

INTRODUCTION: THE EMERGING MEDIA SYSTEMS OF POST-COMMUNISM

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Introduction

The changes set in train by the revolutions of 1989 have advanced sufficiently for us at least to be able to draw interim conclusions. While there is a great deal of unevenness, and many of the processes are very far from complete, there have been major changes in all areas of social life, and the features of the emerging systems are becoming apparent.

This is nowhere more obviously the case than in the mass media. In none of the formerly communist countries, even those in which the changes have been slowest and least fundamental, do the mass media remain the same as they were a decade ago. There is still important work to do in recording the precise changes which have taken place and, even more so, in explaining them to the international scholarly community. It is, however, now becoming possible to start to engage in theoretical reflection. The scope and magnitude of the changes are so great, and the challenge they pose to some of the established ways of thinking about the media so serious, that this kind of work is of pressing importance.

The aim of this article is to discuss what kinds of media systems are emerging from all of these changes. There are two obvious difficulties to carrying out this task. The first is that any author as incorrigibly Anglo-Saxon as the present writer naturally feels a little uneasy dealing with theory. What comes naturally to our continental colleagues leaves us rather out of our depth. We are happier, and better prepared, splashing around in the mud of detail than constructing grand models in the clear air of theory.

Secondly, it would obviously be better if the processes under discussion were complete, and if everyone was agreed as to their contours. In that twilight, the owl of Minerva could fly happily. Trying to theorise about a process of change which is, in most cases, manifestly far from complete runs the risk of mistaking the accidental and the contingent for the fundamental and permanent.

Despite these difficulties, it nevertheless seems possible to attempt some degree of theorisation. This partly at least because

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others are already doing so, and indeed have been doing so since the wall came down. The other reason is because, however unconscious people may be of the fact, the actors in these processes of change are operating with different and competing theories which guide, and legitimise, their practical doings.

Unlike many of these actors, however, the aim of this article is not to say what should be done. Theory can have all sorts of uses, and can be judged in all sorts of ways. We are here definitively not concerned with what ought to happen in the mass media of this or that country. Nor are we concerned as to whether this or that development is a good thing or a bad thing. The present author has very definite views on these subjects, but they are not the concern of this article. This article does indeed have an evaluative dimension, but it is the modest and traditional scientific one of testing the adequacy of different theories.

Two Camps in Thinking about the Media

Before 1989, the world was relatively simple, at least as regards discussions of the media. Just as Europe was divided into two by a wall, so too were views as to the nature of media systems. There was a "Free World" and there was a "Socialist Camp" in the world of politics and economics. In the world of communication scholarship, there was a division between what we may call the apostles of Schramm and the apostles of Lenin. As with many of the belief systems of the Cold War, the adherents were not necessarily at all familiar with the works of their prophets, still less those of their opponents. What was preached in the name of the prophets was often quite remote from their own ascertainable views. But, nevertheless, the distinction was clear and obvious to most of the participants.

There was a notable and interesting mismatch between the geography of the two planes. Many people who lived in the Free World fell into the Lenin group in their thinking about the media, and many in the Socialist Camp were secret adherents of the Schramm school. These extreme positions were, of course, not the only ones available. There were numerous attempts to develop other and more complex ways of thinking about the media, for example by Raymond Williams (Williams 1962). Even such attempts at independence, however, often took at their point of departure this simple polarity (McQuail 1987, 111-124). For many people, however, whether they were working on international communication or journalism education, or almost any other sphere of scholarly enquiry, there were just the two sides. Sartre had captured their essential dilemma: you chose a side, and you fought the good fight. Even if you were sufficiently naïve as to believe you were pursuing pure disinterested scientific knowledge, the very theories you tested were deeply imbued with these ideologies and carried clear evidence of their provenance.

