

Great expectations: On experiences with media reform in post-socialist Europe (and some unexpected outcomes)



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ABSTRACT: The chapter examines the problems resulting from employing the perspective of media reform in relation to the development of post-socialist media systems in Central and Eastern Europe. The perspective of media reform is normatively rooted both in normative (value) expectations and in narrow focus on regulatory success, ahistorical and descriptive. The chapter substitutes this approach with the media systems approach, which allows for a broader analysis of media system dimensions in their historical context, as well as in terms of their relationship to each other. Several examples of failed reforms, a consequence of the misunderstanding of the media system and the misfit with the type of regulatory model employed, are examined. The chapter finally questions whether the relationships between main media system dimensions are still valid in conditions of digital networked media and increased media commercialization. As one example of this it questions the present “health” of the normatively expected relationship between journalistic professionalism and the market-oriented media in terms of the contemporary developments in “predatory” media and citizen journalism.

KEYWORDS: media and democracy, post-socialist media reform, media system, comparative media research, Central and Eastern Europe



INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that the third wave of democratic revolutions in 1989 refocused the analytical and theoretical interest in the issue of media and democracy, and not only in relation to the European post-socialist region. A simple search in google.scholar.com of the “media and democracy” syntagm, gives 28 hits for the 1950–1989 period, and 5890 hits for the 1990–2013 (search performed on 27 June, 2013). This amplified rethink has recently included re-examination of issues of media and democracy in digital contexts (cf. for a recent overview of the new and old issues in Curran, 2011, an early classic, Keane, 1991, and in relation to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) — Dobek-Ostrowska & Głowacki, 2011), including new relations of public and private (Papacharissi, 2010; Dahlgren, 2005), ownership and control from the standpoint of

critical political economy (Chester, 2007; McChesney, 2013), changes to the institutional field and product of journalism in its contact with entertainment (Schudson, 2008; Curran, 2011; Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001), audience fragmentation and the questioning of possibility for a public sphere in the digital environment (Prior, 2007), audience participation as an increasing interest in relation to both media and democracy (Carpentier, 2011).

The focus on democracy is related to the examination of media transition understood as the changes in the media industries related to processes of digitalization and its consequences in production, text and reception, and the related social changes.¹ Unlike this broad theoretical examination that mainly focused on media as being in the center of developments (though not always media-centric in terms of what would be seen as a negative de-contextualization), the concept of transition in CEE was much more focused on the political issues. In the early 1990s the process of media transition in post-socialist Europe was expected to be quickly over after the implementation of regulatory reforms, and was seen as the key step in the introduction of capitalism (the euphemism of *free market* is usually used) and democracy (see Stepan & Linz, 1998, p. 96 for a comparative analysis of their relationship in comparative Central and Eastern European democratic transitions). This specific understanding of media transition as the process of media reform, framed almost exclusively in terms of the establishment of democracy, is unique to this region which underwent a post-socialist transformation.

This original vantage point of media reform has long predominated in evaluating the success or failure of media democratic transformation in post-socialist or post-communist regimes. More than twenty years after the critical juncture in which socialism was replaced by democracy and capitalism, the state of the media in post-socialist Europe continues to be evaluated largely in relation to the consolidation of their democratic role (and less often in relation to issues like media and cultural diversity, program production and audience participation, developments in program types and genres; one notable exception is Downey & Mihelj, 2012). In this article I examine the drawbacks of the media reform approach and its consequences for (mis)understanding the media in European “new democracies,” and propose the media system approach as more useful in understanding media and democracy in a comparative perspective. Finally, I analyze how the media system approach enables a re-evaluation and re-positioning of some key media system variables in contemporary post-socialist and other CEE mediascapes.

REFORMING THE MEDIA

The approach of media reform is primarily normatively defined. It is based on an expectation that the creation, adoption and implementation of correct legislation will bring the media in the target country “up to the expected democratic standard.”

¹ Cf. the MIT Media Lab archive. Retrieved August 29, 2013 from <http://web.mit.edu/m-i-t/>, or the new project at <http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/mit8/>.

