2

Cross-National and Regional Comparisons

Introduction

A Feminist Anthem, from Valparaíso to Tokyo

The date is November 20, 2019, and the location is the Aníbal Pinto Square in Valparaíso, Chile—a colorful fishermen's town lately turned into a touristic destination on the Pacific Ocean. The country is in the midst of social unrest; hundreds of photographs and videos of demonstrations are taken and shared daily on social media and messaging apps. Accompanied by the sound of a bass drum and an electronic harmony emerging from a loudspeaker, a group of around fifty people takes to the street, cuts the traffic, and sings in unison "A rapist in your path." It is an intervention and performance against *machista* violence created by the feminist performance collective LASTESIS, composed of Lea Cáceres, Paula Cometa, Sibila Sotomayor, and Daffne Valdés, and based on a proposal by the collective *Fuego: Acciones en Cemento*. The performance has been inspired in a text written by Rita Segato[1]; it denounces rape culture as a political-institutional problem, and it is directed at the Chilean police force. Activists cover their eyes with black cloth bands and actively move their bodies following a choreography while singing lyrics such as "and it's not my fault, not where

I was, not how I dressed. The rapist is you." The Aníbal Pinto Square is momentarily paralyzed. Passersby stop and record the performance with their cell phones. Within seconds their videos begin to feverishly circulate in the "digital environment" (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2021).

Only five days later, on the "Day Against Violence against Women in Chile," the song is played by 2,000 demonstrators gathered in Santiago, the nation's capital. The video of this performance goes viral. On Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, users read, like, comment, share, and retweet different recordings of the performance. From Valparaíso, or "the end of the world," as Daffne Valdés calls it,[2] "A rapist in your path" becomes a global anthem that crosses borders and languages. In less than three months, the performance is reappropriated in public spaces scattered across at least fifty-two countries, from Australia to Kenya, and from Japan to the United States. It is also translated into approximately fifteen languages, including Arabic, Basque, German, Hindi, and Mapuche.[3] An interactive map created by the nonprofit organization *GEOChicas* shows the hundreds of locations around the world where it has taken place. The evidence used by this map consists of the social media posts shared by users from their own accounts, in different languages, with hashtags converging around the same issue.[4] Less than a year after the original performance, *Time* magazine names LASTESIS one of the 100 most influential personalities of the year.[5]

A Call against Systemic Racism, from Rio de Janeiro to Minneapolis and Back

Thirteen shots are heard in the middle of the night in the neighborhood of Estácio, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on March 14, 2018. They are fired by two individuals from one car to another. In the second car are Councilwoman Marielle Franco, her driver, Anderson Pedro Gomes, and her press agent. They have just left a political discussion event titled "Black youths mobilizing structures." The shots kill

Franco and Gomes.[6] Franco, a thirty-eight-year-old human rights Black activist, sociologist, leftist representative in the Maré region, and feminist leader of Black, indigenous, LGBTQ, and marginalized communities in Brazil and Latin America, has been violently silenced. Various human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, begin to demand justice. News media coverage and social media commentary quickly zero in on Franco's most recent tweet. In it she denounced, just one day before the crime, the responsibility of the parapolice militias in deaths occurring in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, where Franco was born and grew up.[7] The tweet suggests, for those who demand justice, the potential involvement of the police and military forces in the execution of Marielle's murder.

The reaction on social media is almost instantaneous in Brazil and also across Latin America. In a post-Arab-Spring context marked by the rise of "hashtag activism" (Papacharissi and Oliveira 2012; Costanza-Chock 2014; Hopke 2015; Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013; Tufekci 2018; Jackson, Bailey, and Foucault Welles 2020), the hashtags #MariellePresente, #MarielleVive, and #QuemMatouMarielle blend with street demonstrations organized via Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp.[8] People use filters on their social media profile pictures reclaiming justice for Marielle. One year later, two military police officers are arrested for the crime. But 1,000 days after the killing, it is still not known who gave the orders to proceed with the shooting in the first place. The call for justice is coordinated, once again, on social media, via the hashtag #1000DiasSemRespostas. The action on the streets now consists of placing 550 clocks with Marielle's image; their alarms ring jointly, in front of the Rio City Council, to demand an end to impunity.[9]

