

Os benefícios de olhar além das fronteiras: estudos comparativos do sistema de media em diferentes países podem aprofundar e enriquecer a Teoria Deliberativa

The benefits of looking across the fence: comparative studies of the media system in different countries can deepen and enrich deliberative theory

Entrevista com Hartmut Wessler

Interview with Hartmut Wessler

[English Version]

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R E V I S T A
com

política

revista compolítica

2020, vol. 10(3)

compolitica.org/revista

ISSN: 2236-4781

DOI: 10.21878/compolitica.2020.10.3.465

 Open Access Journal

The benefits of looking across the fence: comparative studies of the media system in different countries can deepen and enrich deliberative theory (Interview with Hartmut Wessler)

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Hartmut Wessler is a professor of Media and Communication Studies at the University of Mannheim, Germany. He is a member of the Institute for Media and Communication Studies and Principal Investigator at the Mannheim Center for European Social Research (MZES). His research mainly explores comparative analyses of media systems in different countries and contexts, such as Germany, USA, Brazil, Russia or Lebanon. In this interview, he talks about the main findings and benefits of broader comparative investigations and how they can contribute to a better understanding of the media system and its relationship with deliberative democracy.

Another point addressed in this interview is the methodological issue. Comparative research, such as that carried out by Professor Wessler, is also a challenge in this respect. He and his team have adopted computational methods for big data analysis. In addition to such large-scale analysis, Wessler has also developed methods capable of grasping the details of media content, such as the recognized multimodal frame analysis, in which images and texts are analyzed in a relational way. Currently, he and his research team have been developing a project in which they analyze the news coverage on terrorism in different countries, focusing on emotions.

You have several works that seek to do a comparative analysis between the media systems in different countries and contexts. What has motivated you to do this type of broader analysis?

What initially triggered my interest in comparative research was something I have found in my own media use. If you compare, for example, newspaper coverage in the United States

and in other countries, then you will realize that one of the criteria that has often been used is debate-style articles, that is, articles that present both sides of the story. In countries in which newspapers have political leanings – are not neutral, are not trying to maximize audience across political orientations, but in some way are affiliated with political orientations – you will find that debate-style articles are not so common. This [debate style] is something specific for neutral reporting. Does that mean that in principle coverage in all other countries can only be worse? No, I think because it always depends on the normative value you study. So, my initial idea was to not take the debate-style article as the value that we want media systems to achieve, but as a means. It's not the end, but it's one possible instrument. And how can you develop a good discussion in the media apart from using debates-style articles? That was my initial question. And that is what made me think about ways of developing good public deliberation in systems that do not have a strong liberal tradition of objective reporting and “both sides of the story” style. And that made me think that we need to define the values, irrespective of how they are being realized in different concrete forums and different media systems.

How do you see the importance of research that compares media coverage in different countries/contexts? What do they reveal that less broad investigations, such as those focused on the media of a single country, are not able to identify?

There are different ways of having good political discussions, different ways of engaging audiences. And if you only study one country, you will only find one way of doing it. So, one particular advantage of comparative research is to find best practice examples that are not so familiar. It really broadens your horizon when you compare, for example, more opinionated, also more narrative journalism, with the classical factual and objective reporting. If you open the field up like this, then you will discover more possibilities of doing good democratic media reporting. And I think that is something that single country studies cannot find.

There's one other element. What I just talked about is the comparative dimension. But, nowadays, media systems are also connected with each other. We get a lot of information from other countries through the media of these countries. Maybe not directly, journalists can

take up the stuff from social media or from journalism from other countries and report it here. We witness strong tendencies of transnationalization in the media. I mean, working on media in different countries also sensitizes you to noticing these sometimes surprising connections, for example, that you find the same kind of framing of an event even across very different countries. It's not only differences that you discover, but you also discover how journalism and public communication in general, also citizen communication, are connected across borders and are transnationalized, at least to some degree.

What contributions can these comparative investigations of the media system in different countries, with different democratic characteristics, bring to the analysis of deliberation and the deliberative system?

