A context-led approach to media systems research

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Introduction

Why is the printed press booming in India but declining in the USA? Why are Swiss citizens voting to keep public service broadcasting fees, while France is abolishing them? Why are press councils a tool of media accountability in one country and a tool of government control in another? Why are the media systems that developed in the countries of the former Soviet Union so different?

It is comparative media systems research that tries to answer these questions. By looking at the structural conditions for as well as the political and economic influences on media production, media ownership, and media use, media system research aims to explain commonalities and differences regarding the development of media in its respective contextual constraints (Esser, 2014, p. 15). It is thus an important field in communication studies, enabling us to "process world knowledge" (Kleinsteuber, 2004, p. 83) by pointing us to a multitude of sometimes contradictory global developments, to test theories regarding their applicability beyond a single case, and to learn from other examples to understand shortcomings and predict possible developments in one's "own" system (p. 68). Yet, current media system research has a strong focus on Europe and North America, that is, a Western bias both in its geographical scope as well as with regard to the models, indicators, and categories predominantly developed in and for Western contexts. This has resulted in media system typologies that reflect a Western normative ideal of how media should function, and what the media–politics relations should look like. For decades, Siebert et al.'s *Four Theories of the Press* (1956), which favored a "social responsibility" or a "libertarian" model of media systems against an "authoritarian" or "soviet-totalitarian" model, has been used to classify media systems around the world in a simplified and often pejorative way, indicating that some countries are "not there yet" in their development toward the preferred liberal-market democracy. This typology was influential until Hallin and Mancini's *Comparing Media Systems* was published in 2004. Their comparison of 18 European and North American countries indicates three possible models of media–politics relations, including the "liberal," the "democratic-corporatist," and the "polarized-pluralist" models. In the follow-up research, many authors have tried to locate countries in the Global South within these models, often concluding that they

need to be described as somehow polarized-pluralist—making this model a "catch-all category" (Voltmer, 2011, p. 225). This has produced a media system research tradition which squeezes media systems all around the world into predefined pigeonholes. While such an approach enables us to differentiate the world into, for example, free and unfree, liberal and illiberal, or democratic and authoritarian systems, and thus evaluate developments from a normatively loaded Western point of view, it prevents us from learning more about the specific characteristics of media systems beyond these narrowly defined categories.

Altogether, we are faced with challenges resulting from Eurocentric work traditions, processes, and structures in (communication) studies as a whole. For media systems research, this specifically means that the unadjusted application of predominantly Eurocentric normative theories and models closes our eyes to contextual norms, values, theories, and knowledge as soon as we consider communication contexts that lie outside the much-researched West. This results in blind spots regarding communication phenomena in some regions of the world, an implicit Eurocentric universalism, and a normative hegemonic practice that perpetuates othering and the maintenance of colonial power imbalances in knowledge production and diffusion. Even though increasing globalization has facilitated access to various contexts, the economic, political, and cultural importance of different world regions has increased, and the boundaries between "Western" and "Eastern" (academic) paradigms are becoming increasingly blurred (Kuo & Chew, 2009, pp. 423–427)—this is hardly reflected in current media systems research. It seems as if this long-standing research tradition has made us ask the wrong questions. Media system research should help us to "process world knowledge" and to gain an understanding of how media structures actually shape media practices and how, in turn, practices and policies shape media structures. Building on previous attempts to de-Westernize media system research (see e.g., Curran & Park, 2000; Stremlau, 2013; Voltmer, 2011), this chapter will shed light on the shortcomings of the dominant lines of current media system research and propose instead a context-led approach to media system analysis including a relational research framework.

In the next section, we will first problematize these shortcomings, contrasting them with context sensitive and relational approaches. In the subsequent section, we will then offer some ideas on how to translate these abstract approaches into more concrete research designs and methodologies by building on a review of relevant studies in this field. Our aim is to provide a perspective for a cosmopolitan version of media system research.

Challenges to achieving a cosmopolitan media system research

In the following, we identify four crucial challenges that in our view need to be reflected upon in order to move toward a more cosmopolitan media systems research.

