

US Dominance of Research on Political Communication: A Meta-View

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US Dominance of Research on Political Communication: A Meta-View

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The United States is the focal point of research on political communication. The dominance of the US scholarship is not an outcome of the efforts of a single peer reviewer, but rather an outcome of a larger system of knowledge production. Rojas and Valenzuela's (2019) essay points out two issues related to cross-national research in political communication: how the US is treated as the "context-less" norm and how American scholarship shapes expectations for other areas of the world. Adding to this argument, I provide data about citation patterns in subfields within political communication as well as provide a summary of recent meta-analysis studies in political communication. These data affirm the US dominance in political communication scholarship.

The American Universal versus the Idiosyncratic Other

Rojas and Valenzuela (2019) begin their essay illustrating a typical response from Reviewer 2 to research conducted outside the United States. This reviewer asks how the specific historical context of a country might explain the pattern of relationships observed in the study (Rojas & Valenzuela, 2019). Research based on the US is assumed to apply across a variety of contexts, whereas research conducted outside the US is viewed as idiosyncratic to the country's particular historical context.

My response is two-fold. One, I think we need to test whether relationships observed in the US are the exception, rather than the norm. As such, the presentation of country-level effects is important (as done by Rojas & Valenzuela, 2019, Tables 1 and 2), as opposed to pooling data immediately. This approach is consistent with their recommendation that scholars should consider the conditions under which proposed relationships hold. Specifically, in which countries do we find relationships between variables and in which countries are these relationships not found?

Two, we should be cognizant of our bias towards seeing difference, as opposed to similarity. Rojas and Valenzuela's (2019) analysis of media effects on affective polarization in four countries produces mostly null effects (only 3 of the 16 estimates are statistically significant at the .05 level). When reviewing the results, I see similarity: similarity in the findings that media uses do not have significant impacts on affective polarization. To reinforce my observation, I compute the average effect across these countries (Table 1). The effect sizes are too close to zero to conclude any substantive impact of media. Given the size of the coefficients, it is not clear that the relationships are substantive on their accord and as such, cross-national differences in these effects seem to be a minor point. My conclusion is that these countries are quite similar in finding minimal media effects on affective polarization.

Changing the dependent variable to fake news, Rojas and Valenzuela (2019) offer a similar media effects analysis, which results in mostly null effects (only 3 of the 16 estimates are statistically significant at the .05 level). However, in the case of fake news, the average media effect across countries is larger than that observed for affective polarization. The strongest media effect on affective polarization is for South Korea (social media: .137), but this effect size is a

“small” effect, when considering the range is 0 to 1.00. The strongest media effect on fake news detection are for Japan (foreign news: .213). This finding is worth mentioning and explaining in terms of different media systems.

Table 1 - Average effect sizes across four countries

	Affective polarization	Self-rated ability to detect fake news
Gender (Male=0)	-0.11	-0.12
Age	0.11	-0.04
Education	0.02	0.02
Income	0.05	0.06
Newspaper news	-0.05	0.07
Television news	0.02	0.04
Social media news	0.07	0.07
Foreign news	0.02	0.09

Original source: Rojas & Valenzuela (2019), Tables 1 and 2

Flow of Scholarly Influence

Rojas and Valenzuela (2019) discuss Almond and Verba’s (1963) *Civic Culture* as setting up expectations for cross-national research. The American study led to observed “shortcomings” in other democratic systems. Rojas and Valenzuela (2019) argue that Almond and Verba’s hypothesis about the homogenization of countries was wrong about the direction and flow of influence from the United States to other countries. They dispute the direction of this flow, illustrating how the United States is becoming more like Mexico, rather than Mexico becoming more like the United States.

There is a consistent pattern in scholarship where American studies set the precedent in a subfield of political communication. I offer an analysis of two lists of scholarship. The first list is an inventory of survey-based research on the relationship between social media use and offline political participation (133 studies, see Boulianne, 2019). The second list is an inventory of research on the broad topic of “online political participation and civic engagement” (132 studies, see Lutz, Hoffmann, & Meckel, 2014). In both lists, we see that the most cited articles are (almost exclusively) focused on the United States (Table 2). These citation patterns imply that US scholarship is used to set expectations about findings. Results that do not replicate these findings may be dismissed as idiosyncratic, when it is the US that is the exception, rather than the norm. Or, as Rojas and Valenzuela (2019) point out, Reviewer 2 asks for a description of the unique historical context for a particular country, implying that the results cannot be generalized to other contexts.