Almost two years and two months later, in the northern hemisphere of the Americas, another event of horror and police brutality takes place. George Floyd is a forty-six-year-old Black hip-hop musician who lives in the city of Minneapolis, in the United States. On the afternoon of May 25, 2020, a merchant accuses him of trying

to pay with a forged $20 bill. The accusation is followed by a violent arrest by local police officers. For eight minutes and forty-six seconds, a white cop presses Floyd's neck against the street until he stops breathing.[10] The cameras of horrified passersby record the moment, which rapidly goes viral. The call to end police violence and the struggle for justice against the structural racism of US law enforcement, and society more generally, travels the world at lightning speed. Within a few days, Black Lives Matter marches that take place in Minneapolis are replicated variously from China to Germany, and from Iran to South Africa, among other countries.[11] Set against the background of the challenges brought by the worst public health crisis of the past 100 years, demonstrators take to the streets and the screens with unparalleled strength. Hashtags multiply and help demands coalesce: #EndPoliceBrutality, #EnoughisEnough, #Mobilize. Grassroots movements such as #FreedomFightersDC are organized on social media.[12] On June 2, 2020, there is a dispute over the so-called Blackout Tuesday, in which people are encouraged to post a black photo on their platforms to speak out against police violence and brutality toward Black lives. The conflict arises since activists argue that the circulation of black screens can hinder the usefulness of a hashtag (#BlackLivesMatter or #BLM)[13] used by those on the streets to protect themselves from potential attackers and to eschew raids by law enforcement.

The assassination of Marielle Franco has been linked to a political crime of the repressive apparatus of the Brazilian state. The killing of George Floyd is part of a long series of racist crimes perpetrated against Black bodies in the United States by the forces of law and order. Beyond their particularities and their dissimilar geographical origins, both events share common roots of police brutality and structural racism. However, the social media aftermath of these events had divergent trajectories. While the repercussions of Franco's case spread within Brazil and, to a lesser extent, Latin America,

those of Floyd's case diffused more broadly across multiple continents (Shahin, Nakahara, and Sánchez 2021).

Why Comparing across Nations and Regions Matters

Social media platforms have a fundamental spatial dimension in at least two ways. First, it is possible to conceive of them as spaces in themselves: "virtual geographies," as Zizi Papacharissi (2009) labels them, with their architectures, designs, trajectories, and borders. They are places, in the theorization of Daniel Miller and colleagues (2016), that we inhabit, from which we enter and leave, and where we build our selves, interact with others, and learn about the world. Second, the geographic and material spaces in which platforms are invented, programmed, circulated, and appropriated end up shaping their design and use. A data visualization produced by the company Visual Capitalist in 2020[14] represents the usage statistics of the platforms belonging to Facebook Inc. (United States) as taking part of the same constellation of planets—far from the constellation created by Tencent (China), and by Telegram FZ LLC (Russia). Although not as distant as constellations, cultures associated with nation-states, dependent territories, or specific regions of the world have considerable weight in the ways platforms are designed, regulated, and used, as well as in the social, cultural, and political consequences of their appropriation.

Cross-national and regional comparisons are critical to illuminate the role of these spaces and to understand the similarities and differences present in their construction and adoption. This type of comparative lens shows us that a particular use of social media, such as sharing a protest song that denounces *machista* violence in a corner of Valparaíso, can have global reach and travel across different cultures and platforms. In addition, cross-national and regional comparisons highlight how certain forms of spontaneous and organized activism can diverge in their geographic spread and uptake. While the performance of LASTESIS reflects a phenomenon of convergence in the

diffusion and reappropriation of the same social demand in different countries of the world, the cases of Marielle Franco and George Floyd show a divergence in the circulation of two different, albeit related, claims. This divergence was partly patterned alongside prior differences between Global South and North.

These vignettes begin to show the descriptive, explanatory, and interpretive value of accounting for commonalities and differences; continuities and discontinuities; circulation and recirculation; and local, global, and glocal uptake of social media. These comparative analyses shed light on macro-level issues such as the use of hashtags that cross borders and make visible a claim that does not concern only one country; meso-level issues such as the organization of collective action; and micro-level issues such as the use of a hashtag to protect oneself in the context of mass mobilizations against police violence and structural racism.

This chapter proceeds as follows. We will next draw upon the findings from eight studies about social media conducted in different parts of the world to illustrate the descriptive fit and heuristic power of a comparative lens focusing on dynamics across nations and regions. We will organize them in relation to the four basic categories of scholarly practice that we first introduced in chapter 1: topics, approaches, methods, and interpretations. After making sense of some salient threads across these four categories, we will bring the chapter to a close by reflecting on the continued worth of the concept of the nation-state to make sense of platforms, an object of inquiry that crosses borders with an ease and force like no other media before.