First, we must reflect on how the systems approach is typically used. Mainly emerging from normative theories in political science, the concept of systems is widely used, but often left without a clear definition in media system research (Mancini, 2020, p. 5762). For this reason, we want to raise awareness of the arbitrariness of the use of the term "system" (Rantanen, 2013, p. 257) and emphasize the notion of "context" that should

guide media system research. This might also include a reconsidering of the boundaries of the concept of media systems, which in most academic literature refers to professional mass media. We do not argue to dispense with the use of the term "media system" research, but to emphasize its various connotations. In the following, we refer to media systems as a rather general term, as Mancini (2020, p. 5764) does in his critical assessment of the concept of media system: "As an abstract idea, the definition itself of a media system and its borders may vary in relation to the scholar's investigation goals." This illustrates the necessity to always (re)define what is understood as a "media system" for our specific research questions.

A system is mostly understood as a combination of elements with complex structures and logics (Thomaß, 2013, p. 15). Those structures and logics are shaped by their relationships with one another. This becomes clear in Hallin's (2016) definition of a systems approach:

> [A] basic element of the "systems perspective" is the idea that the elements of a system are defined by their relationships with one another, and therefore cannot be understood without reference to the whole pattern of relationships. (p. 2)

In this regard, a system's perspective highlights relations, but strangely enough research often does not put them into focus. So far, the media system analysis literature has tended to focus on characteristics of categories and factors rather than their relations.

At this juncture, a relational research perspective offers a starting point for overcoming the isolated analysis of components and structural conditions and determinations. As all conditions in a media context are determined by social relationships, a relational perspective does not solely study structures and actors themselves, which is characteristic of most "systems"-oriented research (Emirbayer, 1997, p. 282; Häußling, 2010, p. 70). The relational paradigm of network theory shifts the perception of media contexts along fixed categories and dimensions to the perception of social realities stemming from connectivity, processes, and relations.

The appeal of the network concept as an approach for researching media systems lies in the fact that it is situated between the micro and macro levels, that it encompasses dynamics, and that, as a relational approach, it provides a genuine sociological impetus for tracing mechanisms of social integration and the conditions and results of transformation processes (see also Emirbayer, 1997; Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994). Network analysis usually takes place at several levels, from the micro level of individual relationships to the macro level of network structures in entire societies. There is also an emphasis on structural analysis to identify patterns, centralities, subgroups, and other structural characteristics. Altogether, a network-focused analysis comprises several key concepts and principles, such as (power) relationships as central elements for understanding social structures and actions (Löwenstein, 2017), contextuality as cultural, historical, and structural dimensions (Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994), dynamics (Hollstein, 2006), and social capital. Thus far, network analysis has mainly been used for investigating interpersonal and organizational communication. It is frequently applied to questions that deal with social formations in and around the Internet and examine organizational structures. However, some studies and approaches emphasize the value of applying network

analysis on a macro level to investigate the network relations of media systems (e.g., Castells, 2001, 2007, 2011; Radue, 2022; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; van Dijk, 2021). Still, questions of power relations in media systems are often inadequately addressed. To overcome this problem, decolonial, feminist, or intersectional approaches as specific lenses of relational research frameworks might help to investigate the social realities of media systems by researching rights, resources, and representation. The feminist movement has brought about sophisticated debates about questions of voice and representation over the last decades (Harvey, 2020; Kurasawa, 2004, p. 241). Such perspectives acknowledge the key role of the media in circulating ideologies and its impact on (id)entities. They also help establish a focus on communication power structures in media system research.

In sum, a relational research framework enables a critical perspective by analyzing power relations, social inequality, and structural barriers that are embedded in relationships and contexts. Integrating this lens into approaches for researching media systems can be achieved by putting an emphasis on the relations between the different actors and institutions that are typically regarded in media systems models. Understanding a relational perspective as context-led research thus enables us to approach communication contexts more openly and thus grasp the details of what is relevant on the ground.

