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# Blurred Genres, Trading Zones, and Heterogeneous Inquiries

The journey of this book began with an organizing epistemological principle: to know is to compare. Based on the realization that studies of social media have generally lacked comparative perspectives in at least three dimensions—across nations and regions, across media, and across platforms—we set out to develop a research agenda exploring productive intersections across the foundations of different scholarly traditions to make sense of how platforms are designed, developed, circulated, and used. To this end, we drew inspiration from Clifford Geertz’s notion of “blurred genres” (1980) to explore common logics of comparison across these different dimensions and their associated scholarly traditions.

The next section takes stock of what we learned from this intellectual journey about each dimension of comparison and our deep dive into two pathways for future development—namely, histories and languages. Our account reveals a thread weaving seemingly disparate strands of scholarship: the heterogeneity of social media. This heterogeneity was already conveyed by our selection of the vignettes with which we opened chapters 2 through 6. Taken together, these vignettes combined spheres of social life as disparate as cross-national diffusion of public protests against gender and racial oppression;

cross-media relationships in reality television and political journalism; cross-platform patterns of imitation and regulation; historical dynamics behind moral panics and multiple genealogies; and the resistance against English-as-default and the potential of multilingualism on platforms. We argue that this heterogeneity characterizes both social media as objects of inquiry and the ways in which they have been studied—the latter issue to be addressed more fully in the other two sections. This, in turn, presents important implications for the comparative turn we advocate in this book.

In the following section we probe the issue of heterogeneity further by exploring the potential integration of scholarship across two or more dimensions. We account for why we have discussed each dimension separately in the previous chapters and explore what it would entail to pursue work that integrated multiple dimensions. At stake, we argue, is the construction of accounts countering the intellectual fragmentation that has characterized the study of media and communication more generally—a fragmentation that some see as increasing in recent years. This state of affairs signals both the possibilities but also the challenges of blurring genres of scholarship.

In the final section of this chapter, we reflect on what a focus on comparative perspectives can contribute to addressing this fragmentation. We contend that the deep historical roots and contemporary intensification of this trend indicate a fundamental disunity in the relevant scholarship. Furthermore, we show that neither the existent theoretical nor methodological attempts to bridge different subfields and their associated traditions of inquiry have succeeded at reducing this trend. Thus, we propose that the epistemological turn to comparative perspectives can create trading zones (Galison 1997) across the various traditions of inquiry—about social media matters in particular, and other media and communication phenomena more generally—where local coordination about specific research pursuits can take place without flattening the larger heterogeneity of the field.

## The Heterogeneity of Social Media

Our articulation of the organizing principle that animates this book—to know is to compare—has yielded a series of insights that helped us understand the conditions of existence of social media in global, transmedia, and multiplatform communication environments. None of these insights would have emerged without a comparative approach since it was its application what allowed them to become more visible and put them within the context of larger scholarly conversations. The studies examined throughout the book shed light on topics generally addressed by social media scholarship—such as identity making and self-presentation, relationship maintenance and social capital, and political participation and activism. They were also able to illuminate variations across structural dimensions of the production, distribution, and use of platforms, such as the dynamics of racial and ethnic discrimination, the platform economy of social media, and the logics of datafication and algorithmic bias. In the following paragraphs we will summarize these insights and weave them into an argument that emphasizes heterogeneity as a key feature of both social media and the scholarship about them.

The first insight that emerged from applying the comparative lens to cross-national and regional phenomena is the importance of examining the relationship between the nation-state, globalization, and social media. This relationship is contingent on how social media operate in different national settings. As we argued in chapters 1 and 2, traditional media have played a key role in the constitution of nation-states. The latter, in turn, have shaped the former in various ways. Perhaps paradoxically, the technological evolution of traditional media, together with the emergence of so-called new media, have also played a key role in processes of globalization. In turn, globalization has called into question the importance of the nation-state: If the existence of almost 200 countries in the world

is a testimony to political, economic, and cultural heterogeneity (among other dimensions), globalization embodies the countervailing tendency toward greater international homogenization.

