

Comparing Political Communication

THEORIES, CASES, AND CHALLENGES

Edited by

Frank Esser

University of Missouri-Columbia

Barbara Pfetsch

University of Hohenheim



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Contributors

Jay G. Blumler is Emeritus Professor of the Social and Political Aspects of Broadcasting at the University of Leeds, England, and Emeritus Professor of Journalism at the University of Maryland. A Fellow and Past President of the International Communication Association and a founding co-editor of the *European Journal of Communication*, he has written extensively on the mass media and politics, including “The Crisis of Public Communication” (1995, with Michael Gurevitch) and “The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features” (in vol. 16 (3), 1999, of *Political Communication*, with Dennis Kavanagh).

Wolfgang Donsbach is Professor of Communication and founding director of the Department of Communication at the University of Dresden, Germany. He received his Ph.D. and his postdoctoral Habilitation at the University of Mainz. Prior to his current position he taught at the universities of Dortmund, Mainz, and Berlin. He was a Fellow at the Gannett Center for Media Studies at Columbia University, New York, in 1989–90, and Lombard Visiting Professor at Harvard University, Cambridge, in 1999. From 1995 to 1996 he was president of the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR), and from 2004 to 2005 he is president of the International Communication Association (ICA). He also served as chair of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) Psychology and Public Opinion section and of the ICA Political Communication division. He is managing editor of the *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*. His main research interests are in journalism, political communication, and media effects.

Frank Esser is assistant professor of mass communication at the University of Missouri, Columbia. He was assistant professor in the Institute fuer Publizistik at the University of Mainz, Germany, and visiting professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Oklahoma. His research interests center around cross-national studies of journalism and political communication. He received three top-paper awards at the annual conventions of the ICA (1996, 2001, 2003) and has published four books and various articles in journals such as *European Journal of Communication*, *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, and *American Behavioral Scientist*.

Michael Gurevitch is professor in the College of Journalism at the University of Maryland. Prior to his current position he was on the faculty of The Open University in England. Besides his recent book, *The Crisis of Public Communication* (with Jay Blumler), he has published a large number of journal articles and book chapters and is co-editor of *Mass Communication and Society* (1977), *Culture, Society and the Media* (1982), and *Mass Media and Society* (1991, 1995, 2001). He served as associate editor of the *Journal of Communication* and is currently a member of the editorial board of *Journalism Studies*.

Daniel C. Hallin is Professor of Communication at the University of California at San Diego. His research interests include media and war, media and elections, the development of journalism as a profession, and comparative analysis of media systems, particularly focusing on the United States, Western Europe, and Latin America. He recently published, with Paolo Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* (2004).

Christina Holtz-Bacha is Professor of Communication at the University of Mainz, Germany. After receiving her Ph.D. from the University of Muenster in 1978, she held positions as assistant professor at the University of Munich and full professor at the University of Bochum, Germany. She was visiting professor at the University of Minnesota in 1986 and a Fellow at the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy at Harvard University, Cambridge, in 1999. From 1998–2002 she was chair of the Political Communication division of the German Communication Association (DGpuK), and since 2002 she has been chair of the Political Communication division of the ICA. She published several books, including the *German Communication Yearbook*

(1999), *Wahlkampf in den Medien–Wahlkampf mit den Medien* (1999), and *Wahlwerbung als politische Kultur* (2001).

Hans J. Kleinsteuber is Professor of Political Science and Journalism at the University of Hamburg, Germany. He studied in Berlin and Medford, Massachusetts, and received his Ph.D. in 1975 from the Free University of Berlin. He was visiting professor at various universities in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Japan and is a member of the Euromedia Research Group since 1982. His research interests include media policy and political communication in comparative perspective. He published several books, including *Europa als Kommunikationsraum* (1994, with T. Rossmann), *Information Superhighway* (1996), and *Neue Medientrends in den USA* (2001).

Steffen Kolb studied media and communication sciences and political sciences at the universities of Leipzig and Aix-en-Provence. As research and teaching assistant at the University of Hamburg, Germany, he is completing his doctoral thesis on media coverage of leaded gas in comparative perspective. His research interests include intercultural communication, empirical methods, and political communication.

Hanspeter Kriesi is Professor of Comparative Politics in the Department of Political Science at the University of Zurich, Switzerland. After studies in sociology at the universities of Berne, Chicago, and Zurich, he became an assistant professor in sociology at the University of Zurich. Then he taught political behavior at the University of Amsterdam and Swiss politics and comparative politics at the University of Geneva. His research focuses on opinion formation in grassroots democracies, elections, social movements, the development of West European party systems and the European public sphere, and public participation in democratic systems.