Topics

Scholarship about a wide array of topics within communication and media studies has produced cross-national and regional comparative accounts of social media practices (Chu and Choi 2010; Jackson and

Wang 2013; Qiu, Lin, and Leung 2013; LaRose et al. 2014; Nielsen and Schröder 2014; Miller et al. 2016). Two recurrent topics of interest have been ideological polarization and political debate—both of them critical to social deliberation in the contemporary polity.

One of the common concerns associated with social media has to do with "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers" (Sunstein 2009; Pariser 2011; Colleoni, Rozza, and Arvidsson 2014; Flaxman, Goel, and Rao 2016; Dubois and Blank 2018; Bruns 2019). These notions point to the idea that because platforms allow us to choose our audiences, and their algorithms presumably favor homophily (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001), our ability to confront ideas that are inconsistent with our worldviews could tend to diminish over time (Slater 2007; Himelboim, McCreery, and Smith 2013; del Vicario et al. 2016; Entman and Usher 2018; Ling 2020; Parisi and Comunello 2020).

Marko M. Skoric, Qinfeng Zhu, and Jih-Hsuan Tammy Lin (2018) address this matter by inquiring into the dynamics whereby a person decides to stop either being friends with or unfollow another person on social media as a product of ideological disagreement. This phenomenon is known as "political unfriending" (John and Dvir-Gvirsman 2015; Bode 2016; Yang, Barnidge, and Rojas 2017; Bozdag 2020; Trevisan 2020) and, more broadly, as "selective avoidance" (Liao and Fu 2013; Messing and Westwood 2014; Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic 2015; Zhu, Skoric, and Shen 2017; Vraga and Tulli 2019). To this end, the authors compare key significant variables behind the motivations of political unfriending on Facebook and Twitter in Taiwan and Hong Kong, which they characterize as two Asian societies with common roots but also dissimilar political and cultural traits. Skoric and colleagues speculate that "as unfriending and unfollowing on social media resembles and signals the dissolution of social ties, it may be governed by cultural norms" (2018, 1,102). More precisely, that "users who endorse collectivistic values may be less likely to unfriend others in order to maintain harmony in the network" (Skoric, Zhu, and Lin 2018, 1,103).

The theoretical framework utilized by these authors includes ideas, introduced in chapter 1, about the differences between individualistic and collectivistic societies originally proposed by Geert Hofstede (1983, 1991, 1998). From this perspective, Taiwan is categorized as a "highly collectivist" society (Skoric, Zhu, and Lin 2018, 1,103) that avoids uncertainty and shows affinity with institutional hierarchies. Despite being characterized also as collectivist and hierarchical, Hong Kong's culture avoids uncertainty to a lesser degree, which to the authors indicates a greater capacity to deal with ambiguity and to be flexible when interpreting rules. To address political unfriending in these two cultures, authors analyze results from an online survey conducted in 2016.

Skoric and colleagues find that there are only small significant differences in the level at which the phenomenon of political unfriending occurs in both societies; however, they do find larger differences when it comes to the factors motivating political unfriending in the first place. In the two cases, they observe an inverse association between degree of collectivism and chances of political unfriending on social media. In the authors' words, "this is in line with the literature on collectivism, which argues that individuals strive to achieve group harmony rather than satisfy their own needs" (Skoric, Zhu, and Lin 2018, 1,110). Skoric and colleagues also note that in Taiwan—a nation with comparatively higher levels of democratic participation and social peace and in which the use of platforms is highly associational—psychological or social factors, such as the tendency toward FOMO (fear of missing out), predominate when it comes to breaking a political bond. Instead, in Hong Kong—a country with a relatively higher degree of political conflict where social media use is relatively more tied to engagement in politics—political interest has the greatest impact on the decision to stop being a friend or follower of another user. Thus, "political unfriending and unfollowing in Hong Kong are indicative of political tribalism and a symptom of

heightened affective polarization present in the current Hong Kong society" (Skoric, Zhu, and Lin 2018, 1,110).

The second illustration relates to the rise of platforms in the first decade of the twenty-first century, which was coupled with a utopian perspective that imagined these spaces as conducive to a Habermasian deliberation of ideas, democratic rights, and collective action in a way not mediated by traditional political spaces or figures such as parties, unions, and opinion leaders (Papacharissi 2010; Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Halpern and Gibbs 2013; Jenkins et al. 2016). Over time, this utopian vision, partly inspired by the "rhetoric of the technological sublime" (Marx 1964), was challenged by perspectives that tended to attribute negative consequences to platforms, linking them, for instance, to the breakdown of social ties resulting from the homophily of algorithmic design (Sunstein 2017; Vaidhyanathan 2018). However, questions about the ability of platforms to promote public deliberation and participation remain open in social media studies.