Second, the categories used are often normatively loaded with assumptions of what media structures should look like according to a Western perspective. For example, and with regard to analyses of media markets—a key category in media systems research—academics in the tradition of the critical political economy of communication (e.g., Wasko et al., 2011) have already identified that the functioning of media markets is undermined by neoliberal presumptions. However, the reality of market concentration in many Western countries has shown that the sole competition of entities does not guarantee the best functioning of the media (Knoche, 2013). Public service broadcasting is an important counterweight because it "addresses audiences as public citizens, not individual consumers" (Michalis, 2024, p. 131). Yet, with regard to media systems beyond Europe and North America, the neoliberal preference for a privatization of media outlets and infrastructure as being key for independent media has remained dominant in media systems research, even though some authors have viewed it very critically, as these measures have mainly led to pseudo-liberalization and crony media businesses loyal to regime politics (Della Ratta et al., 2015; Richter & Gräf, 2015).

Thus, media system research that takes Western-centric models and concepts as a starting point would find many aspects of media systems in the Global South deficient by default, positioning itself as a norm. In the same vein that Powers and Vera-Zambrano (2018) "argue for paying closer attention to the epistemologies that shape the very ways comparative research on journalism and political communication is produced" (p. 144), we see contextualization as an alternative approach to account for the limitations that universalism brings about.

For us, therefore, cosmopolitan media systems research should be shaped by a relational approach that is informed by the respective local context**.** When we apply such a context-led research lens when doing media system research, we bring into focus the quality of relations between societal subsystems and the formal and informal structures and processes that shape them. We therewith can also overcome the predominance of

normative Western assumptions on what media structures should look like and rather focus on an analysis of how they actually are. Various examples from different parts of the world illustrate how such a relational and context-led approach would allow us to better understand media systems that are shaped by war and conflict, which Western normative assumptions and categories are of little value in explaining (Radue, 2022).

For example, in conflict settings, traditional media channels might be captured by conflicting parties, so that citizens mistrusting these sources turn to informal channels or interpersonal communication. Stremlau (2013) has explained this dynamic with reference to Somaliland, showing how such examples can challenge dominant understandings of media systems (p. 289).

Regarding contexts where information flows do not mainly pass through broadcasting, print, and journalistic online media, scholars have argued that we should think of communication as a transaction happening in a context shaped by different (f)actors and media and put greater emphasis on the specific societal, technological, and economic factors, but also on the nature of media themselves (see also Hafez & Grüne in this book). This is not only of interest in contexts with weak mass media but also regarding the Internet, where strict differentiations between senders and receivers, public, and private communication tend to fade (Ruotsalainen & Heinonen, 2015).

Similarly, research on media systems in Southeast Asia has highlighted the necessity of deeply looking into the contexts to understand locally relevant categories of media systems. In Myanmar, for example, where over 100 different languages are spoken, this diversity is not reflected in the media landscape. Instead, the policy of teaching only Burmese in schools is also mirrored in the media landscape, where we mainly find Burmese publications. Criminalization of unauthorized publication in ethnic languages stifles cultural expression in Myanmar. A context-led approach can reveal "knowledge necessary to understand underlying concepts, or rather their relationships and how they interact, which in turn provide vital insight on the formation of media environments" (Radue, 2022, pp. 172–173). For example, "neither does the existence of a multilingual society alone necessitate the emergence of a multilingual media market, nor is the mere existence of a multilingual media market an indicator for a free and plural media system in a multilingual society" (Radue, 2022, p. 173). This becomes clear only when we delve into the context of social structures.

Such examples illustrate that a research lens that applies certain Western normative assumptions and does not embed media structures into their context can overlook and thus miss the point of how communication works on the ground. To overcome this problem, Wasserman (2013) argued to bring in "'listening' as an ethical value" (p. 77). Basically, we need to listen to the context itself with its own rules, norms, and values, which can speak to us as researchers. Decolonizing media system research is thus the acknowledgment of the importance of context and the respect for the particularity of contextual diversity.

Third, current media system research often fails to de-Westernize its concepts and lenses also because it rarely analyzes media systems beyond the West. On the one hand, there are many geographical blind spots in media systems research beyond Europe and North America. Even if countries of the Global South are included, it is mostly the big and powerful countries that are in focus, such as Brazil and Mexico in Latin America or

South Africa on the African continent, but most of the rest remain blind spots. On the other hand, if media systems from the Global South are analyzed, this is often done using established Western-centric models and categories (e.g., Hallin & Mancini, 2011) that often lead again to a reproduction of common knowledge instead of allowing us to learn about different concepts and phenomena (Badr et al., 2020). A typical reason for leaving out non-European or South American countries in (large N-) comparative studies is the unavailability or unreliability of statistical data such as media outreach and circulation, number of journalists and media outlets, or media ownership data[1]. As the data for testing traditional concepts are missing and the specific contexts are not acknowledged, many regions in the world remain underexplored and blind spots for media system research.