We argue that to understand how social media are defined, constructed, circulated, and used in different countries, it is essential to unravel on a case-by-case basis the place occupied by the nation-state. Platforms are objects with a potential global reach where the role of the nation-state seems in many cases to be blurred—think, for example, of issues regarding the regulation of hate speech and violent content addressed in chapter 4. Thus, theoretical debates have arisen, as we explored in chapter 2, about whether the country of origin or use should be considered a significant explanatory factor in the first place, with potentially important implications for understanding heterogeneous dynamics of racial and ethnic discrimination within platforms, among other topics. Yet, throughout chapter 2 we showed how in some situations there was substantial divergence in social media use that could be attributed to the persistence of variables associated with the nation-state, whereas in other instances there were phenomena common across borders. Following Livingstone (2003), we concluded that the nation-state appears in principle to remain an important factor, but one whose presence nonetheless cannot be assumed. Thus, we proposed that the role of the nation-state in each case should not be taken for granted but demonstrated as an outcome of the research process.

The second insight was the relevance of traditional media for understanding the genealogy of their digital counterparts, including platforms. Comparing social media with preexisting or coexisting traditional media reminds us that, as Lisa Gitelman (2006) has argued, media exist in a plurality. This plurality reinforces the idea that the media ecosystem has long been heterogeneous. But such heterogeneity does not necessarily imply either the absence of bridges between the new and the old or the assumption that novelty is always associated with a break from what came before. On the contrary, the

application of the comparative approach allowed us to note both a series of continuities between traditional and social media as well as discontinuities between them, which has been key to contextualizing, for instance, the relationship between the platform economy of social media and the commercial logic of traditional media.

Moreover, as we pointed out in chapters 1 and 3, traditional media have not only contributed to shape new media, but the latter have also remediated the former, with the resulting pattern that all media coexist in ecosystems marked by their heterogeneity. Like the case of the nation-state, this means that just as the discontinuity between social media and their traditional media counterparts cannot be assumed, neither can it be assumed that there is always historical continuity. Thus, heterogeneity in cross-media dynamics invites us to interrogate them and demonstrate whether continuity or discontinuity applies in each case.

The third insight is that social media are plural also because they include a wide range of platforms with distinct genealogies, technological properties, and cultures of use. This stance challenges the dominant mode of social media research that has tended to focus on one platform at a time—often privileging options such as Facebook or Twitter. This dominant mode has also usually been enacted without reflecting on how its view from nowhere assumes a certain homogeneity across platforms that does not reflect their various logics of datafication as well as their actual use. If all platforms were similar, it would be hard to understand why, as mentioned in chapter 4, users on average were active on more than seven platforms in 2022.

On the contrary, the cross-platform comparative perspective enabled us to delve into the notion of social media as an object of inquiry that is heterogeneous by definition and therefore far from constituting a unified whole. Throughout a series of studies, we noticed, for example, how users produced complex differentiations between platforms that a priori presented similar technological capabilities. This, in turn, led us to question dystopian discourses

that focus almost exclusively on the algorithmic and commercial design of each platform and its presumed impact on society. Looking at the heterogeneity of platforms increases the conditions of possibility for identifying cross-platform variation. This invites us to explain both the presence and absence of dissimilar effects and of negative and positive social consequences. By implication, this stance envisions dystopian discourses not as an a priori of research but as a symbolic formation that should emerge—or not—as a result of it.

The fourth insight about issues of heterogeneity stems from adding a historical sensibility to comparative perspectives. This enabled us to counter the predominant present-day bias that has produced at least three effects: erasing the evolution of social media over time; blurring the ways in which many of its current features find antecedents in past media; and reifying success stories while neglecting the lessons that arise from recovering the histories of platforms no longer in use. Weaving through the cross-national, cross-media, and cross-platform dimensions, the historical gaze expands the lens of which phenomena are relevant to describe and which factors appear to explain their trajectory over time.