Sabine Lang is Visiting Associate DAAD Professor of Politics at the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies of the University of Washington, Seattle. Having finished her studies of political science in Freiburg, New York, and Berlin, she did her doctorate on the “Political Public in the Modern State” (published 2001). She was assistant professor in the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the Free University of Berlin and visiting Fellow at the Center of European Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. She published widely, particularly on

political public sphere, mass media, and gender studies. In her current research project on mobilizing urban publics, she investigates changes of local publics in German and U.S. cities.

Paolo Mancini is Professor of Communication and Academic Director of the School of Broadcast Journalism at the Università di Perugia, Italy. He has published several books, including *Videopolitica* (1985), *Come Vincere le Elezioni* (1989), *Guardando il Telegiornale* (1991), and *Il Giornalismo e le Sue Regole* (1992). Many of his works appeared in international journals such as *Theory and Society*, *European Journal of Communication*, and *Journal of Communication*. His research concerns primarily political communication and comparative analysis of mass media systems. He recently published, with Dan Hallin, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* (2004).

Pippa Norris is the McGuire Lecturer in Comparative Politics at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. A political scientist, her research compares election and public opinion, political communications, and gender politics. She has published more than thirty books, including *A Virtuous Circle* (2000), *Digital Divide* (2001), *Democratic Phoenix* (2002), *Rising Tide* (2003), *Electoral Engineering* (2004), and *Sacred and Secular* (2004) for Cambridge University Press.

Thomas E. Patterson is Bradlee Professor of Government and the Press in the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. He previously taught for many years at Syracuse University, where he took a position after completing his Ph.D. at the University of Minnesota. His recent book *The Vanishing Voter*, published in 2002, is based on a study of the decline of citizen participation in U.S. elections. Earlier books include *Out of Order*, which was recipient of the American Political Science Association's Graber Award for the best book in political communication, and *The Unseeing Eye*, which was selected by the American Association for Public Opinion Research as one of the fifty most influential books of the past half century in the field of public opinion.

Barbara Pfetsch is Professor of Communication and Media Policy at the University of Hohenheim, Germany. She previously held a position as senior researcher at the Science Center Berlin for Social Research (WZB) and taught at the Free University of Berlin and the University of Mannheim. She was a Fellow at the J. F. Kennedy School of Government

at Harvard University, Cambridge, and at the Center for German and European Studies at Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. Her research interests center on comparative analyses of political communication and on media and the public sphere. She published several books including *Politische Kommunikationskultur* (2003) and numerous articles and book chapters including “Political Communication Culture in the United States and Germany” (in vol. 6 (1), 2001, of *Press/Politics*) and “Government News Management” (in *The Politics of News: The News of Politics*, edited by D. Graber et al., 1998).

Patrick Rössler is Professor of Communication Science at the University of Erfurt, Germany, and serves as representative of the ICA in Germany. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Hohenheim, Germany, and was assistant professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Munich. His research interests concern political communication, media effects, media contents, and new media technology. He has published several books including *Agenda-Setting* (1997), *Online-Kommunikation* (1998, ed.), and *Theoretische Perspektiven der Rezeptionsforschung* (2001, edited with U. Hasebrink and M. Jäckel) and numerous journal articles in, among others, *Journal of Communication*, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, and *Communication Research*.

Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck is Professor of Politics and Political Communication at the University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany. His research interests center on comparative analyses of political communication, political participation, political culture, and election campaigns. His publications include *Do Political Campaigns Matter? Campaign Effects in Elections and Referendums* (2002, with D. M. Farrell), *Politische Kommunikation und Wählerverhalten. Ein internationaler Vergleich* (2002), and *Mass Communication, Personal Communication and Vote Choice – The Filter Hypothesis of Media Influence in Comparative Perspective* (in vol. 33, 2003, of *British Journal of Political Science*).

Robert L. Stevenson is Kenan Professor of Journalism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He earned a Ph.D. from the University of Washington in 1975, where his academic adviser was Alex S. Edelstein. Since joining the University of North Carolina in 1975, he has been a Fulbright Senior Scholar in Mainz, Eric Voegelin Professor in Munich, German Academic Exchange Service Visiting Professor in Dresden, and

CONTRIBUTORS

assistant director of the American Journalism Center in Budapest. He is author of *Global Communication in the 21st Century* and *Communication, Development, and the Third World – The Global Politics of Information* and coeditor of *Foreign News and the New World Information Order*. He was associate editor of *Journalism Quarterly* and president of the regional Southern Association for Public Opinion Research.