Let us first examine the issue of “correct” legislation, i.e. the normative standard in its background. While the adoption of common values of freedom of expression, as a basic human freedom, and its extension to media and its role in the democratic process (following, for instance, the European Convention on Human Rights), is undoubtedly a common value in all democracies (Jakubowicz, 2011; Klimkiewicz, 2010), the media field is more complex and freedom of expression is not the only standard or goal to espouse, nor the only one against which the field can/should be evaluated. McQuail (1995) includes diversity and equality as two linked and equally important standards for democratic media. The latter can be framed in terms of access to media by audiences and sources, while diversity may be understood in respect to content, ownership, type of media, technology/platform, special coverage, as well as pluralism of political views. The work of the Council of Europe has focused over recent decades on the issue of media pluralism and diversity particularly understood in relation to freedom of expression as a basic human freedom (Bruck et al., 2002, 2004). While these values/aims can easily be unanimously accepted by all democracies, the shape of the implementing regulation and its outcomes depend on a number of dimensions, including politics, economy, as well as in relation to the variable and country-specific values in media systems dimensions. The normative approach also suffers from a pluralist expectation that the relationship of media, society and the public is in the established democracies really like in the ideal normative model. I will come back to this point in the third section of my article, when underlying the second level normative expectation based on the U.S. style of professional journalism.

In terms of academic usefulness, the drawback of the media reform approach is its descriptive character and focus on legislative content or its implementation, and as such is of limited use in development of new theory. While it does show some uses in comparative settings, true understanding of social consequences of media regulation can only be accomplished in relation to the media system context where media policy is considered in conjunction with other relevant dimensions and variables.

Normative media reform approach is ahistorical, because it forebodes to take any notice of the historical past, the geographical present, or the cultural future of the country on whose media it focuses. As historical institutionalism shows (Moore, 1966; Hall & Taylor, 1996; Mahoney, 2000) the repercussions of historical conditions can be seen in contemporary media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2012; Balčytienė, 2009; Humphreys, 2012; Peruško, 2012, 2013). Recently this has been understood also in relation to the development of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe (Ekiert & Ziblatt, 2013).

MEDIA REFORM IN CONTEXT

Media systems research (Siebert et al., 1956; Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Hallin & Mancini, 2004) demonstrates that — in addition to the state and media relations — market mechanisms and economic forces, the historically predisposed role of

the journalist and the relationship of the political sphere to the media also shape media systems. The political system and its modalities have been shown to impact media system development in Europe and beyond (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Norris & Inglehart, 2009; Norris & Odugbemi, 2010). When we take the wider media system transformation as the starting point in our evaluation, our approach gains the necessary theoretical starting point that enables empirical research.² It additionally historically grounds the specific media reform under evaluation. This provides (especially in conjunction with the employment of the approach of historical institutionalism) also the perspective of change in time.

Contextualization of media reform with a media systems approach is thus multi-dimensional, and explanatory regarding relationships between variables. With this focus the knowledge of media systems structure, development and change in one country or region can be explained in view of developments elsewhere, thus allowing comparability. Especially useful in this regard is the Hallin and Mancini framework for comparative media system analysis, which they had originally applied to Western European countries, Canada and the USA (2004) and then expanded in several case studies beyond “the Western world” (2012). In conceptualization of models of media and politics Hallin and Mancini (2004) argue that every media system can be described and explained through four media dimensions — the relationship of the media and the state, media market development, professionalization of journalism, and political parallelism. The fifth dimension is that of the political system, and includes variables regarding the dominant type of democracy (Majoritarian or consensus), degree of political polarization, history of cleavages, type of pluralism. Different values in these five dimensions form three models of media systems — the Mediterranean Polarized Pluralist model where they had placed the Southern European countries, Democratic Corporatist model in the Northern and Central part of Europe, and the Liberal Model including the Anglo-Saxon countries (including the USA). In spite of the authors’ and others’ views that the model cannot be applied to post-socialist contexts (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Voltmer, 2008), studies show fruitful application to Central and Eastern European countries (Balčytienė, 2009; Dobek-Ostrowska et al., 2010; Peruško, 2012, 2013a). Still, the issue of the impact of socialism on subsequent democratic media systems remains, and needs to be addressed in order to fully understand the present media systems in post-socialist new European democracies (cf. Peruško, 2013b).