When we take the deliberative system approach seriously, we have to see that different communication arenas are configured in particular ways. For example, in the European countries, you have strong publicly funded broadcasting, television and radio and also online news. The public funding through licence fees is a strong element and this means also that the other elements of the media system can rely on that. They are configured assuming that this public broadcasting exists. In systems where this does not exist, that are commercialized, where especially broadcasting is a commercial enterprise almost exclusively, the other media have to perform some of those functions themselves.

There is sort of a new specific synergy that the different types of media create. For example, my examples are often from the U.S. because I've studied the US. I apologize for that, because one of the driving forces of my own research was to lessen the focus on the U.S. and to bring other countries in perspective. But still the U.S. is being discussed so much because it's such a powerful country politically. And you see the different media ecology there. So, you have a strong partisan media particularly on the right in talk radio and television news and so on. There is a polarization of the media system into more extremely partisan groups and audiences, which close off against each other. If they know about each other, they basically hate each other. Things like that are, on average, less pronounced in media systems that have this publicly funded and more or less centrist media system.

It also shows that these European systems are somewhat more resistant to change. They're more stable. For example, the newspaper crisis or the crisis of traditional journalism is much more severe in countries where market forces are immediately felt in the structure of media offerings, in which media must sustain themselves through sales and advertising exclusively. Whereas systems where you have this financial base guaranteed by political regulation for important media outlets like broadcasting, but also in some countries for newspapers, the system is a bit more resistant to this decline of traditional journalism. The comparative perspective helps to understand the configuration of this interlocking structure between different parts of the system.

This resistance to change or the stability of the system is different also in terms of what media users know about the world. I mean there is some good research by James Curran and colleagues (2009), who have done comparative work on what audiences know about the world in different media systems. And it again turns out that in those countries where you have public broadcasting people tend to know a bit more about the world and other countries because the information base is provided. It's not completely dependent on audience demand and advertising.

In Brazil, the public broadcasting is still weak. Although a quality public broadcaster is important, it can sometimes be difficult to start this discussion because people tend to confuse it with a certain state control over the media...

I think in systems that have commercial media systems, everything that's not commercial tends to be written off as state-controlled. And that's wrong. But on the other hand, I'm not uncritical of how public broadcasting works in all instances. I'm not naive. If you really look closely, you will find that there is a particular closeness between public broadcasting and established politics. The amount of airtime that politicians from the establishment get is higher and voices from the periphery, from civil society are somewhat less often featured. That is the downside. It seems to be somewhat more state-oriented or oriented towards establish politics, and that should be criticized. That's also something that one can learn from comparative research, namely that in other countries the dominance of state actors in the news is not as high

necessarily. So, there is room for doing things differently also in that respect. I don't want to come across as completely apologetic about everything that public broadcasting does. I think there is less closeness to advertisers, but more closeness to established politicians.

Do you believe that research on the deliberative system has given adequate attention to the media? Are there still gaps to be filled?

I think that the initial drive for the deliberative system perspective comes from political science, and it looks more at political institutions, parliaments, courts, also governments, internal deliberation in government bodies. The media are also there, but what we would like, of course, is to recognize how central they actually are. The voters wouldn't be able to actually develop an image of politics if it weren't for the mass media. Social media or Internet-based communication offer citizens also the possibility to directly participate in opinion-making and partly in decision-making. Basically, I think it is important to really recognize that there's a deliberative system, in which collective opinion-making and decision-making happen, and the media and the citizens are important for that, they are integral parts of this system that you cannot neglect. There are works in that direction, for example by Rousiley Maia (2012). With my own research team, we are also trying at least to compare different arenas in social media, in traditional journalism and online journalism in terms of their deliberative potential.

Sometimes there are also unrealistic expectations from deliberative theorists directed at the media. There's one tendency that John Parkinson (2005) has nicely criticized a few years ago already where he says: Well, media are not just transmission belts for micro-deliberative settings. But they must be taken seriously as a separate arena or a number of separate arenas in which political communication takes place. On the one hand, we cannot expect the media to amplify whatever wonderful micro deliberation we might have in our country, to simply amplify it and make it societal. That's not the way public deliberation in media works. We need to look at the media as the arenas in their own right and to see what they actually do contribute, rather than conceiving them in terms of simple transmission belts. So, in a way, I think we have a lot to do. There's a lot of work still missing. And I think we still need to develop a clear framework for comparing the deliberative potential of different media arenas.