David L. Swanson is Associate Provost and Professor of Speech Communication and Political Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His research concerns the social effects of mass communication, with particular attention to the role of media in politics. His scholarly work on these subjects has appeared in various journals and volumes in the United States, Europe, and Asia and includes “The Uses and Gratifications Approach to Mass Communication,” “New Directions in Political Communication” (with D. Nimmo), and “Politics, Media, and Modern Democracy” (with P. Mancini).

Werner Wirth is Professor of Empirical Communications at the University of Zurich, Switzerland. He previously taught as Professor of New Media and Online Communication at the University of Munich, Germany. He has edited three books and published numerous book chapters and journal articles in different areas, including media exposure and media effects research, infotainment, online research, and empirical methods.

Thomas Zittel is John F. Kennedy Memorial Fellow at the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies at Harvard University, Cambridge. He studied political science and German and holds an M.A. from Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, and a Ph.D. from the University of Mannheim, Germany. From 1990 to 2001, he was assistant professor at the University of Mannheim; from 1996 to 1997 he was Congressional Fellow of the American Political Science Association. His current research deals with the impact of computer networks on democracy. He has published numerous journal articles and book chapters on this topic and directs a research project on parliaments, representative democracy, and new digital media.

Comparing Political Communication

Reorientations in a Changing World

Barbara Pfetsch and Frank Esser

This volume intends to assess the state of the art of comparative research in political communication and to make reference to potential ways in which political communication could and should develop. When Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch urged political communication to adapt to the perspective of international comparison more than 25 years ago they were able to refer to only a few studies (Blumler and Gurevitch 1975). At the time, the neglect of comparative work in communication research was even more blatant as this approach had been well established in neighboring social sciences such as political science. However, scholars in comparative politics were never really interested in the mass media and political communication. In communication science on the other hand, political communication has always been a central subject; though it was believed for a long time that it would suffice to describe singular phenomena in the realm of national politics or to subscribe to historical studies. Thus, until the early 1990s communication research lacked an international orientation comparable to that of political science (Kaase 1998; Schoenbach 1998).

From today's point of view it is surprising how long it took for the comparative approach to be acknowledged as a necessary and useful strategy and tool of communication research. Doris Graber (1993, 305) rightly points out that political communication cannot be suitably studied without comparative research "as its form varies between cultures, which makes it necessary and instructive to analyze it from different cultural perspectives." Comparative research in political communication deserves more attention because it enables us to inspect our own findings critically by using the examination of others, and only by doing so enables us to reach conclusions with an extensive claim to validity.

Against this background, it is all the more remarkable that we lack a comprehensive publication in the English-speaking world that brings to the fore and discusses the questions and concepts as well as the applications and problems of comparative political communication research. Such a publication¹ has become all the more important as we can meanwhile document a rapid development of relevant research. During the 1990s, various productive networks of researchers working across national borders were formed that were responsible for a series of prominent and fruitful projects. Moreover, the process of European integration gives the activities on this side of the Atlantic further impetus. Any doubts pertaining to the benefits and the prospect of the comparative approach have been abandoned. Hence, Michael Gurevitch and Jay Blumler (Chapter 14, this volume) note: “Far from being neglected, comparative political research has almost become fashionable.” With this in mind, the challenge now is to revisit and systematize the manifold studies into a comprehensive “state-of-the-art” report, which is a suitable document of the advances of comparative research in this subfield of communication science.

Going beyond the sociology of communication science as an academic discipline, this volume also allows for the deeper insight that political communication processes in themselves are by no means to be understood as delimited phenomena. In the twenty-first century we are confronted with developments in the realm of politics and mass communications that rule out the conception of political communication as a phenomenon that could be defined within singular national, cultural, or linguistic boundaries. In fact, the challenge today is to face the developments and consequences arising from the modernization and globalization of political processes. This is not least necessary because we now know that the structures and processes of media development and communications do systematically impact the development of democracy, the legitimization of political power, and the participation in politics (Chapter 6, this volume).