In effect, media reform approach is focused on just one of the main dimensions that define media systems, i.e. on the relationship between the media and state exemplified in media policy and regulation, taken out of its media system context and thus rendered incomprehensible in its social consequences. Clearly,

² As without a prior theoretical conceptualization we don’t know what data to gather (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995); the advent of “big data” social science has not yet been felt in media systems research, but it is not impossible to conceive, especially in terms of the importance of audience behavior as a new variable in media system analysis (Peruško et al., 2013).

when evaluating the success or failure of democratic media reforms, and the ensuing outcome in the shape of the media system, one must take into account much more than the changes in media regulation. In understanding post-socialist media systems, one also needs to take into account one of the largest differences between post-socialist European media systems and their Western counterparts (apart from the still largely un-researched impact of socialism), and that is the fact that the former are not natural media systems, but have been in a short time (of one or two decades) shaped by imitative regulation/policy (Splichal, 2000; Harcourt, 2003). Thus the relationship of the media and the state, materialized in media policy including regulation and supporting measures, has in a post-authoritarian situation a distinctive importance.

On the one hand, the role and importance of media policy is far greater than in the countries where public expectations from the media developed over a long period of time. In CEE countries changes in media systems were shaped and directed by policy implemented in a short period of time. The character of this type of policy, following in the steps of a critical juncture of the fall of communism which changed both the political and the economic system in the countries in question, was very dissimilar to the socialist and pre-democracy media policies, and changed the relationships between media and politics, media and state, within the media field itself. The policy was expected to install the new social role for the media, based on Western European ideals.

On the other hand, the success of policy-making is strongly constrained by the path dependency of institutional values and cultures from the past. These constraints become clear when post-socialist media systems are meticulously analyzed in all five dimensions of the Hallin and Mancini model (2004). For instance, in the case of Croatia, the media system exhibits very clear characteristics of the Mediterranean model, both in the present day, but more importantly, consistently in its historical development (Peruško, 2012). In the case of Poland, the Mediterranean characteristics originally found to predominate (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2012) are nowadays being replaced by elements corresponding to the Liberal model of media system.³ Baltic media systems also show the historical tenacity of cultural characteristics but an influx of new ones as well (Balčytienė, 2012).

Overall, the successful outcome of media reforms was in all of the consolidated democracies the introduction of freedom of expression as this was part of the democratic consensus (in unconsolidated democracies even this first step is still a problem, as for instance in Russia). At this level, the most generally accepted norm or value of media and democracy was the easiest to implement; to stop prior censorship in those countries that employed it. The task of freeing the public sphere to different and diverse voices, namely, pluralism and diversity, was the second step,

³ Bogusława Dobek-Ostrowska in a lecture on the changes in the Polish media system, University of Zagreb, June 10, 2013.

not as easy as the first one (as many traditional conservative cultural values became confronted with new and unexpected issues, as well as new economic interests that came to play).

SOME EXAMPLES OF FAILURE IN MEDIA REFORM (OR IN JUDGMENT?)

In its worst expression, the normative approach to media policy manifested itself in imitative media regulation in European new democracies (Splichal, 2000; Harcourt, 2003; Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2009), where existing laws from Western European countries were translated into local languages and implemented. The most important disappointments, from the standpoint of normative expectations, were in the reforms of public service broadcasting (PSB) systems in Eastern Europe. The failures result from the application of normative solutions from one type of media system into another, where the shape of the media market, the relationship between politics and the media, the political culture and structures of power, are different. The failure to understand that the context of the whole media and political system influences the possibility of the imported models to be successfully applied is the reason for the perception of failed reforms. Here are a few examples from South Eastern Europe, but its lessons can be applied much wider, and surely similar cases could be found in other parts of the world.