Fourth, another critical aspect is the unit of comparison. Most media system research takes the nation-state as the unit of comparison. However, some authors claim that in an ever more globalized and networked world—with international news agencies and broadcasting companies such as Al Jazeera that connect several countries (see Kraidy, 2011) and especially with the Internet and social media—such boundaries have become obsolete. With a view to platformization and the rise of social media, search engines, and news aggregators that are not (yet) widely regulated by national governments (Rochefort, 2020), one could argue that at least some parts of media systems are not contingent within national boundaries. The massive scale of international migration and refugee movements adds to this. Instead, overlapping scapes may form (Appadurai, 1995/2010) which connect people based on shared language, physical space, economic and social context, and media. In cases such as Afghanistan, Myanmar, Iran, or India with millions of people living abroad and diasporic and exile media at work, how can the boundaries of a media system be defined? The Kurdish media, for example, function as a transnational network that defies Western ideas of journalism not only through its distinctly activist nature but also by going beyond geographically limited spaces (Schamberger, 2021). However, Flew and Waisbord (2015) stressed that despite such transnational tendencies, the nation-state remains one of the most useful "boxes" as it shapes regulations, institutions, and practices most. Yet, depending on the aim of a study, it might be valuable to experiment with, for example, studying the context of global platforms or the media that connect a specific community, such as diasporic groups sharing a language and cultural-historical characteristics. On a more abstract level, Hafez (2007) has suggested that—without neglecting the national borders as determining characteristics of media systems—we should look at "system connectivity" (p. 9) established through, for example, transnational satellite TV, the Internet or international journalism as well as at strategic media influences from abroad, such as public diplomacy and propaganda that aim for a "system change" (p. 13) or transnational media policies and other forms of "system interdependence" (p. 21) that transcend national borders. Again, context-led research and a relational perspective matter here to adequately grasp what shapes a media system.

In this section, we have argued for applying a context-led research perspective in media systems research. This demands in-depth case studies and a relational under-

1 For example, the Media Ownership Monitor (MOM) Latin America, https://latin-america.mom-gmr.org/en/.

standing of structures, including acknowledging power asymmetries between actors and structure as well as taking into consideration transnational relations of some parts of the system. In addition, the application of Western normative concepts to evaluate media structures and system performance needs to be critically reviewed and avoided. The next section will explain how to operationalize this in media system research.

A cosmopolitan approach to media system research

Above, we identified the crucial shortcomings of current media system research. To overcome these shortcomings, we will now offer recommendations on how to cosmopolitanize our practices in media system research. We outline approaches that will facilitate context-led research, thereby enabling us to tackle widespread Eurocentrism in media systems analysis and shed light on (geographical) blind spots in media system research.

Reflecting researchers and media systems' positionality

Datta (2018) argued that "decolonization is an on-going process of becoming, unlearning, and relearning regarding who we are as a researcher and educator" (p. 2). Thus, a first step in doing meaningful media system research is to reflect on one's own positionality. As outlined above, media system research often builds on assumptions from Western societies and democratic political structures, emphasizing "Western values," such as individuality, equality, free markets, or secularism as normative and universal standards (Pokhrel, 2011, p. 321; see also Volk in this book). To acknowledge and consciously identify this internalization of Eurocentrism in most research is a first step. When, for example, only 8% of the world's population is living under conditions of functional democratic structures (Economist Intelligence Unit [EIU], 2022), how can we so often take these conditions as a starting point for our analysis and as granted universal norms? "Unlearning" Eurocentrism as part of context-led research would be a second step to take. We should rethink which assumptions we consider as the base for our studies of media systems and their social, political, technological, economic, and cultural foundations. To get closer to our research contexts, fieldwork, experiences, and international research collaborations are crucial here, including an openness to the meaning of special circumstances. "Relearning" then means (re)thinking the margins or rather thinking from the margins. What can we actually learn from the experiences and structures of seemingly peripheral media systems? This process of relearning also implies the inclusion of those who live and research under enforced, disempowered, and marginalized conditions and trying to exchange with them at eye level.