I think we have a lot of research on individual platforms, like Twitter and Facebook, but we need an overarching, systemic view of the potential and the unique contribution of each of these arenas to society and deliberation. I think that's still missing, and it's both an empirical and a theoretical task.

You just talked about deliberative quality in different media. How do you see the importance of understanding the media as a system with different deliberative qualities? How can this approach contribute to complex media studies?

I think we have to more clearly look at the transmission mechanisms between arenas. So, comparing the deliberative potential is one important step, but it's even more important to know how Facebook discussion on an issue, for example, is translated, is being adapted and debated by journalists. How do journalists take up social media? Do they take them up adequately or inadequately? Are they exaggerating the importance or are they diminishing the importance of social media? How do journalists assess whether they report something that is happening on Twitter in their own reports? What are the criteria? We have some research on this that does not use a deliberative perspective, but it's interesting, and we can draw on it.

There may be other transmission mechanisms, too, especially references to media content that politicians make. The professional media users also have specialists constructing for them the published opinion that they react to. And in their own communication, they actually do react to media content a lot. They refer to media, they directly react to citizen communication. But also in parliament, there are frequent references to what the media report, what public opinion says and so on. I think that's another transmission route. We need to really focus on these transmissions and also on how more remote and peripheral arenas devise strategies to actually enter the mainstream. That's something that relates back to this idea of the counter public that has been debated since the 1970s, but which Nancy Fraser (1990) has made a prominent term in media studies and also in political communication. Counter publics are arenas of strategic action, where people try to tie together and connect to various other arenas by making their claims heard in the mainstream. In studying transmission throughout the deliberative system, we have a number of construction sites that we need to work on.

You have, among others, a paper (Wessler & Rinke, 2014) in which you compare TV news performance in three very different countries (Russia, USA and Germany). What have you noticed in your research about the relationship between the type and quality of democracy and the deliberativeness of news media in different countries?

We take the quality of media debate as a more or less direct indicator of the quality of democracy from a deliberative point of view. It makes sense because democracy is understood as something very communicative. It's about the quality of how political issues are being discussed. Whether decisions can be considered legitimate depends on whether they have been properly discussed. That's the basis of democratic legitimacy from the deliberative perspective. And therefore, looking at the deliberativeness of these debates in various arenas is already almost an indicator for the quality of democracy. Of course, there are other perspectives on democracy, other theories.

Generally, in democracies that have power sharing systems, where power is shared between different parties, you have a number of parties in parliament and you have institutions that moderate the power struggle. These countries tend to have more deliberative public discourse than countries in which you have majority systems, where you basically have two-party systems, one party takes the lead and basically can realize their objectives within certain limits. I don't want to caricature the majority system; there's also checks and balances there. But it's not built into the structure of government that strongly. And somehow it seems to be that systems that have power-sharing structures create more opportunities and more incentives to deliberate. You need to constantly accommodate with other political actors, you cannot just write them off and ignore them, at least not to that degree. This is not only something that we found in our own research, it's also something that Lilach Nir (2012a, 2012b) from Israel has shown on the level of the media users. Power sharing incentivizes deliberation on various levels, in the media and in citizen networks, but also in institutions like parliament. I must say, during the Brexit crisis, I've watched some discussions in the British parliament. And of course, you have there a two party system and the whole arrangement is geared toward bipartisan conflict, one party sits on the left, the other party is on the right. So, it's not an amphitheater, it's sort of a confrontational layout. And I think to some degree that debates are a bit more entertaining than what I take from the debates, for example, in the German

parliament. But I also found that there were quite confrontational. So, results are somewhat mixed. It's not always an extremely clear picture, but the tendency is to find more accommodation, discussion and deliberation in power-sharing systems.

