

Introduction

Comparing Media Systems in Central and Eastern Europe: Politics, Economy, Culture

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Typologies designed to account for the diversity of media systems around the world have been a recurring element of communication research for well over half a century. Yet, in common with comparative endeavours in other areas of social scientific inquiry, the analysis of media systems has long been plagued by simplistic, teleological and ethnocentric understandings of social change. The four-fold typology of press models proposed by Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm in 1956 – which distinguished between the authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility, and Soviet communist concepts of the press – was designed from the normative perspective of classical liberalism, and ranked the four types of the press on an evolutionary scale culminating in the press model promoted in the West. The analytical framework used was too narrow to capture the varied social and political theories underpinning media policies around the world, and left little scope for acknowledging the unequal distribution of economic, political and communicative power on a global scale (Christians et al. 2009: viii). In this sense, the title of the book – *Four Theories of the Press* – was a misnomer: instead of offering four theories of the press, it offered ‘one theory with four examples’ (Nerone 1995: 18).

Nonetheless, it is worth acknowledging that the *Four Theories* also put forward a key argument that remains a valid starting point for comparative inquiries into mass communication to this day. As the authors stated in their introduction, any systematic understanding of the press has to proceed from the recognition that ‘the press always takes the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates’ (Siebert et al. 1956: 1). To put it differently, the key contribution of the *Four Theories* was not merely the typology itself, but rather its attempt to avoid media-centrism, and construct an explanatory framework that acknowledges the importance of factors external to the media system. In subsequent decades, this key lesson was often forgotten, sometimes even by the authors themselves. Especially when examining the link between mass communication and processes of social change, media and communication scholars have time and again fallen prey to technological determinism, abstracting the media from the context in which they operated and treating them as an autonomous modernizing force. Mass media were thus expected to lay the groundwork needed for successful

modernization, namely to: inculcate modern work routines and health habits, instil cultural attitudes favourable to innovation, promote cooperation and long-term effort for the common good, and lure the population away from traditional customs, fatalism and superstitions that were seen to stand in the way of progress. Wilbur Schramm was notoriously infatuated with the transformative potential of communication technologies and the good it could bring to the ‘undeveloped’ countries of the world. In his characteristically prophetic and moralistic *Mass Media and National Development*, the radio receiver figures as an object of almost supernatural qualities: in the hand of inhabitants of remote villages in the Middle East, it becomes ‘a magic carpet’ capable of carrying them ‘beyond the horizons they had known’ (Schramm 1964: 20).

Similarly as the general theories of media and modernization developed at the time, *Four Theories* was of course an intellectual child of the Cold War. Shaped by the global competition for influence over former colonies, these new typologies and theories provided not only description and explanation, but also offered normative and practical guidelines that would help justify and preserve the leading role of the US on a global scale, and most of all its advantage over the rival project of modernity advanced by Soviet communism (Letham 2000, Gilman 2007). Given their embeddedness in Cold War politics, it is of little surprise that the theories developed by US scholars such as Walt Withman Rostow, Lucien Pye, Daniel Lerner and Wilbur Schramm shared many of the weaknesses of the nineteenth-century evolutionist theories. Although they have shed the racist assumptions of their nineteenth-century predecessors, these post-World War II theories of modernization were still premised on a black-and-white opposition between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, and saw modernization as a uniform process culminating in the forms of society, economy, politics and the media known from the industrialized West, and the United States in particular.

These approaches to modernization came under severe criticism already in the 1960s, and were to a large extent discredited by the 1970s (Gilman 2007: 203–40). The early theories of media and development, along with the four-fold typology proposed by Siebert et al., were no exception. From the 1970s onwards, several attempts have been made to construct alternative typologies, or to correct the original typology by adding additional comparative dimensions. For example, Ralph Lowenstein (1970) revised the original criteria for describing world press systems, and developed a typology that categorized different press models not only with regard to their relationship with the political system, but also with regard to different types of media ownership and different levels of economic development of the media. Herbert Altschull’s (1984) typology was similar in this respect, but put even more emphasis on the economics of the media as the key basis for describing world press systems. In contrast, William Hachten (1981) retained the original focus on the media-politics relationship, but suggested two additional concepts of the press – the revolutionary and the developmental – and merged the libertarian and the social responsibility models into a single ‘Western’ model of the press. Finally, Dennis McQuail (1983) proposed a slightly different alternative

to the original typology. While retaining the four media theories discussed by Siebert et al., he added two further ones: the development media theory, and the democratic-participant media theory.