However, not only must the researchers' positionality be reflected but also the positionality of the media systems under investigation must be considered. In many places in the world, especially in formerly colonized and fragile contexts, external actors have shaped the appearance of media systems. Media development actors—whether on the UN, bilateral, NGO, or grassroots level—impact media landscapes through funding, advocacy, training/capacity building, etc. While they very practically build parts of media systems, they also transport their ideas of norms, roles, and values (Fraser, 2021).

Again, a relational approach can be useful to make these processes visible, taking into account the power hierarchies between the involved actors and between the conceptualizations of media systems that come into play in these cases. The results of such processes may be euphemistically described as hybridity, but this often conceals the fact that there are parallel structures of media systems as they "should be" and as they "are" on the ground. In Afghanistan, the challenges of imposing a system conceived through normative ideas onto a complex and conflict-ridden context have become obvious: despite large-scale international investments of international actors trying to establish a new media system after 2001, at least since the Taliban took over in 2021, media freedom in the Western sense is essentially nonexistent, according to Relly and Zanger (2017). However, they noted, such a system change may happen "in countries with heavy foreign intervention, where imported journalism values are layered upon previous and continued institutional arrangements and where violence and instability continue unabated" (p. 1233). Context-led research can show, for example, how regulations that would support media are adopted but are then misused by authorities to exclude or control journalists. On a smaller scale, this happens if regulations meant to support media are abused for government control, or if precarious working conditions force journalists to accept brown envelopes or per diems, although it goes against their values (Sampaio-Dias, 2019). If international media development actors, for example, due to a lack of baseline studies or less close interaction with partners, do not realize these dynamics, it may lead to a "mimicry" system that combines certain elements that are not what their label claims (Fengler, 2022).

Allowing for a deep (historical and transnational) contextualization

A central approach that pays respect not only to Indigenous knowledge but also to our approach to context-led research is a deep contextualization of media and communication phenomena. Contextualization means to incorporate historical developments and related path dependencies, transnational entanglements, and power relations in society (Giraudy, 2015; Huang, 2003; Matar, 2012; Milton, 2001; Roudakova, 2011; Sparks, 2008; Stremlau, 2013; Voltmer, 2008, 2011). As laid out in Stremlau's (2013) "diagnostic approach," the histories and concepts of the entities we are studying are essential for a contextual analysis, and an understanding of the margins and contingency of media systems is needed in respect to their formal and informal structures and functional logic. As such, citizen media, social media posts, music, interpersonal communication, or public debates may be included in our analyses, too, depending on the context.

Dina Matar (2012) provided us with an example of how to integrate a historical perspective: "in studying the 'here' and 'now', we need to take into contexts both material and immaterial (discursive) 'genealogies'—the particular histories of nation-states, religion(s), capitalist class formations, national, regional and international politics as well as cultural and discursive formations" (pp. 78–79). Bayart (2009) called for a more contextual analysis in which a political entity is understood through the history and concepts of governmentality that its people have invented, rather than through the lens of foreign models of government or media systems that have been designed elsewhere.

Deep contextualization is in line with what the concept of listening (Wasserman, 2013) brings with it. Datta (2018) referred to the practice of decolonization as "research with Indigenous communities that places Indigenous voices and epistemologies in the center of the research process" (p. 2). Kurasawa (2004) emphasized the "recognition of global cultural pluralism" (p. 235) through a practice of cosmopolitanism from below: "upon an ethos of cultural openness that actively seeks out and tries to understand and appreciate ways of thinking and acting found in different societies, as well as listening to the voices of those who are not often heard in the elite cosmopolitan discourse" (p. 240).