However, studies on the relationship between political communication and the quality of democracy across different countries (Gunther and Mughan 2000; Thomass and Tzankoff 2001) reveal that the role of political communication is by no means consistent. It is far more dependent on whether established “old” democracies or so-called new

¹ A German edition of this volume was published by Westdeutscher Verlag, Wiesbaden, 2003, under the title *Politische Kommunikation im internationalen Vergleich – Grundlagen, Anwendungen, Perspektiven*.

democracies are being considered. While there is evidence that the media in transition countries support the adoption of democratic norms and play a marked constructive role in political consolidation (Schmitt-Beck and Voltmer 2001), their contribution to the democratic process in contemporary Western systems is no more than ambivalent. Thus, the interrelations and consequences of political communication clearly vary according to the duration and the traditions of the development of democracy, whereby the problems and deficits of modernized political communication mainly occur in the Western mass democracies. As a consequence, the contributions to this volume – with the exception of the study by Norris (Chapter 6, this volume), which takes a global perspective – concentrate on the “old,” established democracies in Western Europe and the United States.

In view of the significance of communication processes for the development of democracy many mainstream researchers dwelled on the United States as the country in which the modernization of political communication seemed furthest advanced and most apparent. The American “media democracy” appeared for a long time to be *the* role model for the development of political communication in all Western democracies (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, 77). With the creation of the term *Americanization* the essential paradigm had been set that generated a great deal of dynamics in international research. A boom in comparative political communication studies was the outcome following the criticism of the parochial perspective of many U.S.-centered projects, which tended to neglect institutional arrangements as well as cultural and structural contexts of political communication. Since the 1990s, European and American scholars have been asking themselves whether the American model of media democracy is indeed appropriate for describing generalizable patterns of developments of modern political communication in today’s Western democracies (Gurevitch and Blumler 1990; Swanson 1992; Negrine and Papathanassopoulos 1996; Swanson and Mancini 1996). The fundamental transformation of the media systems of the Western world, which was caused by the changes in information technology and communication infrastructure and by the global media economy and diffusion of news, also belongs to the driving forces behind comparative research. A clear sign of the globalization of media is the growth and concentration of internationally active media conglomerates. This development has had significant repercussions for national media systems. In almost all European countries there has been a reorientation of media policy with respect to deregulation

and the opening up of media markets. In the case of the United States there has been a further wave of commercialization over the past decade (Underwood 1998; Bogart 2000). While the long-term consequences are still not foreseeable, it was already clear at the beginning of the transformation process that political communication would not go unaffected by the technical development and the increase in competition and commercialization. In view of the development of global communication systems and processes, which no longer stop at national borders, it is obvious that research also cannot be limited to examining particularities that concern one country only. The onus now was on discovering transnational trends, similarities, and deviations from general patterns that only become apparent when a broad – comparative – perspective is taken.

The growth of comparative research has led to a cornucopia of studies. In this situation it is appropriate and necessary to establish paradigmatic paths in the knowledge jungle and to bundle results in order to be able to develop new perspectives. This is the starting point of this volume. In the appraisal of the current research, we follow an outline of three main sections, discussing the fundamentals, applications, and perspectives of comparative political communication research. The first part will access comparative political communication by expounding the basic themes, the problems, and overall developments and by providing an overview of the spectrum of comparative studies. Furthermore, an introduction would be incomplete if it did not address the problems of comparative research designs and its methodological foundations. The essays in the second part of the volume highlight concrete examples of comparative studies in specific subareas of political communication. The focus here is on comparative investigations into the structures, processes, actors, contents, and effects of political communication. These contributions are not just concerned with presenting tangible projects and their results but also with discussing the specific added value of the comparative approach. This added value takes the form on the one hand of a substantial increase in insight regarding the respective research questions and on the other of experience gained regarding the implementation of comparative designs. The contributions in the third part of the volume look to the future and discuss the theoretical and methodological prospects of the comparative approach. The final chapter provides a synthesis of the common theoretical and methodological issues of the studies presented and attempts to integrate the manifold approaches, questions, and concepts.

INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON AS A RESEARCH STRATEGY
AND METHODOLOGY

The acknowledgment of the relevance of communication in political processes is of course not synonymous with the successful implementation of comparative studies. A widening of the perspective thus implies research designs in which a variety of exogenous influencing factors that are difficult to control must be considered. As a matter of principle, various methodological conditions are to be set when a comparative perspective is taken.