These alternative proposals – and many others not mentioned here – brought significant new insights into the diversity of public communication around the world. However, many of them failed precisely where the *Four Theories* succeeded – namely in avoiding a media-centric approach, and in offering an explanation rather than merely a description of different media systems. The first decisive break with this tradition of comparative media analysis came with the publication of Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini's *Comparing Media Systems* (2004), which opened with a seemingly simple question, posed also in the *Four Theories*: Why are the media as they are?

To answer this question, Hallin and Mancini proposed to examine the relationship between media systems and political systems, and their primary focus is on the news media, journalism and media policies. Their threefold typology, based on empirical data drawn from eighteen West European and North American countries, essentially distinguishes the different media models with respect to their relative proximity to, and type of involvement with, two key factors: the market and the state, or economy and politics. At one end of the spectrum is the liberal media model, which finds its best approximation in the media systems of the US and Canada and is characterized by: a) medium-sized press markets, b) low politicization, c) a high level of journalistic professionalism, and d) the dominance of market principles. In contrast, the polarized pluralist model, exemplified in the states of Southern Europe, is marked by a) small press markets, b) high politicization, c) a low level of professionalism, and d) strong state intervention. The third media model identified in their scheme, the democratic corporatist model, dominant in Central and Northern Europe, falls mid-way between the two on all four counts. The roots of each of the three media models can be traced back to the key characteristics of the political systems in which they operate: the historical trajectory of democratization, particularly with regard to the patterns of conflict and consensus (polarized vs. moderate pluralism), the role of the state (the strength of the welfare state), the type of government (consensus or majoritarian) and the development of rational-legal authority.

While we welcome this explanatory turn in comparative media analysis and the increased interest in the field in recent years, we believe that much of the research inspired by Hallin and Mancini's framework has yet again lost sight of the key question – namely, why the media are as they are – and reverted back to a predominantly media-centric and descriptive approach that is largely content to locate a particular media system in one of Hallin and Mancini's ideal types. In contrast, we propose to go back to the main coordinates of Hallin and Mancini's explanatory model, and expand them not only empirically, but also theoretically. The empirical limitations of Hallin and Mancini's work are easy to pinpoint – geographically, their analysis is restricted to Western Europe and Northern America, and historically, it deals primarily with the post-World War II decades

up to the end of the Cold War. From this point of view, focusing the analysis on recent media developments in Central and Eastern Europe (hereafter CEE) seems a logical first step. How do the media in the region fare with regards to the key dimensions of media systems identified by Hallin and Mancini, such as political parallelism, professionalization or types and degrees of state intervention? And, more generally, is their explanatory framework capable of accounting for the particular trajectories of media transformation in the region, and thereby explaining why the CEE media are as they are? If not, how should it be amended?

This volume is not the first one to raise these questions – the applicability of existing models and theories is a central concern in much of the recent research and writing on CEE media (Jakubowicz 2007, Dobek-Ostrowska and Głowacki 2008, Jakubowicz and Sükösd 2008, Dobek-Ostrowska et al. 2010). Yet while providing valuable empirical insights into media developments in the region, this body of work has not offered much in terms of theoretical innovation. Although some authors have put forward suggestions for theoretical improvements to existing comparative frameworks, these have yet to be implemented empirically. The same is true also of many recent comparative studies of the media beyond CEE. Drawing on an ambitious study spanning eighteen countries and four continents, Thomas Hanitzsch and his colleagues (Hanitzsch et al. 2010, Hanitzsch 2011) have developed a rich and truly global typology of journalistic cultures, but have not yet delved into the various explanatory factors that may have shaped them – although they argue that this is exactly where future comparative efforts need to go. On the other hand, studies concerned with causal relationships are often mediacentric. They stay within the remit of media systems themselves, and pay little attention to extra-media factors. A recent study of political information flows in six countries, for instance, focuses on the relationship between media coverage of current affairs on the one hand, and different media system types and varying levels of media commercialization on the other, without considering the role of extra-media factors (Aalberg et al. 2010). In a similar vein, another study argues that the supply of political information and public awareness of political issues are both influenced by the properties of national media systems, but pays no systematic attention to links with, for example, political systems or economic indicators (Iyengar et al. 2010). Without considering such external factors, it is impossible to ascertain whether and to what extent media systems are indeed an independent causal variable in the supply of political information, and how exactly they relate to other potential explanatory factors. Many studies of media systems share this fundamental design flaw.