One of the examples is the Croatian regulation of public service broadcasting. In the past twenty years different solutions have been implemented, many of them modeled on the regulation from media systems of the Democratic Corporatist countries. In these countries the representatives of civil society play a key role in ensuring social pluralism in governance of public service broadcasting (such as in the case of Germany and the Netherlands). However, in Croatia there are no historical social segments of this kind that should be thus represented and no significant social cleavages. The membership in the Program Council of the PSB organization (HRT) was in different changes in the law over the past decade(s) stacked with “representatives of civil society,” but in the Croatian case they are drawn from different NGOs, including the Actors guild, churches, the Association for the Protection of Consumers, (any one of the numerous) associations of war veterans, etc. These organizations, while members of the developing civil society, have no relationship to the original *raison* for the social representation in media governing bodies in the countries of the Democratic Corporatist model. Since the members of the Council, not really representing anyone were not rooted in an actual social segment with durable interests, the influence of informal political powers filled the void naturally (Peruško, 2012). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a deeply nationally divided state, instead of a policy similar to the Belgian or Swiss model which accommodates this division and serves all the national segments equally, public service television policy promotes, unsuccessfully, a single national/federal broadcaster (Jusić & Džihana, 2008). In Serbia, the new media strategy stresses self-regulation

in relation to journalism codes of ethics, and highlights this as an improvement and a step forward (Milivojević et al., 2012), not understanding that in a country with weak professionalization of journalism, ethical norms must be legally defined and protected in order to be implemented. All of these insights are possible only after we employ the comparative media systems approach.

Two additional points need to be made in regard to success of the implementation of media reform, from the point of view of advancing a democratic reform agenda.

The first one is related to timing. As in all human affairs, “good timing” is crucial for the success of a media reform. An appropriate example is from the Croatian case of democratic media reform at the end of the 1990s, when civil society, journalists associations and academic advocacy successfully developed the agenda for media reform which was taken up by the democratic center-left coalition which came to power in 2000 (Peruško Čulek, 1999a, 1999b, 2003; Peruško, 2005). After the next change in the leading party and coalition in 2004, media policy was again defined from above, often in answer to the (perceived, or so presented) European Union’s requirements. In this phase of media policy the impact of academia and civil society was minimal, and the agenda was largely set by the media industry. At the time of writing this article, in the summer of 2013, the center-left government coalition that came into power in December of 2011 is preparing a new media strategy. While this work in progress has not been publicly revealed yet, a wide consultation has been started with civil society, non-profit, media, academic community, and new provisions made for enlarged public support to non-profit community media. While this reform has not been started and shaped by civil society advocacy (helped significantly, in the 1990s, by international organizations’ interest in the topic), it does seem like there is again a reform window open at the present moment.

This brings me to the second important point regarding media policy, and that is media policy is always political. As public policy it always reflects the goals and values of the leading party/coalition’s idea of what is the best way to regulate a certain area. The media are no exception. In Central and Eastern Europe, the constant changes in the media regulation, often at every change of the parties in power, highlights this political nature of media policy. In countries with a brief democratic history, social expectations from the media are not yet stable, and the political field consequently takes license to tweak the regulatory framework much more often than is the case in more stable and mature Western democracies.

There is also a third aspect that contributes to the explanation of the “failure” of media reforms and the current state of the media in post-socialist European new democracies. This is perhaps, of the three, the aspect that needs the most scrutiny in future research as its consequences are far reaching, both in terms of theory and in terms of future media reforms in other parts of the world undergoing democratic transformations. I refer here to the (tentative) finding that previously hypothesized relationships between variables in the media field do not hold up in Central and

Eastern Europe after 2000. They also do not hold up any more in the USA, UK, or other Western democracies. If this is true, the normative expectations about the best, or most useful, role of the media in democracy are also largely invalid (of course, if we wish to base our normative benchmarks in existing reality; as we know also from CEE experience, this was not always the case). If the benchmark against which we evaluate the success of media reform in new democracies does not exist anymore, even in “those handful of countries” in which the Liberal model was originally developed, then the failure to achieve a standard impossible in contemporary circumstances is not a failure of reform, but of judgment. If we take a critical theory approach to the analysis of media and democracy, then this normative relationship, which is based on a pluralist view of politics and society, simply never existed (even in the West; or especially in the West). Far from facilitating citizens’ participation in democracy, the media’s negative role is highlighted in perpetuating the relations of hegemony (Taylor & Harris, 2008).