This gaze also reinforces the centrality of heterogeneity in the study of social media. Platforms can evolve in relation to the national contexts in which they are built and used, to the traditional media that precede them and with which they coexist, and to the other platforms with which they compete for users' attention. Furthermore, they can also change in their temporal evolution. Facebook today is not what it was a few years ago, nor what it will be in a few years—assuming it continues to exist. This historical sensibility leads us to explore continuities with the past that help us better assess any discontinuous aspects in the present. But above all it invites us to delve into the various combinations between determination and contingency that characterize the passage from what was to what is. It also reminds us that what we think will become in the future

from the point of view of the present is not something inevitable but a conjecture among other possible ones.

The fifth insight resulted from our interrogation of a central element of symbolic and relational life: language. Proposing a comparative approach that took language as its focus opened the possibility of countering two dominant biases in studies of social media. First, the English-language bias, whereby the production, circulation, and consumption of platforms are by default imagined as configured and experienced in the English language. Second, the written-text bias, whereby social media communication should be understood in a written-textual key, leaving aside the emergence, stabilization, and centrality of visual languages and new signifiers that increasingly characterize symbolic expression on platforms.

The journey through cross-national, cross-media, and cross-platform comparative perspectives that centered on the role of languages enabled us to make visible the heterogeneity of linguistic realities linked to the lived experiences of users and to movements within and across nations, media, and platforms. This heterogeneity of languages and signifiers contrasts sharply with the homogenous view centered on the English language and on textual communication as the dominant modes of symbolic expression on social media. This, in turn, transforms issues of choice of language and mode of signification into questions rather than taken-for-granted answers. This is not to say that in some (or many) cases, social media communication does not occur in written English and in textual form, but that even in these cases the existence of such communication is a phenomenon to be explained rather than a premise to be accepted without interrogation.

In sum, foregrounding the heterogeneity of social media and their scholarship through adopting comparative perspectives, and probing this heterogeneity with particular intensity regarding matters of histories and languages, invites us to turn assumptions into questions

and certainties into conjectures. A further step in this direction occurs when we aim to integrate multiple comparative perspectives, an issue we discuss next.

## **Integrating Multiple Comparisons**

Throughout the book we have opted to discuss comparisons across nations and regions, media, and platforms separately. This decision was informed by argumentative, intellectual, and institutional factors that align with the heterogeneity of both social media as objects of inquiry and the ways in which their study has often proceeded.

From an argumentative standpoint treating each type of comparison in a distinct way has helped us articulate what it consists of, how it differs from dominant modes of scholarship, which contributions it enables the analyst to make, and what broader theoretical issues it illuminates.

From an intellectual perspective each of these modes of comparison has been partly shaped by varying traditions of inquiry which have historically evolved into semi-autonomous communities of discourse. Thus, cross-national and regional comparisons build on prior institutional and historical accounts in political communication and journalism, intercultural approaches to communication, and cultural analyses of global media patterns. Cross-media comparisons are informed by insights from institutional and cultural perspectives on media evolution and from historical analyses of technological change in information, communication, and media artifacts. Finally, cross-platform comparisons have drawn from a combination of audience research and cultural approaches to technology use.

In addition to the role played by these different traditions of inquiry, social media comparative work along these different dimensions has focused on divergent topics, examined them with different approaches and methodologies, and interpreted the resulting findings



