


Book Review

Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies
2023, Vol. 0(0) 1–3
© The Author(s) 2023
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
journals.sagepub.com/home/con



Mora Matassi and Pablo J Boczkowski. *To Know Is to Compare: Studying Social Media across Nations, Media, and Platforms*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. ISBN: 9780262545938, 224 pp., \$40.00

Reviewed by: Blake Hallinan , Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel
DOI: 10.1177/13548565231208150

It's the algorithm. This seems to be the answer to an ever-expanding list of questions about social media: What makes TikTok so special? What is driving political polarization? Why are people spending so much time on their phones? Add in questions about mental health, misinformation, conspiracy theories, radicalization, and child exploitation and you have a sense of the debate over the harms of social media playing out in newspaper editorials, governmental halls, television documentaries, public conversations, and academic research. While ‘the algorithm’ makes for an appealing target, social media is, as danah boyd presciently argued, complicated (2014). The new book *To Know is to Compare: Studying Social Media across Nations, Media and Platforms* from Mora Matassi and Pablo J. Boczkowski, published by MIT Press, makes a compelling case for resisting simple stories about social media and outlines how a comparative approach can better deal with its complexity, as well as do justice to the diversity of the world connected through information and communication technologies.

The book begins with the contention that popular trends and the availability of data significantly drive social media research, resulting in a field that disproportionately favors the United States (and, to a lesser extent, other Anglophone contexts) and, at least until recently, platforms with more accessible data like X (formerly known as Twitter). These biases are not exclusive to social media research. Indeed, as the authors note, communication writ large continues to grapple with the field’s ‘parochial and universalizing Western bias’ (7). However, a narrower focus poses particular problems for social media given how platforms cross borders and create new networks of belonging and influence. To broaden our perspectives, the book outlines three primary vectors of comparison named in the title: nations, media, and platforms. To illustrate each vector, they discuss exemplary comparative research from a ‘wide array of countries and regions of the world, connecting different traditional and social media, and a multiplicity of platforms’ (13–14). This approach simultaneously serves to substantiate the book’s theoretical claims, highlight significant research, and engage the reader through stories of political mobilization, cultural production, unfriending, news consumption, and more.

Each vector of comparison – nations, media, platform – is associated with distinct disciplinary traditions and subfields of communication research. Cross-national comparisons of social media emerge out of longstanding interests in intercultural communication, globalization, and political communication. Cross-media research has strong affinities with media

history and medium theory, while cross-platform research relates to work on media repertoires, polymedia, and ecological-inflected research on the broader media environment. While each research tradition is connected via an interest in social media, they also reflect the fragmentation of the field, often asking very different types of questions, employing different methodologies, and building upon different theoretical or conceptual vocabularies. Faced with this diversity, Matassi and Boczkowski introduce a simple and discipline-agnostic framework for comparing comparative work: topics, approaches, methods, and interpretations. Each category offers a way to analyze existing work, which they use to structure the book, but could easily support class discussion for students or brainstorming new directions of investigation for researchers.

The book proposes two additional tools to facilitate comparison: history and language. While history is particularly tied to cross-media research and language is particularly tied to cross-national research, the connections are neither necessary nor exclusive. A historical perspective can enhance cross-platform perspectives, recovering possibilities for platform governance that might otherwise be overlooked (Reynolds and Hallinan, 2021; Zuckerman and Rajendra-Nicolucci, 2023), just as attention to visual language can be used to make sense of the filmic and social media logics at work in new forms of media witnessing (Henig and Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 2022). As these examples, along with many of Matassi and Boczkowski's own publications, attest, different modes of comparison can overlap and converge within the same study.

Comparative work is not easy. There are challenges with appropriately scaling research, especially at the level of academic articles, as well as material challenges related to resources, language and cultural competencies, disciplinary standards, and so on. As such, this book offers a welcome resource, laying out an agenda for comparative social media research with compelling examples and clear language that should be accessible to readers across different subfields of communication and different levels of experience. What's the matter with social media? Following the line of argumentation from *To Know is to Compare*, rather than stopping with 'the algorithm', we might ask how resistance to algorithmic management plays out in distinct regulatory environments (Yu et al., 2022), how algorithmic culture draws upon organizing logics that cross mediums and centuries (Striphas, 2023), or how algorithmic governance struggles to address abuse in a multi-platform environment (Berge, 2023). Even if comparison can't offer epistemic certainty, it certainly promises to enrich academic research and help us better navigate the complications of social media.

ORCID iD

Blake Hallinan  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4696-8290>

References

- Berge P (2023) #Answerusyoutube: predatory influencers and cross-platform insulation. *Feminist Media Studies* 1–21.
- Boyd D (2014) *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Henig L and Ebbrecht-Hartmann T (2022) Witnessing *Eva Stories*: media witnessing and self-inscription in social media memory. *New Media & Society* 24(1): 202–226.
- Reynolds C and Hallinan B (2021) The haunting of GeoCities and the politics of access control on the early Web. *New Media & Society* 23(11): 3268–3289.
- Striphas TG (2023) *Algorithmic Culture before the Internet*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Yu Z, Treré E, and Bonini T (2022) The emergence of algorithmic solidarity: unveiling mutual aid practices and resistance among Chinese delivery workers. *Media International Australia* 183(1): 107–123.
- Zuckerman E and Rajendra-Nicolucci C (2023) From community governance to customer service and back again: re-examining pre-web models of online governance to address platforms' crisis of legitimacy. *Social Media + Society* 9(3): 1–12.

Author biography

Blake Hallinan is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Communication and Journalism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. They research algorithmic culture and participatory platform governance.