Tanja Estella Bosch, Mare Admire, and Meli Ncube (2020) examine the use of Facebook for political discussion in Zimbabwe and Kenya. Both countries represent cases that "have endured decades of authoritarian rule" (352) as well as been "at the forefront of appropriating digital media platforms for political activism and campaigns" (353), especially in the face of traditional media censorship. According to the authors, the traditional spaces for debate in Zimbabwe and Kenya tend to be closed to youth, which in turn generally exhibit low levels of political efficacy and attitudes of apathy toward their political systems. The authors analyze the Facebook pages of two politicians, Emmerson Mnangagwa and Uhuru Kenyatta.

Bosch and colleagues find that in both countries Facebook pages allow citizens to engage with content shared by politicians, initiate debates around it, and perceive the possibility of participating in the extended public sphere. For example, when it comes to Zimbabwe,

they observe that "citizens' concerns are being shared, heard and debated on the Internet and social media, which is making it possible to distribute and receive alternative sources of information to government propaganda, disinformation and secrecy" (Bosch, Admire, and Ncube 2020, 359). However, they also find that this does not necessarily imply a change of position with respect to presidents' mandates in their communication with the electorate. In the authors' words, "if ever there is anything to note, there is 'passive listening' whereby politicians use these invited and invented spaces of participation to monitor, predict and observe public opinion formation" (Bosch, Admire, and Ncube 2020, 361). Whereas in the case of Zimbabwe, Facebook's relevance for the public sphere increases in the face of political limits to freedom of expression, in Kenya, "the lack of dialogue between citizens and the presidency . . . represents a missed opportunity to engage in dialogue with citizens" (Bosch, Admire, and Ncube 2020, 360).

Focusing on ideological polarization and political debate, these two studies tackled central theoretical ideas in scholarship about social media such as echo chambers and engagement in the public sphere. In both cases, the main findings emerged because of the comparative perspective. Without this approach, Skoric, Zhu, and Lin (2018) would not have been able to identify the strong cultural aspect to political unfriending, and Bosch, Admire, and Ncube (2020) could have missed the intersection between national contexts, Facebook affordances, and their uptake in fostering public debates.

Approaches

We identify two central approaches in cross-national comparative studies, which can be characterized in institutionalist and culturalist terms. The first has to do with comparing the political systems of the countries or cases analyzed (Gainous, Wagner, and Abbott 2015;

Kalogeropoulos et al. 2017; Saldaña, McGregor, and Gil de Zúñiga 2015; Chen, Chan, and Lee 2016; Mosca and Quaranta 2016; Bou-lianne 2020). The second is based on contrasting national cultures (Chu and Choi 2010; Kim, Sohn, and Choi 2011; Jackson and Wang 2013; Katz and Crocker 2015; Trepte et al. 2017; de Lenne et al. 2020).

Regarding the first approach, political systems are conceived of as independent variables that then affect media systems—operationalized as the dependent variables—in their respective nations. A widely circulated example we mentioned in the first chapter is *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* (Hallin and Mancini 2004). The underlying logic that there is some significant relationship between a country's political system and the way its media system behaves also permeates scholarship on social media. This is even after taking into account the limitations that a national system might have to influence a sociotechnical infrastructure that has largely emerged in the Global North, has planetary reach, and can potentially be used by anyone largely regardless of the location from which they do so.

Does national political culture affect how a leading national newspaper's newsroom adopts and uses Facebook or Twitter? Jeslyn Lemke and Endalk Chala (2016) compared news media's uptake of social media platforms in Senegal and Ethiopia, two countries with variations in at least four aspects relevant to the topic under analy-sis: their level of democratic quality, the dominant language used by the news media, the degree of internet adoption, and their internet governance policies. Lemke and Chala argue that "we assumed that differences or similarities in social media feeds can be intangibly connected to Ethiopia's restrictive laws or Senegal's democracy" (2016, 182).