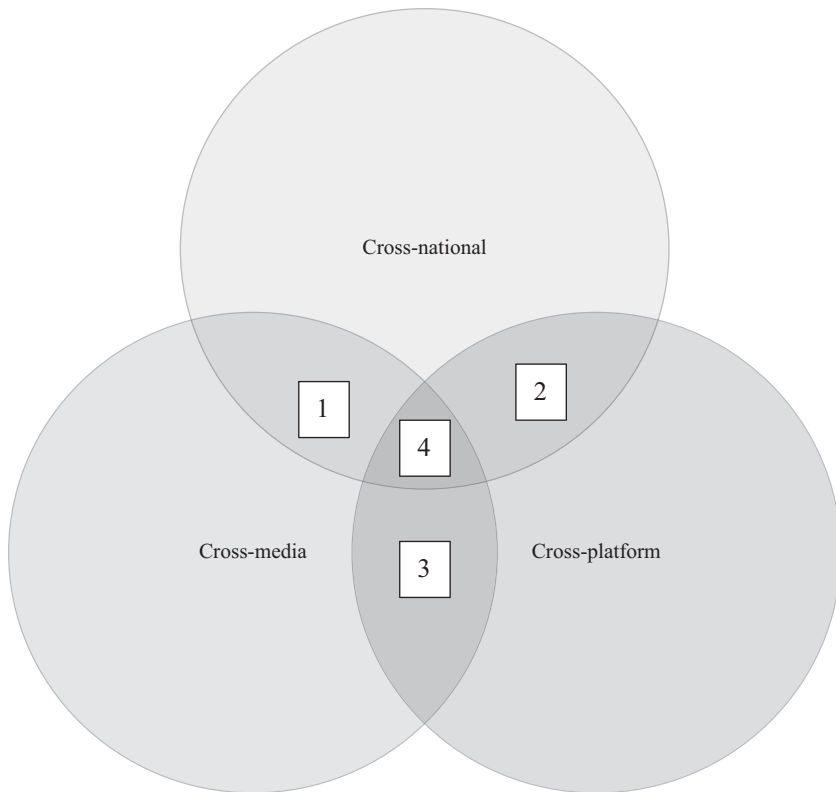
from varying lenses. Thus, while cross-national and regional accounts of social media have often concentrated on topics such as ideological polarization and political debate, cross-media work has recurrently examined issues such as the relationship between media and politics or journalism, and cross-platform scholarship has frequently delved into matters such as interpersonal communication and presentation of the self and the impact of platforms on mental health. Furthermore, whereas work in cross-national and regional studies has typically been marked by political economy or intercultural approaches, both cross-media and cross-platform comparisons have often featured perspectives emphasizing continuous and discontinuous patterns happening either synchronically or longitudinally, thus featuring various evolutionary and coevolutionary dynamics.

Methodologically, cross-national and regional studies have often conducted large-N studies based on surveys and—albeit to a lesser extent—carried out small-N data analyses. In contrast, cross-media and cross-platform studies have resorted to both quantitative and qualitative techniques such as surveys, experiments, network analyses, interviews, focus groups, and discourse analyses. Finally, in cross-national and regional accounts the interpretive lenses have often revolved around issues of convergence and divergence among media systems, political institutions, and cultural configurations. In contrast, in cross-media studies these lenses have frequently been organized around dynamics of reinforcement and displacement between social and traditional media. Moreover, in cross-platform work scholars have typically resorted to lenses that prioritize explaining either why different affordances of specific platforms produce divergent effects or why modes of appropriation vary beyond similarities in technological design.

In addition to these argumentative and intellectual factors relevant in addressing issues of heterogeneity, the decision to discuss the three dimensions separately has also stemmed from institutional matters. The multiple traditions of inquiry associated with the

different types of comparative scholarship about social media map onto various subfields in the study of media and communication. These subfields, in turn, are linked to different divisions, sections, interest groups, preconferences, and workshops in professional societies; journals and book series in the publishing space; and jobs and curricular developments within colleges and universities. As the field has become increasingly specialized and expectations of publication volume have risen in recent years, the intellectual distances across these multiple institutional expressions appear to have widened further, thus leading to a state that Silvio Waisbord (2019) has recently characterized as “intellectual fragmentation.” It has become common that scholars working on cross-national matters rarely engage with the concerns of studies on cross-media and cross-platform dynamics, and vice versa. Although the increased specialization has partly been responsible for a significant growth in scholarly output, the ensuing fragmentation has sometimes artificially severed connections that could enable analysts to present a more nuanced and holistic understanding of their object of study.