More decisive steps beyond media-centric research designs can be found in recent cross-national research on media attention and news values. Though this body of work is not specifically concerned with advancing the comparative understanding of media systems, it is worth briefly surveying some of the recent studies to highlight the explanatory potential of extra-media factors. For instance, in her comparative analysis of media coverage of 9/11 in four countries, Cristina Archetti (2010) develops an explanatory framework that includes not only factors

internal to the media system (national journalistic cultures and editorial policies of individual media organizations) but also factors pertaining primarily to the political system (national interests). Drawing on a comparative study of news coverage of earthquakes in three countries, Ruud Koopmans and Rens Vliegenthart (2010) propose a different explanatory model of media attention, which includes five causal forces: the inherent characteristic of the event, such as for instance the magnitude of the earthquake or number of casualties; the cultural, socioeconomic and political homophily between the source (the country in which the event occurred) and the adopter (the country where the event is reported), as well as social network ties between the two, the status and power of the source, and the existence of prior coverage of news from the same source. In contrast to Archetti's model, this framework goes well beyond the familiar focus on the media-politics relationship, and covers a broad range of economic, cultural and political factors, none of which is specific to the media. In fact, the media feature merely as a conveyor belt for messages shaped by external factors. Of course, such a socio-centric model has its drawbacks. While it may be appropriate for explaining the coverage of events such as earthquakes – which, as the authors themselves note, are typically not politicized – a more broadly applicable explanatory framework would need to include also factors internal to media systems, including levels of political parallelism and the political leanings of individual newspapers. Only by using such multi-level explanatory models we can develop a better understanding of the relative role of the media vis-à-vis other factors at work in contemporary societies.

In line with this, we propose a more ambitious theoretical revision of existing typologies and explanatory approaches used in comparative media systems research. In short, we contend that trying to fit CEE media into one of the three media models suggested by Hallin and Mancini, or developing an additional, 'post-communist' media model, does not suffice. What we need instead is to go back to the main premises of comparative frameworks, find ways to improve them, and then test such an enhanced framework using new empirical data.

Expanding the Scope of Comparison: Explanatory Goals, Causal Factors and Methodological Challenges

There are many possible routes for pursuing a revision of existing media typologies and comparative frameworks that go beyond mere geographic expansion. First, we can ask ourselves whether the research goals and questions that dominate existing literature are broad enough to encompass the pressing dilemmas of modern mass communication. If not, we can identify new questions that can be usefully tackled using comparative modes of inquiry. Second, we can interrogate the roster of causal recipes used to explain particular media outcomes, such as tabloidization or the rise and decline of journalistic professionalism. Could the introduction of new causal factors lead to better, more powerful explanations of these phenomena? Third, we can address the methodological challenges faced by comparative media

research, and develop new research designs and analytical procedures. In the following paragraphs we briefly outline each of these options, and explain which of the routes are pursued in this book.

New Questions

Like other social scientists drawing on comparative modes of inquiry, and in particular those using comparative historical analysis (Skocpol 1984: 7–12, Mahoney and Rueschmeyer 2003: 7–10), scholars conducting comparative media systems research are typically interested in ‘big questions’ concerning the development of democratic governance and the consequences of large-scale transformations such as industrialization, urbanization or commercialization. Yet so far, the focus has largely been on the *political outcomes* of these processes, and on the media as *political institutions*. For instance, one of the key questions motivating research in this area has been the impact of commercialization, and of the related processes of globalization, on the quality of public deliberation (e.g., Chalaby 1996, Esser 1999, Benson and Hallin 2007, Aalberg et al. 2010). A related, equally central question concerns the changing practices, structures and contents of political communication, and their causal links with democratization processes and with the global diffusion of Western political practices (e.g., Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, Holtz-Bacha 2004).

While doubtlessly important, such questions leave many other important substantive outcomes of social change, and the role of media in them, unaccounted for. To be able to investigate the full range of these outcomes, we need to acknowledge that the media are not only political, but also *economic* and *cultural* institutions. Apart from filtering, framing and disseminating information about the political processes, the media also play a key role in promoting goods, in shaping and negotiating cultural values and norms, and in fostering particular forms of social cohesion and exclusion. Describing the similarities and differences between media systems with regard to their relationship to political systems is therefore only part of the story. We also need to find ways to account for different relationships between media institutions and economic systems, as well as between the media and socio-cultural structures, including different forms of ethno-cultural diversity, different patterns of gender roles, or for instance class structures. To these we could add the relationships between media systems and *communication technologies*, and, for instance, the relative prominence of newspaper reading, television viewing, or Internet use in media use patterns.