Comparative research lives up to the rule that “every observation is without significance if it is not compared with other observations.” It can be said, arguing theoretically from the point of view of epistemology, that we form our ideas through comparisons. We know that apples are not pears because we have compared them with each other. An object only develops an identity of its own if it is compared with others” (Aarebrot and Bakka 1997, 49). This means that we observe at least two populations when making comparisons. In the field of political communication we usually compare political systems that can be comprehended as nation states, regional entities, political subsystems, or parts of subsystems (e.g., local areas of communication or elite or media cultures). Comparative political communication research is also always a cultural comparison. Even though many studies that compare across countries are based on the assumption that culture and nation overlap, this must not disguise the fact that both parameters are not necessarily congruent. It is often the case that contradictory and discrepant processes and phenomena of political communication appear within one single political system taking the form of a nation state, as is shown by comparing journalistic cultures, for instance, in Francophone and Anglo-American Canada (Pritchard and Sauvageau 1997) or by comparing media effects in Western and Eastern Germany (Chapter 13, this volume). Cultures constitute communities of values in the broadest sense. In comparative political communication research, therefore, it is possible to study specific subcultures and their value structures such as the political communication cultures emerging between journalists and political spokespeople in different political systems (Chapter 15, this volume) or the local communication cultures within their specific media environments across countries (Chapter 7, this volume).

Although the nation-state is by no means the only reference frame for comparative studies, we adhere to the term *comparative* in this volume

to signify the comparison across national political systems or societies. We are deliberately not using the terms *interculturally comparative* or *intersystemically comparative*. The pragmatic reason for this convention is that of all conceivable reference frames national political systems are the most clear-cut (Kohn 1989; Chapter 17, this volume). If the terms *interculturally* or *intersystemically* were used we would have to define in every case what is meant by *culture* or *system*. Because the overwhelming majority of studies in this volume is concerned with comparisons between countries it seems justified to speak of comparative research. As we understand it in this volume, comparative political communication research refers to comparison between a minimum of two political systems or cultures (or their subelements) with respect to at least one object of investigation relevant to communication studies. Furthermore, correlations with explanatory variables are considered on the microanalytical actors' level; the meso-analytical organizational and institutional level; and on the macroanalytical system or cultural level.

Moreover, we assume that the specific structures, norms, and values in political systems shape the political communication roles and behaviors. Therefore, comparative research is often designed in such a way that the countries studied are selected with regard to the contextual conditions of the object of research (Chapter 17, this volume). Thus, the crucial questions to be answered are 1) What always applies regardless of the contextual influences? 2) How does the object of investigation "behave" under the influence of different contextual conditions? Michael Gurevitch and Jay Blumler (Chapter 14, this volume) rightly stress that comparative research "should be designed to realize 'double value.' That is, it should aim to shed light not only on the particular phenomena being studied but also on the different systems in which they are being examined. In other words, more mature comparative research will be 'system sensitive.'" The way in which the context shapes the object of investigation and, conversely, any repercussions on the system resulting from the object of investigation, is of central importance in comparative political communication.

Since the early days of comparative studies, enormous progress has been made with respect to the refinement of research designs. In the meantime, the more demanding studies are built on the logic of "quasi-experimental methods." Researchers select their cases or countries in such a way that they correspond with the differing characteristics of the independent, explanatory variables (e.g., suffrage in countries with the

majority vote system versus countries with proportional representation) in different system contexts. The groups in field experiments comparing different countries are then compared to see to which degree the systems differ with respect to the dependent variables (e.g., personalization of election campaign reporting). Such quasi-experimental research designs certainly forbid a strongly causal attribution of explanatory factors for the determined variance of the dependent variable. However, “soft control” of the variance can be achieved by describing systematically the institutional and cultural contexts, and thereby fulfill the requirements “to think structurally, to conceptualize in macro terms, to stretch vertically across levels and horizontally across systems” (Blumler et al. 1992, 8). Against the background of these specifications the understanding of the comparative approach underlying this volume can be complemented in the following way: Comparative political communication research refers to a particular strategy to gain insight that allows for general conclusions, the scope of which cover more than one system and more than one cultural context, and that explains differences (or similarities) between objects of investigation within the contextual conditions of the surrounding systems or cultures.