*In your last book, *Habermas and the media* (2018), you revisit Habermas' work by shedding light on aspects that, in a way, are little explored by deliberativists, related to the role of the media in Habermas' critical theory. Today we live in a context of polarization, misinformation and distrust in relation to news media, in which normative ideals seem increasingly distant. How do you think the Habermasian deliberative theory can be appropriated or even revived in this context?*

I think the big problem actually is how you deliberate with populists who basically cynically dismiss constructive debate because they have all sorts of quick explanations. The conspiracy theories are often connected with populist ideologies, and you don't know how to deliberate in that setting. That's really something that we need to face more as a theoretical task. If democracy is not working well, what is the role of deliberation? You cannot properly deliberate with somebody who explicitly doesn't want to. I mean, it is the idea that citizens would engage in this voluntarily and so on.

I think the theoretical and practical solution is not so clear yet. I don't have a quick and easy answer for this. Maybe we do need some non-deliberative discourse tactics to be tied in. Certain forms of confrontational protest are necessary. I think to simply always demand to be constructive is not enough in situations of power imbalance, especially if the power holder dismisses all real discussion and tries to manipulate the process. Then there must be a more multifaceted strategy to safeguard actual deliberation and society-wide discussion.

Do you think that comparative studies of the media system in different countries can contribute to a better understanding of the growing distrust in the media? How?

The first thing would be to distinguish between justified scepticism and a sort of generalized cynicism, distrust or hostility towards the mainstream media. I think generalized distrust is

something that the more extreme partisan groups exhibit who don't feel reflected, represented well enough in the media. Therefore they over-generalize and dismiss everything. I'm not saying that the mainstream media, even the quality media, do not make mistakes. They do sometimes make mistakes and there is a certain element of elitism, I think, in some of the quality journalism. So, journalists are more socially, structurally and culturally similar to the elites that they cover than to the common people. It means that there can be an element of elitism and that's not good – that's where justified scepticism is in order. So I think, first, not everything that people criticize about the media is unjustified and a sort of populism.

I'm actually not such an expert on these questions of media hostility or media distrust, but I do think that it is interlocked with political ideologies and provides a quite distorted picture of what the media can actually do. What can the media do to mitigate hostility or to mitigate this kind of distrust? I think there are some important and interesting approaches in explaining what media actually do, because most of this distrust comes from “Well, but you [journalists] haven't reported on this”, “the media have, again, ignored that”, but I know, of course, this is something important, something true. In this context it is important to show how journalists actually go about finding out about the world, to make this transparent and to not just say “ok, we are the bastion of truth”. There are professional routines involved in how journalists come up with editorial decisions. I think citizens, especially those very distrusting and hostile, need to understand how these routines come about. One interesting thing about the corona crisis seems to be that citizens are really interested in reliable information. Even now, there's people who believe in conspiracy theories and who are generally dismissive of the media. But more people than before are actually quite interested and sympathetic with the kind of information that they get from good journalistic media. And I think it sometimes takes crisis situations like this to discover the value of truth through information.

Your previous research project looked at the coverage of global events on climate issues in different countries¹. Given the impact that climate problems will bring in the coming decades, do you think the research on communication has given adequate

¹ Sustainable Media Events? Production and Discursive Effects of Staged Global Political Media Events in the Area of Climate Change.

attention to this topic? Is it possible to say that certain political issues need to be prioritized over others at certain times?

I actually think the topic has been researched quite well by now. But, of course, we have the usual disparities in which countries are being studied well and which countries are more or less neglected. And that's why in our project we made it a point to look at a collection of countries that is important in the various continents, Brazil, South Africa and India, in addition to Germany and the United States. But, in general, I think the topic has received quite some interest from communication researchers so far.

The more general question is about whether particular issues should be prioritized. As much as I find climate change an extremely important topic, decisive for people's future, I don't think one should politically prescribe research agendas. I don't think that's a good idea in general. I value the autonomy of academic work and as much as I like research to address the topics that for me as a citizen are important, I would think that this is something that collectively is developed in the research community and that's not something that should be programmed from the outside. And that's why I think it's up to the research community to develop these things, but also we should be self-critical and we should say, "Ok, and in a discussion like this, are we neglecting this, are we neglecting that?"