1989 should have ended all of this. But the intellectual polarisation has long outlived the material circumstances which gave rise to it. It continues to influence very powerfully the ways in which the post-communist media are thought about and discussed. A number of the contributors to this volume, notably Karol Jakubowicz, but also Frank Kaplan and Milan Šmid, and Valentina Marinescu, find aspects of the old polarity of continuing utility. It is therefore important to look at this issue in a little more detail, in order to understand the ways in which it influences our current thinking.

The main characteristic of both sides was that they were “two camp” views of the world. The Lenin camp was the older of the two. In his own writing, and in particular the most famous texts, Lenin had been mostly concerned with the tasks of a small illegal oppositional political press published outside the country and smuggled in infrequently (Lenin 1972, 48-143). He had also written, less systematically, about the large-scale media in a post-capitalist society, albeit one in a situation of open civil war and its immediate aftermath (Lenin 1972, 331-360). Whatever its limitations as a developed theory of the media, however, there was no doubt, that the opposition of bourgeois and proletarian marked all of his writings, and no doubt whatsoever that he saw social life, including all aspects of the mass media, as a struggle between them. In the later formulations of the Socialist Camp, this polarity between classes was transformed into one between blocs of nations headed respectively the USA and the USSR.

Schramm, together with his co-authors Siebert and Peterson essentially accepted this starting point. Although he had, famously, four theories of the press, only two were really operative. One of them (the authoritarian theory) was essentially of historical, rather than contemporary, relevance. Another (the social responsibility theory) represented the authors’ wishful thinking about the future of the US press rather than any developed concrete reality. That left the US and the USSR, represented here by the libertarian and the Soviet communist models. For Schramm, very explicitly, the world was marked by a struggle between the two theories and the two systems. The very language he used in his peroration was revealing of the fact that his view of the world as a military struggle between the USA and the USSR was identical to that of his Soviet enemies:

To Soviet observers, our media are...irresponsible and disorderly. To us, the Soviet mass media are “kept” and “servile.” To the Soviets, the multidirectional quality, the openness, the unchecked criticism and conflict in our media represent a weakness in our national armor. To us, they seem our greatest strength. The next few decades will tell which is the better estimate (Siebert, Peterson and Schramm 1963, 146).

As it turned out, it was only two and half decades before question posed in the lines written as the news of Krushchev’s “Secret Speech” filtered out was answered.

It is striking that, despite their different starting points and different purposes, both sides came to the same conclusion. Just as, politically, your allegiance was either to Washington or Moscow, so either you had US-style media or you had Soviet-style media. Despite differing rhetoric, there was thus fundamental agreement about the shape of the world and the alternatives in the mass media. The differences were essentially at the level of political evaluation. The issue was which kind of system was better, not which theory was superior.

It is for this reason that the collapse of communism, and with it the victory of the Schramm camp, have changed so little in the way in which the media are discussed. The fundamental structure of thinking would have remained intact whichever side won.

This polarisation was as much a device for policing internal dissent as a weapon of ideological struggle against an external enemy. It allowed the marginalisation of

alternatives, both politically and intellectually. Such was, and indeed is, its power that attempts to create alternative models tend to depart from, or to shadow, the basic polarisation. Still, today, there are a number of projects attempting to forge new departures from the same initial opposition. Perhaps the best known of these is probably that of James Curran, who wrote that: "The two main approaches to organizing the media — the free market liberal and the collectivist-statist strategies — each have drawbacks" (Curran 1991, 46). His own "third way" was an attempt to combine what he saw as the strengths of each and avoid their weaknesses.

In concrete terms, the alternatives for media systems were thus very limited. On the one hand, you had an essentially commercial system, in which market-competitive media were funded by a combination of advertising and subscription. They were extremely lightly regulated or completely unregulated. The content of this media tended towards entertainment, but the market ensured that the supply of serious news and current affairs was sufficient and that it was presented in a neutral and objective manner.

On the other hand there was an essentially state directed media system. The degree of regulation and of political interference was very high. The tendency of these media was towards didactic and propagandistic content, in which what passed as news and current affairs was tailored to the tactical needs of the state.