In this volume, we focus on clarifying media’s relationships with politics, economy and culture, and with respect to the latter, we pay attention primarily to ethno-cultural diversity and gender relations. Given how central the impact of media commercialization is in existing debates, the relevance of economy as an axis of comparison – addressed in contributions by Sparks and Downey – hardly needs justifying. In relation to CEE, the importance of understanding the media-economy dynamics is perhaps even more pronounced, since the transformation

of media systems in the region went hand-in-hand with an accelerated process of economic liberalization. The same is true for media's relationships with ethno-cultural diversity and gender equality, discussed in contributions by Mihelj and Pajnik. On both counts, the countries of CEE have seen wide-ranging transformations – for instance the decline of female participation in the labour force, the disintegration of socialist federations, and the rise of new nation-states – that must have reverberated in the media sector as well. This is not to say that other foci of analysis would not be desirable. Future research might, for instance, look at the growth of new communication technologies, including satellite and cable television and digital media, or examine the shifting relationships between media systems and class structures, exemplified in the growth of the tabloid press and financial dailies.

New Causal Factors, New Explanations

The expansion of research questions inevitably invites a broadening of causal factors that can account for similarities and differences between media systems. Given that the greatest advances in comparative media research have so far been made in the field of political communication, it is hardly a surprise that political factors are at the forefront of existing explanatory efforts. However, understanding the impact of political variables is not enough to explain the variation in media systems – not even when we limit the analysis to the media-politics relationship alone. Developments in post-communist CEE are a case in point. While most countries in the region have adopted a formally democratic political system, implemented new legislation and developed the institutions necessary for a functioning democratic system, the actual operation of political institutions and the media varies significantly from country to country, and in many cases continues to display important continuities with the pre-1989 period. To explain these diverse outcomes, we may need to move beyond political factors, and take into account economic and socio-cultural variables. As Sparks points out in his chapter, the economies of CEE are significantly smaller than those of Western Europe and North America, and this can impose significant limitations on the ability of the region to develop a vibrant, internally diverse media market that is capable of servicing different segments of the population regardless of their income levels. Cultural factors may have played a role as well, argues Jakubowicz in his contribution. It is reasonable to suggest that cultural preferences and patterns of behaviour that survived from the communist period impinged on the autonomy of journalists, and prevented them from acting as detached and critical observers.

Economic and socio-cultural factors are even more important when we try to account for the diversity of media systems in relation to gender roles or ethno-cultural diversity (Mihelj and Pajnik, this volume). It is often suggested that the organizational structures of media systems and the particular visions and divisions of the world they promote play a crucial role in sustaining and reproducing existing forms of social inclusion and exclusion. It is less clear, however, how and why the

forms of media segmentation differ from country to country. Why, for instance, are some media systems more open to female journalists, editors and producers, and more inclined to promote them to highest-ranking positions? What helps explain the divergent approaches to ethnic and cultural diversity across different media systems? And also: which of the different approaches to cultural diversity is most likely to foster a truly inclusive democratic culture beyond and above social and cultural differences? These are pressing concerns for communication scholars and practitioners alike, and provide a basis for developing media policies tailored to the needs of contemporary multicultural societies.

Two qualifications are in order at this point. First, although emphasising the importance of contextual factors, we do not want to replace a media-centric approach with an equally one-sided socio-centric approach. While we do maintain that the functioning and shape of media systems are in important ways determined by the political, economic and socio-cultural environment in which they are embedded, we also believe that the media can and do act as a force in their own right. However, the ability of media to function as relatively autonomous agents is largely determined by socio-economic, political, and cultural context. Comparative analysis provides an excellent means of assessing how and under what conditions media independence is likely to increase or decrease. Second, while emphasizing the importance of economic and cultural causes, it was not our intention to suggest that political causes are not worthy of examination, or that they can be subsumed under economic, social or cultural factors. Quite to the contrary – all of the contributions to this volume, including those focusing on economic and socio-cultural aspects of media systems, pay attention to relevant political factors as well. Many also find that these factors still possess substantial explanatory value, albeit within an expanded explanatory framework.

New Methods and Approaches

Unlike sociology, political science, or linguistics, media and communication studies lack a well-established tradition of comparative analysis with a shared set of methodological principles, approaches and procedures (Livingstone 2003, Downey and Stanyer 2010). Several suggestions for improvement have been put forward in recent literature, yet actual applications of these suggestions in empirical research remain few and far between. Let us immediately clarify that it is not our intention to address all of these debates and proposals here – this is a task that deserves a book on its own. Instead, we limit our discussion to two key issues that have the most direct bearing on the aims of this volume. The first concerns the validity and generalizability of findings produced by comparative media systems research. The second relates to the challenges posed by transnational causal factors, and the danger of methodological nationalism.