In terms of contextual relearning, an emphasis on inductive approaches is key. For example, an inductive comparative study (Radue, 2022) using a relational research framework compared media control processes in Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand and concentrated on the connotative context. It found that not only should the relationship between media and politics be relevant for analysis but also that "society-media relationships provide a broad spectrum of analytical starting points" (p. 172). This study inductively detected connotative context factors to understand media control in these three countries. In those cases, according to Radue, the relationships of journalists and media producers with specific elites, such as the military and monarchy in Thailand, Buddhist nationalist elites and the Tadmadaw (Burmese armed forces) in Myanmar, and economic elites like government-linked companies (GLCs) and religious and ethnic elites in Malaysia, provide new insights into the media contexts while the categories from traditional media system analysis fail to do so.

One approach to gaining explanatory weight by analyzing media systems is the inclusion of (transnational) path dependencies. Rodny-Gumede (2020) suggested that postcolonial societies have, in the case of the same colonizer, also developed out of a similar logic, yet undergone different transformations based on historical or cultural factors. Here, historic approaches may be useful (Bastiansen, 2008), which should again be context sensitive and include aspects of the communication system before and beyond the colonizers' communication practices and infrastructure to achieve a full picture. As Serwornoo (2021) has shown, this path dependency extends to information flows within these media systems: he found that the media reporting in Ghana about neighboring African countries carries the same problems as European reporting about Africa—because the Ghanaian media mostly relies on external actors such as international news agencies and the BBC for such information. Researchers have also found shared experiences based on historic, cultural, geographical, and technological factors such as leapfrogging (see e.g., Tereshchuk, 2018). These include the experiences of colonization and state building in multiethnic societies after decolonization, often influenced by external actors. When Ngomba (2012) asked if the "Chinese model" had a place in Africa's media systems, this alluded to the increasing number of actors with growing influence on different sectors in the African continent, including the media.

Relearning and emphasizing context also means identifying possible new categories for media system research. For example, Yin (2008) suggested that "alternative concepts or dichotomies can be explored in building new models, such as an observer-interventionist/activist dichotomy, or commercial–ideological dichotomy" (p. 55). Norris (2009), on the other hand, wrote, "[t]he search for typological schema and categorical classifications of 'media systems' or 'political communication' systems should perhaps be aban-

doned" (p. 340). Other researchers have suggested the inclusion of new contextual categories, such as cultural values (e.g., Mellado & Lagos, 2013; Willnat & Aw, 2009). In Asian contexts, concepts such as "face," "loyalty," "social harmony," "individualism," and "collectivism" have an impact on all social and political interactions, hence opening up the potential for a variety of new research (Willnatt & Aw, 2009). For the comparison of media freedom in Thailand, Myanmar and Malaysia, Radue (2022) inductively found:

> factors that are crucial to understanding and explaining the formation of the three media contexts; . . . [for example], (de)centrality, social stratifications/polarizations, supremacy of (religious) norms and values, persisting conflicts, national security, seniority, culture of (dis)agreement, multi-ethnicity, multilingual societies, mechanisms of intimidation, rule of law vs. rule by law, media trust, racism. (p. 75)

Also focusing on press freedom, de Albuquerque (2019) drew similar conclusions regarding the often used Western concepts for media analysis and suggested "a postcolonial approach to media/politics relations" (p. 915). Looking at the Brazilian media landscape, he dissected Hallin and Mancini's models (2004) and critically noted that with regard to European case studies, they are often treated as "models from" in terms of being pure research tools. However, when applied to case studies, they are treated as "models to," that is, as "normative parameters" (de Albuquerque, 2011, p. 72). Of course, transfers of categories and approaches need to be carefully proven and justified but are necessary for any serious comparative work, as Kubik (2015) discussed concerning the combination of "context sensitivity with generalizing ambition[s]" (p. 362).

Applying context sensitive methodology

A challenge when researching media systems is the operationalization of rather abstract theoretical ideas, such as "system," into a functional empirical research design. While trying to move away from Eurocentric concepts, the aim to avoid the overuse of existing models and resulting inaccuracies should also be reflected in methodology. Above, we identified a general lack of reliable and statistically relevant data, for example, for media usage figures or media infrastructure, as a common problem in non-Western countries. Thus, more in-depth research would be necessary. Qualitative mapping (Marx, 2023) can provide a basic understanding of the existing elements and actors of a media landscape, their interrelations and roles. This can tie in with relational and network approaches, especially if it is implemented in a participative way, with journalists, experts, or media users sharing their everyday experience rather than the researcher applying a predefined lens and asking just for the expected outcomes. Participatory methods can be useful to ensure that aspects important in the respective context are not tainted or overlooked. These methods must be context sensitive to reach media practitioners and users, including disadvantaged groups. Schönbächler (2023, pp. 141–144) described an example that she applied in Burkina Faso: When the COVID-19 pandemic hit and the security situation became too tense for her to visit and interview female journalists in local radio stations across the country, she used instant messaging techniques to conduct a diary study. Either using their own recording device, a device sent by the researcher, or send-

