies of media systems have been, like Hallin and Mancini’s, most typically regional in character. This makes sense in many ways, both practical and theoretical. Geographical regions are often marked by common patterns of historical development that make the cases easier to compare, in the sense that the range of concepts required is smaller than it might be with a more diverse set of cases, and it is often easier for researchers to achieve adequate familiarity with the cases within a region. But comparisons across regions are often extremely valuable. Voltmer’s (2013) discussion of different forms of authoritarianism cuts across regions. Stockman (2013) closes an analysis of what could be called market authoritarianism in Chinese media with comparisons with similar patterns in a number of other regions. Cross-regional comparisons often require a higher level of theoretical groundwork to make possible the identification of comparable cases—media in one-party dominant regimes (South Africa, Turkey, or Mexico under the PRI) might be an example.

Communist media systems persist as a particularly sharp contrast to “Western” models. They are characterized, above all, by the leading role of the party-state in social, economic, and political life, and, as Zhao (2012) points out, western models that assume a separation between state and media and then analyze forms of state intervention are inadequate to conceptualize the nature of such a system. While the party-state does play a leading role in Communist systems, however, these systems are complex, and do not fit the purely top-down, unidimensional model presented in *Four Theories of the Press*, particularly with the introduction of market mechanisms in media and in social life more generally.

Post-communist systems in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union are also clearly distinct from Western models, though with stronger parallels than exist in most other areas of the world, particularly in the case of Eastern Europe. Many scholars of Eastern European media begin by comparing Eastern European systems to Hallin and Mancini’s Polarized Pluralist model, often observing that they combine elements of the Polarized Pluralist model with a high degree of commercialization characteristic of the Liberal model (e.g., Dobeck-Ostrowska, 2012; Perusko, 2013). This comparison has limitations, however, and there have been a number of efforts to develop typologies to distinguish distinct patterns of development among the former Communist states. Mungiu-Pippidi (2013), for example, distinguishes East European systems on the basis of different combinations of three paths of development following the liberalization of media systems, one toward independent media and open competition, one toward media “capture” by political and economic actors who would use them as instruments in pursuit of their interests, and one involving a regression to state censorship.

Latin American media systems can also be seen as combining elements of Hallin and Mancini’s Polarized Pluralist and Liberal systems, reflecting historical influences of the
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Iberian colonial powers and (in the sphere of culture) of France, on the one hand, and of U.S. cultural industries on the other. They are also distinct in important ways from any of the countries in Hallin and Mancini’s analysis. Albuquerque (2012) analyzes some of the limits of Hallin and Mancini’s models for conceptualizing Latin American media systems. Latin American political party systems, for example, do not, for the most part, fit European patterns. Europe has a particular history of “mass parties” with deep social roots, strong organizational structures and distinct ideological identities that led to particular forms of “party-press parallelism,” first identified by the British scholar Colin Seymour-Ure (1974). Latin American political parties, on the other hand, have been, with a few exceptions, more ephemeral, with shallower roots and indistinct ideological identities; and political competition is more personalized. This point no doubt applies to many other parts of the world, including Eastern Europe, and suggests the need for different conceptualizations of the relation between media and politics.

Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez (2014) have proposed what they call the “captured liberal” model as a starting point for the analysis of Latin American media systems. Their analysis points to the fact that Latin American media systems are characterized by the prevalence of private ownership and commercialization, but at the same time tend to be instrumentalized by political and economic actors. Rather than evolving toward autonomous, professionalized media, as many had predicted in the 1980s and 1990s, when most Latin American countries shifted from autocratic to competitive democratic systems and adopted neo-liberal economic policy, Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez argue that commercial media were captured by particular actors who often fused political and economic power. Many media outlets, for example, remain heavily dependent on government advertising, which is allocated at the discretion of political authorities and used as a means of control. Broadcast licenses are often handed out as political patronage, and political actors are often involved in maneuvers to engineer takeovers of privately owned media to shift their political alignments. These mechanisms, in various forms, are employed in much of the world, and as suggested by Mungiu-Pippidi’s analysis of East European systems on the basis of variations in the degree of “capture,” the captured-liberal model may be relevant to the analysis of other parts of the world as well.

The idea of a “captured liberal model,” however, is probably too general to be a fully adequate framework for thinking about Latin American media systems. All Latin American media systems combine a wide range of different types of media, some more or less fully captured, and others more independent or professionalized. There is also an important distinction to be made between dependent and powerful media. Media organizations that have few readers and little advertising base, and that survive by selling publicity to politicians or other actors are a common phenomenon in Latin America, as in much of the world, and clearly fit the concept of capture. Latin American media systems are also characterized, however, by powerful, often transnational media conglomerates, centered around lucrative television markets, which often have the power to intervene in politics, influencing both elections and policy-making. These media might be described as “captured” in the sense that they often serve the interests of their owners rather than of a broader public, but the concept does not apply in the same way to them as to media with
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weak market positions, and the distinction between media controlled by politics and politics controlled by media is obviously extremely important.