The authors examine the content produced by the Facebook and Twitter accounts of five newspapers in each country for sixty con-secutive days in 2015. These posts are analyzed according to two vari-ables: number and format. In theoretical terms, the paper is based on Mark Deuze's claim (2003) that the three central characteristics that

distinguish online from traditional journalism are multimediality, interactivity, and hypertextuality. Overall, Lemke and Chala find a mix of commonalities and differences between the two countries attributed to their respective political systems. On the one hand, both countries share the way journalists use platforms for storytelling purposes. Far from Deuze's goal of multimedia journalism, they find that content shared on social media platforms tends to replicate the information produced for the print or digital version of newspapers: "In the ten newspapers we analyzed in Senegal and Ethiopia, 'networked' journalism seems to be on the horizon, but creating specialized content for a newspaper's multimedia platforms is yet to come" (Lemke and Chala 2016, 180–181). On the other hand, although in Senegal, platforms are used to channel the same content into different traditional and social media, in Ethiopia, Facebook is mostly used for international news. The authors hypothesize that this difference may be because Ethiopian newspapers strategically use this platform to include foreign media links and thus increase freedom of expression without running the risk of political persecution.

The second approach commonly present in cross-national studies of social media has a cultural bent. Following Stuart Hall (1980), culture can be understood as "the categories and frameworks in thought and language through which different societies classif[y] out their conditions of existence" (65). Venetia Papa and Dimitra L. Milioni (2016) compare issues of national culture in Facebook groups based in Greece and France regarding the *Indignados* movement. This movement emerged spontaneously around 2011 in different countries to fight against political and economic corruption and to claim for the rights of the unemployed and the disenfranchised (Castañeda 2012; Anduiza, Cristancho, and Sabucedo 2014; Postill 2014; Flesher Fominaya 2015; Theocharis et al. 2015). According to Papa and Milioni (2016), the movement represents a compelling case study because it appeals to an international collective

that, while not responding to a clear ideology, becomes visible against the backdrop of national differences. In addition, *Indignados* is particularly relevant for social media scholarship since social media platforms became for this movement a critical space for self-organizing and increasing public visibility. The authors concentrate on Greece and France because each country shows different roles in the evolution of this social movement. In Greece, it involved a series of anti-austerity protests against the tightening of financial policies and living conditions for workers,[15] which were in turn supported in France a few months later. From France also came the political pamphlet turned into the book *Time for Outrage: Indignez-vous!* (Hessel 2011), which contains ideas believed to have inspired *Indignados* in Spain, a country central to the development of the movement.

Based on a thematic analysis of content on Facebook postings and in-depth interviews with activists, Papa and Milioni (2016) find that the way activists recognize and relate to each other online has to do with a notion of citizenship that exceeds geography and ideology: "[A]s the *Indignados* movement is void of a predefined political identity, a certain (defiant) understanding of civic identity becomes the motive or the 'social glue' that brings them together" (296). They also find that the central trait of the movement, that of including the excluded, reinforces the non-national condition of movement membership on social media. However, in the case of Greek activists, Papa and Milioni (2016) note how the demand for nationalism emerges from some radicalized members and is directly linked to discourses referring to a "homogeneous Greek state" (301). Specifically, "through their discourses, they express their strong bond with an idealized Greek nation, directed by the need to 'save their nation' from internal and external enemies" (Papa and Milioni 2016, 297). Regarding French activists, authors find a rhetoric by which "individuals who are mostly citizens of Maghreb countries . . . do not possess the formal status of French citizenship" (Papa and Milioni 2016, 297).

Both cases show the different meanings that "we" can take within the same political movement.

In this section we have showcased two approaches to the varying roles played by national and transnational variables in illuminating the adoption of specific platform practices across countries. In both cases, the comparative perspective was fundamental. Lemke and Chala's interpretation of the finding of Ethiopian newspapers using Facebook for international news was possible thanks to the contrast of Senegalese newspapers' use of Facebook and the consideration of the Ethiopian political context. Papa and Milioni's capacity to observe both a virtual commonality transcending geographical borders and divergent national enactments of a single social movement was enabled by their comparison of discourses of social media users in two different cultures.

Methods

One important methodological dimension in comparative cross-national and regional research has to do with the volume and kind of data analyzed. On the one end we note large-N studies that mostly rely on surveys (Jackson and Wang 2013; Ku, Chen, and Zhang 2013; Nielsen and Schrøder 2014; Trepte et al. 2017; Skoric, Zhu, and Lin 2018). On the other end we observe accounts that draw upon small-N data (Miller et al. 2016; Papa and Milioni 2016; Kalogeropoulos and Nielsen 2018; Abokhodair and Hodges 2019; Masullo et al. 2020).