Hallin and Mancini have never meant their media models to be universally applicable, at least not without significant adaptation (2004: 6). Yet curiously, their typology is repeatedly criticized precisely for its lack of universal

representativeness. We believe that this apparent paradox involves more than just plain misunderstanding or careless reading on the part of Hallin and Mancini's critics. Rather, it stems from a failure to acknowledge the distinctive research goals and procedures of comparative media systems analysis vis-à-vis those characteristic of statistical research. To put it differently, the problem lies in the tendency to judge the relevance of comparative media systems research by drawing on criteria derived from quantitative social science. Borrowed from natural sciences, these criteria presuppose the availability of reliable numerical indicators, comparable units of analysis, a large number of cases, and the existence of clear-cut, unidirectional causal patterns. As soon as we move beyond individual communicators and media texts, it is unlikely that any of these conditions will be fulfilled easily. In cross-national media research, the number of variables is typically high, and the number of cases low – a combination that rules out the possibility of statistical testing of competing theories (Lijphart 1971: 686). Causal forces often flow both ways and do not lend themselves easily to a clear delineation between dependent and independent variables. Units of analysis – for instance national media systems or media organizations – are so diverse that direct comparisons between numerical indicators are likely to be misleading, unless accompanied by further explanation. All this appears to cast serious doubts about the validity and representativeness of findings produced by comparative media systems research.

However, such doubts are valid only insofar as we assume that the aims of comparative media systems analysis are the same as the aims of statistical research – namely to produce universally applicable findings. This is misleading. As James Mahoney and P. Larkin Terrie (2008) point out, comparative historical analysis is not aimed at estimating average effects of particular causes for large populations, but seeks to account for particular outcomes in specific cases. Methods of analysis and research designs differ accordingly. For instance, while statistical analysis tests theories by using regression analysis, comparative historical analysis relies on process tracing and comparative set-theoretical thinking. Due to this, it makes little sense to criticize comparative historical research for its inability to provide universally applicable conclusions. The type of knowledge gained by means of comparative historical analysis is of a different kind, and should be evaluated as such. This argument applies also to Hallin and Mancini's work, as well as to the contributions in this volume. Each chapter describes and explains the main features of media systems in selected countries, mostly taken from CEE, in a specified historical period, i.e. after 1989. Whether the conclusions reached are applicable to other countries and periods remains to be investigated, though the causal factors and processes identified here can serve as a useful starting point nonetheless – just as the causes and processes discussed by Hallin and Mancini provided a useful point of reference for our own work.

Another methodological challenge of relevance to this volume concerns the relationship between the national and the transnational. The various causal factors affecting the shape and functioning of media systems – whether political, economic

or sociocultural – are not limited to the nation-state level, but might operate either at a transnational or at a sub-national level. Much as nation-states themselves, national media systems are increasingly interconnected, and their survival depends not on self-isolation but rather on successful integration into global media structures and flows. This situation has prompted many observers to question the nation-state as the relevant unit of analysis, and seek ways of overcoming the ‘methodological nationalism’ that purportedly plagues social science research (Beck 2000, McMillin 2007). These debates have certainly helped direct out attention to various important communicative phenomena that would otherwise remain marginal or invisible, including diasporic communication, transnational broadcasting, and city-based media cultures. Yet in many ways, the nation-state remains an indispensable unit of analysis, even when examining transnational forces. Although media systems that are exposed to similar trans-national forces display a degree of similarity, the presence and influence of these transnational structures can vary significantly from country to country. To account for that, we still need comparisons at national level.

To say that globalization and reproduction of national differences are not mutually exclusive is to state the obvious; what is more interesting is to ascertain under what conditions transnational forces will lead to greater global convergence, and how their impact may differ depending on the characteristics of local media cultures, economies and policies. How can we explain the differing levels of foreign media investment in CEE media, or the marked variation in the amount of imported media content? What accounts for differences in receptiveness to competing transnational regulatory pressures coming from the EU, the WTO and the US? It is only by marrying the examination of transnational factors with nation-level comparisons that we will be able to ascertain why and how such variation occurs. This is also the approach pursued in this volume (see chapters by Downey, Harcourt and Štětka, but also Mihelj). The challenge, then, lies not so much in moving beyond nation-level comparisons as such, but in acknowledging that the outcomes we are seeking to explain may have been caused not only by endogenous factors, but also by exogenous ones.

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