My point is less about topics, political issues that we should study more. For me it's more important to bring in a more global perspective as such, whether it's on climate change, whether it's terrorism or whether it's on intercultural exchange. I think that is something that we should, as a research community, highlight more, the fact that we live in a global communications system, which requires ever more intercultural competencies to understand what's happening and also actual knowledge about things that go on beyond our immediate sphere of experience. And so I think that would be more important for me to open up that perspective and continue to push for that rather than prescribing certain issues or solutions.

In this project on climate change you have applied the multimodal frame analysis (Wessler et al., 2016; Wozniak, Lück & Wessler, 2015) to analyze the text and the images of news articles. How do you see the importance of methodological rigor in

research on communication, a field of studies in which methodology is commonly seen as something secondary?

The interesting thing about the multimodal approach is that it's not so much about rigor. Of course, I value rigorous research and we invest a lot of time in developing good methods. But the original idea for the multimodal framing analysis was to actually take the fact seriously that almost all media content that we consume is multimodal. And we have been looking away consistently because we had highly sophisticated methodologies that were completely reductionist, because they were only focused on text. And in a way, in this computational turn that we are in now, we are in an even greater danger of only focusing on text, because text-oriented computational methods are much more advanced than the visual ones. So I think that's the "scandal". If you broaden that perspective and if you take that really seriously, you discover a whole new continent about how to actually deal with this non-textual content. And of course, researchers from visual studies, they will laugh at this astonishment that those of us who are coming more from the traditional communication studies perspective and have studied text of all their lives are experiencing when we open up to this field and we try to devise methods with our own canon of methods that actually take visual content seriously. Generally I think it's important to be very clear and transparent about your methods, and to try to avoid misinterpretations of reality as much as we can. And that's the idea of methodological rigor. It's not a value in and of itself. But the whole endeavour aims at avoiding these misinterpretations and mistakes. And in that sense, I value methods very much.

In this sense, what is the importance of considering the use of images and their relations to the news text, as you did, and how does this interfere with the understanding of the framing processes?

Visual framing and multimodal framing are important new research topics now. They have developed in these past years into things that people tend to take more seriously now. And the particular challenge here is to understand how the connection, how the synergy works between an image and an accompanying textual element. We have developed a relatively, I would say, innovative but also relatively simple idea: You take an article from a newspaper that has a

picture and you catalogue the content of the picture according to some categories, and then the content of the text. The new thing was to put both categorizations into one and the same cluster analysis. Then you have groups of articles that have similar combinations of visual content and textual content. That gives you a sort of an aggregate idea about how certain images tend to coincide with textual information in articles and how that might inform each other.

You can drive this much more deeply if you want. And I think in a way, there is a connection to reception research here, too. We have to understand how people process images and text. There is the idea that images have a more immediate effect, a quicker effect; therefore the perception of pictures frames the perception of the text. That may be true. But I also think there's a reverse process in the sense that captions and textual messages also give meaning to some visuals that might not be understandable otherwise. I think in a way, really deep down, we could have more research on exactly these reception processes. We know something about it, but that could then also inform the reconstruction of these synergies. But that's for the future, for the time being as a general methodological approach I think that simultaneously analyzing text and visuals is always better than just doing one or doing both completely separately, as is still sometimes done. So, I think this simultaneous interconnected analysis is something that has gained traction now and that is really important in order to understand media content. The best example of this is Internet memes where, of course, you have the visual and the little text element superimposed. And it's often ironic. Of course, you cannot understand these memes by just looking at one or the other or by looking at them separately. It is this interconnection that makes the meaning of that meme. And in a way, that is only a reminder of this interconnection that is actually present in all of the content that we consume.

You are currently researching emotions in the news coverage about terrorism in different countries. What have you noticed about the difference in expression/interpretation of emotions in these different contexts?