Concerning the former, Dustin Harp, Ingrid Bachmann, and Lei Guo (2012) focus on understanding "more about activists who use the Internet and social media, their perspectives on these new technologies, and the scope of their work" (299) and on the variation of these issues across three distinct locations: Latin America, mainland China, and the United States. Their ultimate interest resides in providing a comparative perspective on the ways in which digital

public spheres are shaped in different regions. The authors "treat these regions as three separate cultures or systems of meaning comprised by shared beliefs, norms, and expectations" (Harp, Bachmann, and Guo 2012, 302).

Their goal is to examine research that has criticized online activism for its lack of "real life" engagement or questioned the actual inclusivity of the digital public sphere. Analyzing online surveys administered in Chinese, English, and Spanish, Harp and colleagues find significant differences in the ways in which activists conceive of social media when it comes to managing them and assessing their capacity to shape the digital public sphere: "For respondents in China, the top challenge for using SNS [social networking sites] for activism was fear of government surveillance, while for those in the United States, it was the lack of time. Respondents from Latin America, on the other hand, emphasized the lack of access to affordable Internet, and, indeed, 15% of these survey respondents said they did not have access to the Internet in their own homes" (Harp, Bachmann, and Guo 2012, 313).

Thus, Harp, Bachmann, and Guo (2012) conclude that "social media can become a participatory forum where people with common interests can come together, become empowered, and ultimately join efforts to improve their communities" (314). On the basis of these findings, they explain that their "cross-cultural approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon" (2012, 314).

An illustration of the small-N alternative is Cigdem Bozdag and Kevin Smets's (2017) examination of the reception of the image of a deceased Syrian boy named Alan Kurdi. Turkish photojournalist Nilüfer Demir captured Kurdi's dead body found on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea on September 2, 2015, in the midst of an ongoing refugee crisis.[16] Bozdag and Smets decide to analyze the circulation of Kurdi's image on Twitter in Flanders and Turkey resulting from posts by different social actors: citizens, politicians, and nonprofit organizations. Both settings are selected because they are

either geographically close to Syria, the country most associated with the recent refugee crisis, or because they are refugee-receiving countries. Specifically, the authors examine a corpus of 961 tweets, using both inductive and deductive codes, and pay special attention to how refugees and migrants are represented in each case. Among the codes, Bozdag and Smets include whether refugees are represented in individualized or collectivized ways, the reasons around the refugee crisis, its proposed solutions, and references to the case of Alan Kurdi.

The authors find that far from producing a single, global understanding of Kurdi's image as a symbol of a humanitarian crisis, the meanings produced in each case were strongly shaped by the national context of reception. There were issues in common—such as the association of the photograph with the presentation of refugees as a threat to national order and security. However, there were also two important differences. First, in Flanders there was much more interaction across social media posts than in Turkey. The authors connect this difference with the level of social polarization in each context: "[P]ublic perceptions of immigration take shape in a broader context of societal polarization in Turkey (in relation to ethnicity, religion, and politics), whereas in Flanders, there is a rather dominant anti-migration and anti-Islam discourse, nourished by decades of polarization of the extreme right" (Bozdag and Smets 2017, 4,056). Second, religion—operationalized by the authors as either the belief or the nonbelief in Islam—shaped whether the image of Kurdi was interpreted in either a sameness key or as an example of otherness: "When reference is made to Islam in Turkey, it serves as a vehicle for solidarity and a religious obligation to help other Muslims. In Flanders, Islam is mentioned by certain politicians and citizens who explain it as the source of cultural differences" (Bozdag and Smets 2017, 4,064).

There has been a range of designs patterned along the dimension of the volume and kind of data utilized in comparative cross-national and regional work. In the two examples we showcased in

this subsection the analyses revealed findings that would have probably remained invisible through single-country accounts. In comparing social media perceptions from Latin America, mainland China, and the United States via a survey, Harp and colleagues (2012) were able to observe the relative importance of, for instance, internet access for activists. In contrasting two contexts via a qualitative content analysis, Bozdag and Smets (2017) showed how they strongly shaped divergent social media representations of the refugees and the refugee crisis.

Interpretations

A popular interpretive frame in cross-national and regional comparative studies of social media is making sense of the findings in terms of either divergence or convergence of phenomena under examination. On the one hand, there is the notion that under certain circumstances the culture associated with the national territory effectively shapes the use of platforms and ends up producing significant variations. On the other hand, there is the idea that despite the differences among countries, there are major points in common in the use of social media.