This fragmentation is both an expression and a limitation of the heterogeneity of social media and the resulting value of developing perspectives that can account for it. Thus, in addition to stressing that dynamics taking place in one country are not necessarily similar to dynamics present in other national settings, that what applies to one medium does not apply by default to another medium, and that phenomena specific to one platform in many cases are not replicated on other platforms, throughout chapters 2 through 6 we have highlighted connections across the different dimensions of comparative work. Building on this, in the remainder of this subsection we explore the potential of integrating comparative analyses across two or more of the dimensions analyzed in previous chapters. More specifically, we visualize this integration on Figure 7.1 through a Venn diagram that maps the distinct intersections among



**Figure 7.1**

Distinct intersections among the cross-national and regional, cross-media, and cross-platform dimensions.

the cross-national and regional, cross-media, and cross-platform dimensions.

Area 1 of the Venn diagram is where the cross-national and regional dimension meets its cross-media counterpart. In chapter 2 we presented a paper by Skoric, Zhu, and Lin (2018) on political unfriending or unfollowing on social media. The authors asked, among other things, whether social factors such as the degree of collectivism in a society or psychological factors such as the experience of fear of missing out (FOMO) were somehow linked to the

practice of political unfriending or unfollowing on Facebook and Twitter. To do so, they compared the results of an online survey conducted in Hong Kong and Taiwan—two societies that according to the authors exhibited variation in level of collectivism and FOMO. The authors treated traditional media use as a control variable. However, integrating cross-national and cross-media comparisons would inspire the analyst to consider turning traditional media use into an independent variable. If content produced by traditional media is a central source of conversation in modern societies (Harrington, Highfield, and Bruns 2013), then it seems relevant to consider whether the use of traditional media compared to that of social media, in different countries or regions, influences the dynamics whereby a person decides to avoid the presence of other people on one or more platforms. This, in turn, would enable the analyst to contextualize the effect of social media *per se*.

Area 2 of the Venn diagram is where the cross-national or regional dimension meets its cross-platform counterpart. In chapter 4 we introduced a study by Utz, Muscanell, and Khalid (2015) on feelings of jealousy on Facebook and Snapchat. The authors compared the association between the use of social media and the experience of jealousy in the context of romantic ties. Analyzing data from an online survey of participants mostly from England and Scotland and, to a lesser extent, from countries not identified by the authors from Europe and beyond, Utz and colleagues (2015) found that while platform use did not seem to generate high levels of jealousy, the effect was greater on Snapchat than on Facebook. They attributed this difference to the fact that on Snapchat communication appeared to be more intimate than on Facebook. Despite having collected data from different countries, however, the authors failed to explore the possibility of cross-national variation in the findings. Since social norms associated with romantic relationships and emotional states have been shown to vary by national setting (Bhugra 1993), it would have been worth exploring the relationships between these aspects

of platform use by country. Both the existence and absence of cross-national variations in platform use would have been interesting findings whose explanations could have contributed to theorizing the intersection between cross-platform and cross-national dynamics.

Area 3 of the Venn diagram is where the cross-media dimension meets its cross-platform counterpart. In chapter 3 we discussed a paper by Rebecca Nee and Valerie Barker (2020) on the social impact of coviewing in second screening situations. The authors inquired into the capacity of second screening to provide a sense of togetherness when carried out both in relation to traditional and social media. Nee and Barker (2020) found more similarities than differences in coviewing experiences with respect to traditional media content and YouTube. Integrating cross-media and cross-platform foci would invite the analyst to also include second screening experiences with respect to content viewed across different social media platforms. Contrary to the more common way of framing second screening as the experience of consuming either traditional or streaming media and commenting about it on social media, an integration of dimensions would lead us to inquire about the conversation that happens across different platforms about the content that is encountered primarily on social media. This, in turn, would allow us to compare the social effects of interaction about content in traditional media versus on different platforms.