ing WhatsApp audio messages, female journalists produced regular audio diary records, providing not only a unique insight into their daily work, but also their professional and personal concerns (Schönbächler, 2023, pp. 143–144). As well as enabling research in a context marked by security and health concerns, the study also served as an example of a feminist research perspective because it considered the realities of women journalists' work life and allowed them to express these in a self-determined way.

While context sensitive describing and mapping of media systems should be the first step to allow for a more Indigenous knowledge production to surface, most media system research is interested in comparisons and drawing conclusions on the causes and outcomes of certain processes. Previously, Siebert et al. (1956) stated that beyond describing and comparing media systems, it is important to ask "Why is the press as it is?" (p. 1). Peruško et al. (2020) stressed that different methods must be used depending on whether the research is supposed to be descriptive or explanatory (p. 33). To analyze the different paths of development in post-socialist media systems, they worked with fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA), which can show causal mechanisms in samples with a medium or large number of cases (p. 33). Comparing these provided insights into the nature of media systems and understanding them as dynamic networks with a process-like character.

Another way of drawing conclusions beyond Western models has been done by Richter and Kozman in their comparative study, published in their text entitled *Arab Media Systems* (2021). Based on descriptions of 18 Arab media systems along rather typical dimensions, such as political system and legal framework, media ownership patterns, and technology and infrastructure, they identified important themes and compared the different states' performances regarding these themes on a spectrum instead of building a clear-cut typology of media systems. For example, they related the particular media ownership patterns, which included media being in the hands of the security apparatus, as well as being assets of crony businessmen or instruments of militias, to their effects on public opinion. The spectrum spanned from creating a confrontational opinion climate in society on one end of the spectrum to a loyalist opinion climate toward the ruling regime on the other end of the spectrum. To answer the question "Why is the press as it is?" the authors not only included the written laws and regulations as a basis for their analysis but also the actual practices of implementing them and the states' approach to media. Such a context-led approach, according to the author, highlights that it makes a difference for the structural build-up of a media system, as to whether or not the regime envisages the media to mobilize for certain causes or to educate the people or to symbolize a wished-for era of modernization.

Conclusion

We have shown why enhancing media system research through context-led research allows us to better understand how media structures shape societies in all parts of the world. While some work has been done in recent years to diversify the research on media systems and include new dynamics, some regions of the world remain "blind spots" that are barely even considered. Consequently, the existing concepts cannot grasp the reali-

ties in these contexts, and the over-application of dominant approaches based on Eurocentric case studies leads to distorted or biased views on media systems. This has effects on knowledge production and understandings of norms but also on practical issues, such as media assistance. To achieve an actual cosmopolitan approach to media system analysis, we have therefore stressed the need for and importance of inductive approaches and context-led research. Here, a research focus on historical path dependencies, power imbalances, and relations offers starting points to overcome the shortcomings of established media system research. Instead of Western norm-driven deficit analyses, we can gain new insights by taking findings from seemingly peripheral contexts and concepts seriously.

Beyond voicing our criticism of current media system research, we have provided some hints on how to translate our criticism into more cosmopolitan research practices. As a first step, we need to reflect our positionality and reconfigure it through processes of "unlearning" and "relearning" (Datta, 2018). Understanding the "positionality" of media contexts and acknowledging path dependencies and impacts from different (f)actors in various world regions is essential when we want to go beyond trying to find a one-fits-all typology for media system analyses. Second, by means of deep (historical and transnational) contextualization and inductive approaches, we can pay respect to Indigenous knowledge, voices, and epistemologies. This also means, as a third step, revising our methodologies by means of context sensitive research, relational analysis, qualitative mapping, and participatory methods.

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