According to the "protest paradigm," traditional media tend to cover news linked to social mobilizations usually with a reactionary and right-wing bias that has a detrimental impact upon the public legitimacy of protests (Gitlin 1980; Chan and Lee 1984; McLeod and Hertog 1992; Harlow and Johnson 2011; Mourão 2019). How is this paradigm applied in the context of social media? To answer this question, Summer Harlow (2019) investigates coverage of the protests in Ferguson, Missouri, United States, that took place in reaction to the murder of Michael Brown by local police on August 9, 2014. Examining data from four countries—France, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States—Harlow looks at how the focus on racism and

police brutality shapes the framing and perception of protests. To this end, she compares the tweets produced by media organizations, journalists, and the public.

Harlow finds that across these four countries, media organizations tend to highlight the issue of police brutality. This in turn downplays the relevance of structural dynamics regarding racism in law enforcement and sidelines the core theme that organizes and legitimizes protests in the first place, since "focusing on police brutality rather than racism painted the issue as a problem specific to individual cops rather than systemic racism deserving of protest. The underlying reason for protests thus was ignored, as the protest paradigm would suggest" (Harlow 2019, 635). Beneath these commonalities Harlow notes that whereas in France and the United States journalists tend to present post-racial views, in Spain and the United Kingdom they emphasize racism as the core target of social mobilization. The author attributes this divergence to the historical memory of the latter two countries concerning racial inequality. When it comes to the protest paradigm and to how demonstrators are framed, Harlow notes that "the U.S. media outlets and their journalists' tweets adopted delegitimizing frames of protesters significantly more than the U.K., Spain, and France" (2019, 636). According to Harlow, "this finding illustrates the importance of comparative research and the need to better understand how the paradigm changes on a country-by-country basis" (2019, 636).

In what she sees as a context of transformation for digital journalism, Amy Schmitz Weiss (2015) investigates how journalists in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru link news production routines to social media practices—whether in the newsroom or in the context of individual coverage. To examine how "legacy and non-legacy media organizations . . . are facing dramatic changes to the news production and distribution process," the author analyzes responses to an online survey and follows how different journalistic cultures are perceived and enacted by reporters and editors.

According to Schmitz Weiss, "it is only by continuing to do comparative research that we can see how these different journalistic national cultures differ and how they are similar" (2015, 96).

Survey results indicate that how journalists appropriate social media platforms in their production routines is linked to their professional roles, which are in turn partly shaped by national contexts. Schmitz Weiss distinguishes four roles that function as Weberian ideal types (Weber 1949): adversarial, interpretive, disseminator, and populist mobilizer. The first has to do with presenting an adversarial position to political and economic interests. The second connotes that the journalist must focus on analyzing and interpreting complex phenomena. The third is conceived as a provider of information in ways that educate and entertain. The fourth espouses a normative position that sets the public agenda, informs audiences, and proposes solutions to societal problems.

The five countries studied present commonalities in terms of their political infrastructures, but they also show areas of divergence in relation to their media systems—in both media ownership and state intervention. However, Schmitz Weiss finds that, across case studies, journalists identify more with the interpretive and with the populist mobilizer roles, and considerably less with the disseminator and adversarial roles. This, in turn, shapes the digital media routines engaged in their everyday professional tasks. For instance, the populist mobilizer role was more associated with the task of searching news releases. She states: "Considering all five countries showed significance in this area [populist mobilizer] demonstrates how much the journalists surveyed in this study perceive a different role than just an informer or disseminator that can be tied back to the unique media evolution that is now taking place in each of these countries" (Schmitz Weiss 2015, 94). The author also notes that journalistic roles, which are associated with culture, change over time and with everyday practice: "[R]oles are not stagnant but may change as the journalist's work changes. . . . These roles may need to be adjusted

to new ways of looking at the profession" (Schmitz Weiss 2015, 94–95).

In this section we highlighted the coexistence of divergence and convergence interpretive frameworks. On the one hand, Harlow's (2019) study showed significant differences between France, Spain, and United Kingdom, and the United States regarding how newspapers and journalists on Twitter covered the events following the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. On the other hand, Schmitz Weiss (2015) found how, despite some differences, journalists from Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru shared many commonalities in relation to their imagined professional roles. Both interpretive frameworks demonstrate the descriptive and heuristic importance of comparing cross-nationally. Neither the divergent nor the convergent dynamics could have been foregrounded without examining social media processes across countries.