Table 2 - Citation Patterns in Two Subfields of Political Communication

citations	Social media and offline political participation	citations	Online political participation and civic engagement
2,261	Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009	2,225	Wellman, Quan-Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001
1,263	Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012	1,263	Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012
1,175	Tufekci & Wilson, 2012	1,098	Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005
579	Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2010	987	Boulianne, 2009
509	Baumgartner & Morris, 2010	798	Hargittai & Walejko, 2008

*Citation patterns based on an analysis of Google Scholar on June 27, 2019. The lists are from online appendices attached to Boulianne (2019) and Lutz, Hoffmann, and Meckel (2014).

As further evidence of the American dominance of literature, I offer a summary of recent studies that attempt to offer a comprehensive inventory of existing research. These meta-analysis studies were found by searching *Communication Research*, *Political Communication*, *International Journal of Communication*, and *Annals of International Communication Association*. Then, I sorted through the hits on “meta-analysis” to find articles related to political communication. The articles were reviewed to determine if they identified the geographic focus for the set of studies being analyzed. Many meta-analysis papers did not include this information; as such, it is not clear whether the set of studies were drawn exclusively from the United States or if the studies were drawn from a more diverse sample of scholarship.

Table 3 includes a list of recently published meta-analysis studies in the field of political communication. The US scholarship populates these review pieces. Approximately half of all studies used in these meta-analysis projects were focused on the United States. As such, we know a lot about the 325 million Americans, but we know relatively little about 50 million South Koreans, 125 million Japanese, 130 million Mexican or 1.4 billion Chinese (the list of countries reflects Rojas and Valenzuela’s (2019) analysis). A handful of meta-analysis studies have examined whether the effects differ for the US versus other countries. While these studies suggest that there are no differences, they are pooling results from many other countries when offering these conclusions. We should be exploring more deeply into whether there are differences among countries, by region or by political system. We need more research on the other countries in order to offer a meta-analytic comparison. As Rojas and Valenzuela (2019) suggest, we should be asking: under what conditions do we observe these relationships?

Table 3 - Summary of Recent Meta-Analysis Work in Political Communication

Authors	Topic	Number of studies	Portion of US studies	Do the effect sizes differ?
Boulianne, 2018	Digital media and political participation	251	52%	No
Lind & Boomgaarden, 2019	Knowledge gap hypothesis	68	54%	No
Matthes, Knoll, & von Sikorski, 2018	Spiral of Silence	66	60%	No
von Sikorski, 2018	Effect of political scandals	78	51%	Not reported
Zoizner, 2018	Effect of strategic news coverage on political cynicism, knowledge, and participation	32	53%	Not reported

Beyond the dominance of the US context as the focal point research, US-based scholars dominate the field of political communication (as suggested by Table 2). This type of analysis has been done within Communication more generally. Demeter (2019) shows that the field of communication and media studies is distinctive in terms of being highly biased towards North America, particularly US scholarship, compared to mathematics, physics, and chemistry. Walter, Cody and Ball-Rokeach (2018) conducted a systematic analysis of the *Journal of Communication* from 1951 to 2016. They find that 83% of first authors are affiliated with the United States (also see Chakravartty, Kuo, Grubbs, & McIlwain, 2018). These biases in the authors' affiliations may, in part, explain other biases observed in relation to the field of Communication. Chakravartty et al. (2018) examine 12 Communication journals from 1990 to 2016. They find 14% of articles are published by "non-White scholars as first-author" and within *Political Communication*, the percentage is even lower (4%). As such, the US dominance of this field of research contributes both to a lack of published scholarship based on other parts of the world, as well as feeds into other inequalities observed in relation to publication and citation patterns.

Concluding remarks

In sum, I agree with Rojas and Valenzuela's (2019) argument that the United States has enjoyed a special privilege of being a "context-less" role model for political communication research and that US scholarship sets expectations for what should be found elsewhere. What I hoped to contribute to this discussion is: 1) We should test whether relationships observed in the US are the exception, rather than the norm. 2) We should be cognisant of our bias towards seeing difference, as opposed to similarity. Table 3 suggests that when the US is compared to "other countries," there is not a strong difference. This does not mean we should not study other countries. Rather, I want to encourage research on other countries that can then inform research conducted in the US, as suggested by Rojas and Valenzuela's (2019) comparison of the US and Mexico over time. This strategy will be difficult to implement because as scholars, editors, and reviewers, we seem to favor US studies as well as scholars based in the US. Lastly, I would like to encourage cross-national research. These cross-national comparisons help us understand the

conditions under which relationships exist or do not exist. Understanding these conditions can help identify causes of and solutions to political communication issues.

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