Area 4 of the Venn diagram is where all three comparative dimensions converge. In chapter 4 we introduced a study by Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández (2017) on the circulation of racist speech in Australia on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. The author found, among other things, that the posts tended to escape moderation controls. Moreover, recommendation algorithms usually reinforced the circulation of this type of content. While Matamoros-Fernández's work focuses on the cross-platform dimension, an integrative view of cross-national, cross-media, and cross-platform dimensions would, for example, allow us to understand the transnational reach of

platformed racism as well as to compare the forms of moderation of racist content in traditional versus social media.

We have used this Venn diagram to map different ways of integrating the three comparative dimensions that we have mostly explored separately in previous chapters. Integrating these comparative perspectives has enabled us to make visible potentially relevant aspects of inquiry that would have remained less visible otherwise. Doing so invites us to pose new questions, identify significant sources of variability, contextualize observed phenomena, and increase explanatory and interpretive power. Yet, despite this potential, the paucity of attempts to undertake this kind of scholarship is built on a long-standing divergence among traditions of inquiry, as noted earlier. Thus, in the next section we close this chapter by arguing that the comparative perspectives proposed in this book have the potential to create epistemological trading zones helping to bridge the heterogeneity of studies about social media and about other media more generally.

## Comparative Epistemologies and Trading Zones

The study of media and communication has been historically characterized by its heterogeneity. In the Anglo-Saxon arena there have been repeated accounts of this heterogeneity over the years.<sup>1</sup> One manifestation of this trend has been the proliferation of special issues devoted to matters such as “fragmentation,” “ferment,” “intersections,” and “speaking across subfields” published by *Journal of Communication*, the flagship outlet of the International Communication Association, in 1983, 1993, 2008, 2018, and 2020, among many other related special issues and edited volumes (Gerbner and Siefert 1983; Levy and Gurevitch 1993; Pfau 2008; Fuchs and Qiu 2018; Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Lee 2020). Wiemann, Pingree, and Hawkins (1988) have gone as far as saying that the study of media

and communication had been “bisected before it was united” (307). Yet, despite critiques about the potential deleterious consequences of these splintering dynamics, scholars have recurrently noted that these dynamics appear to have deepened. Already three decades ago Charles Berger (1991) asserted that “the traditionally high level of fragmentation manifested by the field seems to be increasing as the field expands” (101), a claim that (as noted above) Silvio Waisbord (2019) echoed in his account of these matters partly inspired by his experience as editor-in-chief of *Journal of Communication* from 2010 to 2016.

Scholars have often underscored that this heterogeneity is linked to an intellectually parochial predisposition. Michael Pfau (2008) observed that “the tendency is for scholars to burrow deeper into their respective niche, treating their own specialty as if it were isolated and self-contained” (599). This kind of intellectual parochialism resonates with the divisions among patterns in scholarship on social media that we identified in chapter 1. Thus, repeated calls for approaches aimed at overcoming this tendency are unsurprising. One of the most recent calls was made by Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Chul-joo Lee (2020) in their introduction to a special issue about scholarship across subfields: “[C]ross-cutting discussions and integrations are crucial for theoretical innovation, for fuller and deeper understanding of communication processes and effects, and for the field’s ability to achieve public impact” (304). Thus, scholars have most commonly attempted to engage in these discussions and integrations through either methodological or theoretical strategies.

The focus on methodological strategies in part stems from the centrality of attention to matters of method among many students of media and communication phenomena—which, according to Charles Berger (1991), sometimes has verged on an “almost obsessive preoccupation” (105). Within scholarship on social media, computational techniques have been the main candidate for integrative approaches in recent years. This builds on the high expectations that

many researchers across the behavioral and social sciences—and to a lesser extent the humanities—have placed on this kind of techniques (Lazer et al. 2009; boyd and Crawford 2012; van Atteveldt and Peng 2018; Wagner et al. 2021). Along these lines, commenting on the submissions received for their recent special issue Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Lee (2020) state that “in communication research, the most notable development over the past decade has been the rise of computational methods” (305).