CONCLUSIONS: MEDIA IN TRANSITION

While we could find argument that all of the five dimensions of media systems (including the political field) have changed in the past two decades (and that the past twenty years begin with two interesting critical junctures — the Fall of the Wall in 1989, and the advent of the WWW in 1992), I focus in this article only on the changes in the dimension of journalistic professionalization, which I examine by using two different examples.

The first example deals with the professionalization and autonomy of the journalistic field. In their theoretical model of media systems Hallin and Mancini (2004) link early market development (at the time of modernization, usually in 19th century Europe and the USA) with the development of journalistic professionalization. Thus, historically in Western Europe, journalistic autonomy is seen to be a result of commercialization of the press. The commercial character of the printed press, i.e. its “business model” which is based in the wide audience who pay for a copy of the newspaper, and the advertisement of a wide number of businesses, meant that the media was not (any more) dependent on its existence on a political party or interest. Thus, the story of origin of journalistic neutrality continues, in order to sell the paper to as wide an audience as possible, it had to cater to as wide a scale of political tastes as possible; in effect, contributing to a political neutrality and balance in reporting. The outcome of this historically and geographically delimited outcome of relationships came to be seen as the norm of a neutral and autonomous journalistic profession, applied as a benchmark also to the newly democratized states.

We know that today this relationship does not any longer stand, neither in the West nor in the East of Europe. In the West, the misconduct of Murdoch’s media companies materialized in phone hacking, buying information from the police, and

other unethical activities in the UK led to a national enquiry and the Leveson report (<http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk>). The profit motives of the media in this example did not produce, but derogated neutral and objective journalism. The resulting “predatory” journalism profits by scandal and entertainment instead of information. Neutrality of (especially) broadcasting, in relation to political ideologies, is also derogated in the USA, especially by FOX News, which developed politically engaged right-wing reporting and commentary. Even if this is the same global company, the owner of the now defunct News of the World, which was the main actor in the recent media ethics scandal in the UK, the conditions for their actions are without doubt structural. The trend of genre hybridity where the entertainment code enters the information programming is another example of the same development where the originally hypothesized normative standard begins to slowly disintegrate (cf. Curran, 2010).

In Central and Eastern Europe, the negative influence of the owners today is seen to surpass the negative influence of politics, and often the two go hand in hand (Balčytienė, 2012). Far be it that the profit motive is separate from politics; in this part of the world (as well) the political field (cf. Bourdieu, 2005; Benson & Neveu, 2005) is often the path to attaining economic goals. Even if the predominance of economic interest and the leaning of the economic field on the autonomy of the journalistic field has similar manifestations, Habermas (2006) warns that there is a difference between de-differentiated media which have temporarily slipped back from their previous position of autonomy (this would apply to the western media situation) and those who have never (or recently) attained that differentiation (from the political, or economic, sphere) in the first place (this would apply to the CEE media situation). Further comparison of the East to the West would perhaps give more insights into the similarities and differences of the present position, dependent on different developmental paths.

The second example relates to the theoretical conceptualization of a connection between journalistic professionalization to the process of differentiation of journalism from other professions, becoming in this process more distinct, with internal norms and values (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In this context the original relationship expects that the greater the separateness of journalism, the greater its professionalization. Are we witnessing de-differentiation of journalism in digital networked media with new practices of citizen journalism and *prosumer* activity? When the former roles of journalists, as gatekeepers and agenda-setters who play a key role in defining the role of media of information and the public sphere, are no longer performed only by journalists but also today by non-professionals, i.e., citizens/audiences, what is the consequence for the public sphere and the social role of the media? How does this influence the whole media field, in which the four dimensions stand in specific relationships? The path to the present development in journalistic autonomy and professionalism must thus be taken into account in evaluating media systems’ development and performance. Clearly, the new

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