The comparative research strategy in political communication is not only associated with chances but also risks. The fundamental problem of comparative research in the social sciences lies, as Werner Wirth and Steffen Kolb (Chapter 5, this volume) point out, with the establishing of functional equivalence. The authors show in their chapter that the pitfalls of comparability appear on many levels so that researchers have to make a series of far-ranging strategic decisions when conceiving studies. Among these, the selection of countries and the determining of a quasi-experimental design seem to be among the easier ones. The authors rightly refer to the two strategies that are discussed as “most similar” and “most different systems design” in the literature (Przeworski and Teune 1970). Studies that are based on a “most similar design” make it possible to study the cultural differences in most similar systems. Studies that are based on a “most different design” unearth the similarities in the systems that differ the most. It is more difficult, on the other hand, to determine functionally equivalent constructs, indicators, and methods in such a way that it doesn’t amount to contortions and the interpretation of measurement artifacts as differences. The chapter by Wirth and Kolb makes us sensitive to the fact that comparative research rests on many prerequisite and implicit conditions. Moreover, the quality of comparative studies regarding their potential to empirically determine

and explain interrelationships all the more depends on whether the research is systematically guided by theory.

The range of themes and research questions associated with comparative political communication research is – as Hans Kleinsteuber (Chapter 4, this volume) points out – enormously broad and diverse. In this respect, comparative research goes well beyond determining similarities and differences between different objects studied. Kleinsteuber stresses that comparative designs fit to analyze complex interrelationships and thereby shed light on processes of diffusion, dependence, temporality, or performance. With respect to political communication, Kleinsteuber's overview reminds us that comparative studies are by no means limited to the prominent subject of election campaign communication, as one may believe from glancing through the literature. In fact, comparisons across countries have been applied in many fields of communication studies and media policy. Moreover, concerning the analysis of media systems we are on the way to understanding international processes of modernization and transformation as well as processes and effects of media regulatory policy. However, Kleinsteuber also emphasizes that some political developments, that is the problem of multilevel governance as observed, for instance, with the expanding competences following European Union integration policy, represent a serious challenge for comparative research.

THE QUESTIONS AND THEMES OF COMPARATIVE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION RESEARCH IN THIS STUDY

The demand for comparative research in political communication is consequential because it requires abstracting from the implicit premises and the national idiosyncrasies in both politics and media communications in the search for generalizable communication patterns and their consequences. Considering the substantial driving forces of comparative research two comprehensive themes stand out. On the one hand, fears concerning the homogenization of media, media contents, and political communication processes as a result of technological, social, and political change led to the debate of concepts of convergence such as Americanization, globalization, and modernization. On the other hand, the suspicion that the media would dominate the modern political publicity process with the implication of dysfunctional effects on modern democracies provoked an exhaustive preoccupation with the structures, actors, media contents, and effects of political communication.

**METATHEMES OF COMPARATIVE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION
RESEARCH: AMERICANIZATION, GLOBALIZATION,
AND MODERNIZATION**

The idea of a convergence of media systems and of a homogenization of media contents has established itself at a relatively early stage as a process of “Americanization” in the literature. As Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini (Chapter 2, this volume) write, “in terms of the kinds of media structures and practices that are emerging and the direction of change in the relation of media to other social institutions, it is reasonable to say that homogenization is to a significant degree a convergence of world media toward forms that first evolved in the United States.” Americanization accordingly comprises a targeted, uni-linear diffusion of political communication practices from the United States to other countries. Central parameters of behavioral logic converge with those of the corresponding actors in the United States, irrespective of institutional restrictions. The source of innovation is without doubt the United States, the adoption pattern is an imitation of communication practices that are prevalent there. This view, however, remains for the most part superficial, as it refers only to symptoms and practical patterns of political communication, whereas the institutions of the political system or the organizations and roles of media and political actors are neglected.

Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini therefore suggest that the changes in political communication are assigned to the broader and more complex concept of “globalization.” This perception implies a reciprocal, free, even conflicting exchange of values, norms, and practices between cultures. The far-reaching integration of modern means of communication facilitates that actors in one country orient themselves to the practices of other countries – including those of the United States – and adopt their strategies. In so doing, however, there is no hierarchical subordination/superiority, as implied by the term *Americanization*. The perspective of globalization points to mutual interaction or transaction processes of communication stemming from various sources. Many of the structures and behavior patterns that characterize an increasingly homogenous global communication system were in fact first of all observed in the United States. “Where European countries have borrowed American innovations, they have done so for reasons rooted in their own economic and political processes, often modifying them in significant ways” (Chapter 2, this volume).

A decisive shift in perspective regarding the changes in political communication was to attribute these to endogenous causes in the respective