Despite these high hopes and the equally high level of popularity in some quarters, we argue that computational methods have significant limitations to foster productive conversations among disparate traditions of inquiry in social media scholarship—and other media and communication phenomena—because of their inherent difficulties in capturing the manifold global, transmedia, cross-platform, historical, and language dynamics examined in chapters 2 through 6. That is, despite the advances in computational power that undergird the contemporary renewal of expectations to develop a universal language of observation already articulated by the philosophers of the Vienna Circle a century ago, the complex differences in meaning and practice that emerge in relation to multiple national, media, and platform settings; the often circuitous unfolding of these matters over time; and the challenges in dynamics of translation and signification that resist the transition from words and images to numbers, posit limitations to the ability of computational methods to foster productive conversations across the various dimensions of scholarship on social media. In addition, the deployment of computational methods as a way of bridging subfields would require methodological homogenization across disparate traditions of inquiry, something that would most likely elicit significant levels of intellectual and institutional resistance among scholars and units with different methodological inclinations.

Deploying theoretical resources to foster these cross-cutting conversations has also proven to be quite limited, albeit for two reasons



that differ from the use of methodological strategies. The first reason is because the most popular theories in the study of media and communication have historically been tied to particular subfields and have been applied much less frequently outside of them. Even those developed to account for social media phenomena tend to remain circumscribed to their domain of application. For instance, even though the definition of “context collapse” (Marwick and boyd 2011) builds on Joshua Meyrowitz’s work on traditional media reception (1985), the majority of the work engaging with the concept with respect to social media does not engage in cross-media accounts, which is consistent with our argument in chapter 3.

The second reason is the remarkable stability of the most popular theories used in the study of media and communication. As Walter, Cody, and Ball-Rokeach (2018) conclude in their study of scholarship published in *Journal of Communication* over the past six decades, a handful of theoretical frameworks has largely dominated the explanations offered by scholars: framing, agenda setting, social learning theory, narrative theory, uses and gratifications, and so on. As we have shown in chapters 2 through 6, these are some of the main theoretical resources also used to account for social media phenomena from comparative perspectives. Therefore, if the use of these theoretical frameworks by itself has not been enough to counter fragmentation until now, there is no reason to expect it would have that effect in the future.

In contrast, we propose that the adoption of comparative perspectives as a key epistemological principle organizing scholarship on social media is a more fruitful alternative than primarily methodological or theoretical strategies to engage in cross-cutting work. This is because these perspectives have the potential to become something akin to the “trading zones” identified by Peter Galison (1997) in his account of the productive exchanges between theorists, experimentalists, and instrument makers in modern physics. There, Galison shows how scientific communities that differed in a number of key

theoretical, methodological, and institutional matters were nonetheless able to fruitfully exchange critical key resources in a highly localized fashion that did not require coming to consensus about larger intellectual matters. Thus, “the focus is on finite traditions within their own dynamics that are linked not by homogenization, but by *local coordination*” (Galison 1999, 145; emphasis in the original).

This local coordination takes place in a trading zone where the different parties meet because, as Pamela Long (2015) has suggested, “each party has a particular knowledge or skill that the other side values as something they would like to possess or use in their own work or thinking” (843). The exchange of knowledge does not require either significant intellectual compromises among the parties or broad translations of methodological and theoretical ideas. Instead, Galison has argued, “what matters is coordination, *not* a full-fledged agreement about signification” (2010, 35; emphasis in the original). This is because “trade focuses on coordinated, local actions enabled by the *thinness* of interpretation rather than the thickness of consensus” (Galison 2010, 36; emphasis in the original). This is a critical point for the perspective we advocate in this book, that is, that the blurring of genres of scholarship on social media sustained by comparative perspectives does not require that these various perspectives come to broad agreements among the various traditions of inquiry involved. All that matters is the shared commitment to guiding epistemological principles that orient scholarship alongside cross-national and regional, cross-media, and cross-platform dynamics. Furthermore, this stance can potentially apply not just to social media but to other objects of inquiry in the field of communication and media studies.