Latin America is extremely diverse, and probably, as with Western Europe, a full analysis of its media systems would require identifying a number of distinct patterns. Chile and Uruguay, for example, have highly concentrated private media ownership, as in other Latin American countries. But clientelism is less prevalent than in other countries, journalistic professionalization is higher, and the mechanisms of power are based less on instrumentalization by particular actors and more on the kinds of impersonal mechanisms familiar in Western systems. These include journalistic routines that result in “indexing” of political debate to the views of the major political parties, as well as “ideological hegemony” that privileges the points of view of wealthier social groups, who are the target audiences of media, and the social groups from which journalists and media managers are recruited. A number of countries (Argentina, Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela, and in a more subtle way, Brazil, after the election of the Workers Party leader “Lula”) reflect a distinctive pattern of confrontation between populist political leaders and commercial media linked to traditional elites, with state power often being mobilized by populist leaders, with varying degrees of success, to undermine the power of commercial media. This pattern involves capture or efforts at capture, but also contestation and, often, popular mobilization. In other Latin American countries—Mexico and Honduras, for example—violence against journalists is a central force shaping the media systems. This represents a different mechanism of control from those involved in capture: if the actors involved had captured media, they would not need to exercise violence.

Chakravartty and Roy (2013) do a comparison of media systems at the sub-national level, comparing states within India’s federal system, which, they show, have both different political party systems and different patterns of media ownership. They present a typology of three types of media system: partisan systems, with open alignments between media and political parties; indirect partisan systems, where partisan control over media is exercised behind the scenes through various forms of patronage and pressure—similar to the forms of capture analyzed in Latin America by Guerrero and Marquez-Ramírez; and network systems, which are marked by a pattern of opaque, shifting alliances between media and particular political and economic actors. The network model resembles a pattern of “partisan polyvalence” that McCargo (in Hallin & Mancini, 2012) identifies in many Southeast Asian media systems.

Scholars working on African media have stressed both the central role of the state in society (Hadland, 2012) and a “journalism of association, affiliation, and belonging” (Shaw, 2009, p. 498) often manifested in partisan media affiliated simultaneously with ethnic groups and political parties. Theorizing about variations among African media systems has been limited, though Nisbet and Moeller1 proposed a typology distinguishing among open democratic, liberalized democratic, liberalized autocratic, closed autocratic and repressive autocratic systems.
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Voltmer (2013), in a work focusing on transitional democracies, proposes distinguishing among types of authoritarianism and the nature of media/state relations within them to analyze transitional media systems. She distinguishes among military dictatorship, communist one-party rule, one-party rule in the context of statism, and personalized one-party rule in the context of weak state institutions, and argues that each tends to be associated with patterns in the role of media that shape subsequent development in a transition to democracy or to some intermediate political form. Military dictatorships, for example, because ideology and political mobilization are typically not central to their rule, often encourage the development of commercialized, apolitical media; in personalized rule in the context of weak state institutions, media often have limited reach beyond urban areas and elites.

Conclusion

Substantial progress has been made in recent years in developing typologies of media systems, and a large body of comparative research is beginning to develop in which such typologies play a central role, though the scope of the research is still very uneven, centered mainly on Europe.

Typologies identify common patterns in the relationships among elements of a media system and a wider social system, and they generate research questions about why particular patterns occur in particular systems, why particular cases may deviate from common patterns, and what the consequences of these patterns may be. They often guide the construction of measures for use in comparative analysis, focusing attention on particular phenomena that might be expected to vary between systems, and guiding the construction of measures of these phenomena that would be valid across contexts—guiding researchers, that is, in thinking through what might reasonably be compared with what across systems. They are also often used for case selection, either to make a particular analysis more generalizable, by including cases belonging to different media system types, or to insure variation on key system-level variables. Sometimes types are used as an independent variable in a causal analysis; that is, it is hypothesized that some variable of interest will be affected by which type a particular media system fits (e.g., Esser et al., 2012). This makes sense when the classification of a media system by type summarizes a pattern of interactions among a number of different media system variables which is considered essential to explaining the phenomenon in question. But it is crucial to specify which particular characteristics of media systems fitting a type actually account for effect in question, and not to imagine the types themselves as causal agents. Media system typologies are also used to specify the scope conditions of social theories, that is, to specify the range of systems to which a particular theory might be expected to apply, or within which a particular concept might be considered relevant.

One important general function of typologies is that they provide a means of conceptualizing context. This can be important to the development of quantitative measures or other kinds of operationalization of important variables, as the significance of indicators of
some construct may vary across systems. It can be important to the development of hypotheses about relationships. Albaeck, van Dalen, Jebril, & de Vreese (2014, p. 174), for example, in a comparative study of political journalism in Europe, observe that “structural developments taking place in different media systems, though similar in nature vary in their impact on journalists working in these systems.” They found that while commercialization of media seemed to decrease partisanship and political pressures on journalism in some systems, it increased them in others, particularly in Polarized Pluralist systems.

Not all comparative research relies on media system typologies, and there is significant debate on the utility of typological approaches. Norris (2009) and Humphreys (2012) for example, in critical commentaries on Hallin and Mancini, make the argument that research should focus on relationships of particular variables across systems in preference to categorical approaches “suggesting that media systems can be classified into distinct types” (Norris, 2009, p. 334). The use of typologies tends to be associated with more holistic, sometimes historical approaches to comparative analysis; if we accept the perspective of systems theory, that a system is not reducible to its parts, then there are limits to what we can understand looking exclusively at relationships among particular variables. The growing body of research on media systems over the past ten years, much of which uses quantitative methods to assess hypotheses about media system types, suggests that the two approaches to comparative analysis are by no means opposed, however, and that a high degree of cross-fertilization between them is possible.

References


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