Conclusions

This chapter presented comparative research on twenty-two countries—Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Chile, China, Colombia, Ethiopia, France, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Kenya, Mexico, Peru, Netherlands, Senegal, Spain, Taiwan, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States, and Zimbabwe—spanning four continents: Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe. The studies crossed borders and addressed a multiplicity of cultural, social, political, and technological formations: from communication dynamics that privilege a sense of collective harmony to modes of sharing content on platforms that express political dissent; from quasi-dictatorial regimes to liberal democracies; and from levels of internet connectivity and access reaching below 6 percent of the population to almost universal uptake of mobile devices. In all the studies we discussed how it would have been impossible to account for variance in the phenomena under

examination without resorting to comparative work. In addition, the variety of methodological and theoretical resources used across these studies underscores the idea, first introduced in chapter 1, that this work can encompass an array of choices within a broader epistemological stance.

In some cases, the countries studied were compared because they belonged to the same geographical region. This is associated with the research design of the "most similar systems" (Collier 1993, 111). Since, as Arend Lijphart (1971) explains, the comparative method runs the risk of presenting more variables than compared cases, one way to proceed is to select cases where contexts present the lowest number of differences possible; this allows the differences identified to be effectively used to attribute causality. In other occasions, the countries selected are compared precisely because they rank very differently on a specific dimension. This relates to the research design of the "most different systems" (Teune and Przeworski 1970, 34), by which "different contextual conditions . . . are used to explain different outcomes regarding the object under investigation" (Esser and Vliegenthart 2017, 3).

The notion of countries as units of analysis is a core element of the interpretive and explanatory apparatus of cross-national or regional accounts. As mentioned in chapter 1, this foundation is based on the role of communication processes in the constitution of the nation-state and in media innovations related to globalization. Benedict Anderson (1983) argued for the importance of communication in the historical emergence of the nation-state as an "imagined community." He also elaborated on the role of technological change in the joint evolution of nationalism and everyday communication, a theme which he continued to explore in subsequent writing (Anderson 1994). Communication has a constitutive relationship to the nation because the latter is seen as an imagined community that is talked about, circulated, and questioned in the interactional and mediated practices of everyday life, as Mick Billig (1995) explained

in his analysis of "banal nationalism." Within the context of this chapter, the massive adoption and varied use of social media in all continents over the past decade brings up the following question: What is the validity of the nation-state as a reservoir of heuristic power for making sense of communication phenomena in a world that is increasingly deterritorialized (Appadurai 1990) and traversed by platforms of planetary reach?

The question of the validity of the nation-state is linked to an ongoing debate about technological change and globalization in traditional and digital media (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Walter 2011; Schroeder 2016; Hallin and Mancini 2017; Schünemann 2020; Steinberg 2020). On the one hand, a video like the one produced by LASTESIS at the almost literal end of the world can be a tool for the replication of communication practices and social mobilizations across continents, albeit with local adaptations. On the other hand, the propagation of related claims against racist violence such as those following the murders of Marielle Franco and George Floyd can follow dissimilar trajectories that reproduce divergent cross-national and regional patterns of information flows. The future of comparative cross-national and regional research on social media lies partly in deciphering under what conditions and by which mechanisms these different dynamics take place and what implications this has for the validity of the nation-state as a source of heuristic power.

Many of the challenges encountered in comparative work at the cross-national or regional level have to do with the impact of globalization, which is fueled by media and communication processes and which seems to question the capacity of nation-states to operate as either objects of study, contexts of study, or units of analysis, an issue summarized by Sonia Livingstone (2003) as follows: "Given the tension between theories of media, culture, identity and globalization on the one hand and the crossnational interests and frameworks of research funders, policy-makers and research users on the

other, any project seeking to conduct cross-national comparisons must surely argue the case for treating the nation as a unit, rather than simply presuming the legitimacy of such a research strategy" (480).

As this chapter shows, scholars continue placing the nation-state at the center of their theoretical apparatus designed to explain different social media phenomena. Therefore, the studies analyzed, echoing hundreds of other comparable studies, point to at least a tentative answer to the question posed above: The heuristic power of nation-state is still worth considering, but its validity should not be assumed and taken for granted. Instead, it should be demonstrated as a result of the research process.

The comparative perspective we have presented would be incomplete, however, if we did not refer to another kind of comparison that is important for understanding phenomena linked to social media. When users tweet about their presidents or find a news item about the political arena that leads them to stop being friends with a contact on Facebook, they do not do so only in relation to the cultures of the nation-states or regions to which they belong. They also undertake these practices in connection to the cultures, structures, and institutions tied to another central element of modern societies: traditional media. It is the relationships between traditional and social media practices that we turn to next.

To Know Is to Compare
Studying Social Media across Nations, Media, and Platforms

By: Mora Matassi, Pablo J. Boczkowski

The MIT Press