It's something cultural, but it also has culture-invariant dimensions to it. That's an interesting discovery that we made. So, in that paper (Chan *et al.*, *forthcoming*) where we study emotional

tone of articles which talk about terrorism or refugees or Muslims or combinations of these topics, what we realize is that fear and pity work antagonistically, and this works across cultures. We study Western and Muslim majority countries, and left wing, right wing and center media. What we found is when fear goes up, pity goes down in a particular topical category. I mean, they work antagonistically, it is basically what we call a butterfly pattern, because butterflies also have this sort of symmetrical shape. And if you visualize the emotions across these different topical categories, vertically, as we do in the paper, then you get a butterfly shape. So, we have this metaphor of the butterfly pattern and it actually turned out to be the case in all the countries, all the six countries that we studied. And it was also independent of the political leaning of the media outlet.

So it seems to be something universal or at least culturally invariant in these cultural settings we have studied. But, in general, it makes sense in this type of coverage of events that are about people experiencing hardship or violence. If you develop fear, then you may have less pity with those involved there. Or if you develop less fear, then there is more room for pity. So, that seems to be something overarching. But then we also have culturally specific elements in the emotional tone. If you compare articles that are only on refugees or on Muslim refugees pity goes up. But in articles that talk about Muslims and terrorism, that will usually drive fear up and pity down in Western countries, but not in the Muslim majority countries.

It was interesting to see how clear that pattern actually is. Talking about Islam is not something that drives fear and depresses pity in countries where Islam is a majority religion. So, these are the two things. Emotions are something that we learn, especially the expression of emotions, and it has a strong cultural element. But emotions are also tied to our bodily expressions too, there's a physiological complement, a process in our body, in our brain and on our face. And this also translates into some culture-independent elements, at least in journalism. So, we are not studying emotions of individual people or emotions as expressed through bodily expressions. It is all mitigated through the system and culture of journalism in our case. But on that level it's still interesting to see that there seem to be some culture-invariant aspects to emotions.

Nowadays there is a growing discussion about emotions and the emergence of populist and authoritarian leaders. Such studies often point to the migration crisis and terrorist threats and the fear of them as one of the factors that favoured support for these leaders. Have you observed in your research any results that corroborate and/or complex this relationship between the emotions, especially fear, and the support for populist leaders?

I'm actually not an expert on that. What we do know about terrorism coverage is that if journalism doesn't differentiate between the concrete perpetrators and the larger group, for which perpetrators pretend to speak, if there's an undifferentiated coverage, it will create and support prejudices against that larger group. There is a fear of terrorism that will also support measures against that larger group, mostly the group of Muslims in the Western context. If people are afraid of "Muslim terrorists", they will more easily support measures that hurt Muslims, regardless of whether they are terrorists. That kind of undifferentiated coverage is something that needs to be avoided. If you differentiate perpetrators and the large group for which they pretend to speak and to whom they are similar on some aspects, then you can mitigate that fear perception and you can also mitigate the policy support against vulnerable minorities. Otherwise that policy support ties into the support for right-wing populists. So not for populism as a whole, not for left wing populism, which is also a topic, but for right wing populism that makes a lot of sense.

I'm not a real expert on public opinion research in that sense. But, the earliest steps in the causal chain from the type of undifferentiated reporting through fear perceptions and policy support are pretty well documented. Therefore journalists do have a responsibility for how they cover. In terrorism research, one of the things that we could stress normatively is that it's not just like coverage about any random event because terrorism coverage is so intimately intertwined with how you relate to communities. It is important to observe how you depict the so-called suspect communities, whether you construct a suspect community or not, or whether you are more analytical about the reasons for and the consequences of terrorism. Then you can avoid constructing a suspect community of people who in fact have nothing to do with these terrorists. They are often victims. Most of the victims of Islamist terrorism are actually Muslims. Western non-Muslim victims are actually pretty rare. So, this is something where

journalism does have a special responsibility, because the tone of coverage also translates into the general societal climate in relation to right wing populism.

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Notas

This work was carried out with the support of the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (Capes), Brazil – Financing Code 001 – and the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD).

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Data de submissão: 08/06/2020

Data de aprovação: 02/10/2020

