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Book review: The media in transitional democracies

Lehtisaari, Katja

2015

Lehtisaari , K 2015 , ' Book review: The media in transitional democracies ' , Global Media and Communication , vol. 11 , no. 1 , pp. 81-82 . <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742766515578036>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/155609>

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1742766515578036>

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Katrin Voltmer, *The media in transitional democracies*. Cambridge: Polity, 2013, 204 pp., ISBN: 97807456445.

Reviewed by: Katja Lehtisaari, *University of Helsinki, Finland*

The media in transitional democracies offers an introduction to the role of media in the process of democratisation. In the introduction, Voltmer notes how little attention has been given to media's role in the research literature on the dynamics and prospects of new democracies. Media research on emerging democracies has focused mainly on particular geographical areas, such as Asia (especially China), Eastern Europe, or Latin America.

Voltmer's book offers a summary of a range of research on the role of media in so called transitional democracies. In doing so, it brings together political science democratization research and communication studies and tries to construct a theoretical framework that allows exploring the connections between media and politics in emerging democracies across time and different national and cultural contexts.

With transitional countries, Voltmer refers to all countries that have turned away from authoritarian governance since mid-1970s. Some of these, like Portugal, Spain and Greece, are today seen as consolidated democracies. Others are still struggling with establishing democratic institutions and free media, and as Voltmer notes, in many cases it is still questionable whether they have succeeded or will succeed in the democratic transition. Voltmer uses the term 'transition' interchangeably with 'democratization' and 'democratic transformation'. Transition does not thus refer to a short-term unilinear movement, although a busy reader might be left with this impression, since not much space is used to explain this key terminology in the introduction. However, Chapter 4 gives a more detailed description of the phases of the democratic transition, noting also the possibility of a nonlinear development and discussing critical voices towards the transition theory.

The term 'authoritarian', in its turn, is used in a rather general sense to refer to any form of non-democratic regime. Also 'democracy' is given no specific definition in the context of the book. While this may be confusing, it also serves the book's aim of bringing in a descriptive way together research from different disciplines. This requires operating within a broad theoretical framework. As Voltmer notes, the book is more on the process than on the outcome, thus the focus on 'democratization' instead of 'democracy'. The book does explain and discuss many key concepts used in the context of democratization research, however, including 'truth', 'diversity' and 'influence', referring to classical works of John Stuart Mill, Marshal McLuhan and others.

While discussing the variations of democracy and democratization development, the book also takes into account the dangers of 'exporting democracy', which may include, for example, insufficient integration of new forms of governance into the traditional local customs. Thus, the author acknowledges different outcomes and definitions related to the transition to democracy. Voltmer also raises an important question of whether too much

diversity may exacerbate disintegration in volatile societies. As noted in Chapter 4 on media's role in political and social transition before regime change, this question is central not only in transitional democracies but also in the countries that are in a pre-transitional stage. Furthermore, Voltmer also discusses the dilemma of restricting media freedom for democracy's sake, and stresses that the different contexts of particular societies at a particular point in time must be taken into account when considering these kinds of measures. In many cases, new democracies are divided after ethnic, religious or ideological conflicts, and often democracy-building and nation-building happen at the same time. Restricting freedom of speech has in some countries arguably helped prevent intercommunity hostilities.

Besides general theoretical insights, the book gives numerous examples of different procedures and outcomes regarding media's role in a transition process. Spain is given as an example of a country where media helped the new government in the stabilization period, by not turning back to a critical stance until after the democratization process had 'succeeded'.

If the second part of the book is mostly on the democratization process and different forms of media systems in authoritarian regimes, the third and last part focuses on the transformations in the media after the end of the authoritarian regime. Here Voltmer looks at media transformation from political, economic, socio-cultural and professional dimensions drawing on the comparative framework based on Hallin and Mancini's (2004) work. One of the conclusions is that in addition to a large variety in the outcomes of democratisation, there is also a diversity of media systems and different forms of journalism.

Overall, *The media in transitional democracies* is a comprehensive introduction to the media in countries that are or have been in the process of democratic transformation or transition. As such, it is valuable reading also from the perspective of the challenges these societal changes pose for media theories and media research.

Reference

Hallin, D.C. and P. Mancini (2004) *Comparing Media Systems. Three Models of Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.