Another important idea regarding trading zones is that “nothing in the notion of trade presupposes some universal notion of a neutral currency” (Galison 1997, 803). Furthermore, “the pertinent theoretical point is that coordination of action occurs between languages in the absence of a full-blown translation” (Galison 1997, 833). The

implication of this is that the trading of ideas can proceed without massive investments in shared conceptual frameworks and the potentially ensuing power struggles among traditions of inquiry. On the contrary, the trades happen through the development of contact languages that enable local coordination without the need for global agreements. In his account of the evolution of twentieth-century physics, Galison shows time and again how “it lies among our linguistic abilities to create these mediating contact languages and to do so in a variety of registers” (1997, 833). We suggest that the simple and intuitive vocabulary we have proposed in this book of dimensions of comparison; topics, approaches, methods, and interpretations; and pathways such as languages and histories, provide some initial building blocks to begin developing the contact languages that could assist in trading key ideas among the various traditions of inquiry involved.

A common thread among the reflections about the growth of specialized knowledge in media and communication scholarship has been to underscore the negative effects of this specialization—as connoted, for instance, in the notion of fragmentation. However, Galison has proposed that what accounts for the strength of scientific inquiry is its disunity: “[S]cience is disunified, and—against our intuitions—it is precisely the *disunification* of science that underpins its strength and stability” (1999, 137; emphasis in the original). Along similar lines, Barbie Zelizer (2016) has recently suggested that dynamics of disunity—plurality, in her framing—not only underpin the field of communication and media studies but are also a basis of its contribution to the larger “fan of disciplines” within the humanities and the social and behavioral sciences. In her view, “Communication’s relationship to evidence pushes the fan of disciplines by reminding them of epistemic plurality, or the multiplicity of available interventions” (Zelizer 2016, 227). If Galison and Zelizer, among others, are right about the potentials of intellectual disunity, the need for comparative perspectives as trading zones is greater than ever. This

is because what might be at stake is not so much ameliorating the downsides of specialization but fostering the strength and stability of scholarship in the field at large.

To illustrate the relationship between disunity of knowledge on the one hand, and strength and stability of domains of inquiry on the other, Galison (1997) resorts to the analogy of a cable put forward by Charles Sanders Peirce. “Reasoning should not form a chain which is no stronger than the weakest link, but a cable whose fibres may be ever so slender, provided that they are sufficiently numerous and intimately connected,” Peirce argued (1984, 213). In this scenario, strength does not emerge from a single unified entity—however powerful it might be—but from the joining of different entities, despite potentially being “slender” or weak. Yet, Galison (1997) cautions: “Ultimately the cable metaphor too takes itself apart, for Peirce insists that the strands not only be ‘sufficiently numerous’ but also ‘intimately connected.’ In the cable, that connection is mere physical adjacency, a relation unhelpful in explicating the ties that bind concepts, arguments, instruments, and scientific subcultures. No mechanical analogy will ever be sufficient to do that because it is by coordinating different symbolic and material actions that people create the binding culture of science. All metaphors come to an end” (844).

Against the backdrop of the limitations of mechanical metaphors of that kind, we have emphasized the power of comparative ways of knowing enabled by the actions of blurring boundaries across disparate dimensions of relevant phenomena and traditions of inquiry. It is our hope that the epistemological turn articulated in this book might amount to new beginnings.

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# To Know Is to Compare

## Studying Social Media across Nations, Media, and Platforms

By: Mora Matassi, Pablo J. Boczkowski

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