The collapse of communism has, of course, meant that one end of this intellectual polarity has vanished. The other, however, is not only alive and well but appears to have demonstrated its evolutionary superiority. What was originally a bipolar system is now left with only one developed form.

It is in this that the origins of some of the contemporary difficulties with thinking about media systems originate. Because there is only one intellectually developed form of thinking about the mass media, it is assumed that all media systems, everywhere, must be gravitating towards it. This kind of teleological thinking about the mass media is extremely common today, particularly in discussions about the situation in various post-communist countries. A check list of features corresponding to what is imagined to constitute the US system is developed, and the local media systems are interrogated to see how far they have progressed towards the goal of complete convergence.

The Reality Principle

These media-centred versions of the "End of History" thesis display a number of problems. The most obvious one is methodological, and concerns the dangers inherent in teleological reasoning in the social sciences. Although of decisive importance philosophically, objections of this nature need not detain us here. We need only note that belief systems based on a certainty as to some final end towards which all history is developing seem, in explaining concrete development, to need frequent recourse to a version of the poet William Cowper's couplet that "God moves in a mysterious way/His wonders to perform." Free of the constraints of the Cold War, it seems more valuable to ask whether we ought to be thinking in this way at all. There is certainly a case for starting from a closer examination of the reality of media structures and practices than from abstract models of media systems.

If we do this, we find that the variety of media systems is rather greater than these

theories permitted. Even if we restrict ourselves to the stable and developed world of North Atlantic capitalist democracies, we find not one "Free World" model but at least two: the US and the European.

At the structural level, the US model consists of a completely, or overwhelmingly, privatised broadcasting system, in which a number of relatively lightly regulated players compete for audiences and advertising revenues. The dominant forms of programming are aimed at the mass audience. In the newspaper press, it consists of very lightly regulated privately owned journals gaining revenue from sales and advertising, and overwhelmingly enjoying the benefits of local monopoly. This characteristically results in papers superserving the more prosperous sections of society.

The European model consists of a dual broadcasting system, in which both private and non-private channels operate, enjoying funding from a range of mechanisms, sometimes on a competitive basis. There is usually a relatively high level of regulation, which often obliges the broadcasters to pursue goals other than audience-maximisation. In the newspaper press, there are relatively lightly regulated journals, most of which face serious competition for sales and advertising revenue. There is consequently a tendency for the press to stratify to serve different niche markets.

The outcomes in terms of media content can equally well be contrasted. In US television, operating in conditions of competition, there is a strong bias towards entertainment programming. In the opinion of many commentators, news and current affairs tend towards the trivial. In the US press, enjoying the advantages of local monopoly, there is a tendency towards enlightenment and a strong stress upon the classical reportorial role of journalism. Government tends not to intervene significantly at the level of content, either in the press or in broadcasting.

In the European media, the state and public stations, at least, have a strong orientation towards enlightenment and minority programming. In some cases, regulatory requirements have also imposed this on commercial broadcasters. In the press, operating in competitive conditions, there is a tendency towards entertainment and the trivial. There is often quite a high level of partisanship in reporting. Government quite often intervenes significantly at the level of content in both the press and, particularly, broadcasting.

In neither the structural features of the press and broadcasting nor the characteristics of media output is there a single uniform "western model" against which we can compare the development of the mass media of the former communist countries. There is no agreed simple check list we can use to grade them on their democratic achievements.

Media after Communism

Viewed in this light, it makes a lot more sense to say that the media systems which have begun to take shape in the former communist countries are already evidently variants of the European model, rather than dim prefigurations of the US model. Their dynamics are thus perhaps better understood in terms of the European media experience than that of the USA.

The "European" nature of the development is clear if we review the case of

television broadcasting. This has been by far the most contentious part of the media in all of Central and Eastern Europe and forms the focus of the articles in this volume.

The first thing to say is that there are clearly very strong differences between different national experiences. At one extreme lies the former East Germany. Here the whole media system, including television broadcasting, has simply been absorbed into that of the Federal Republic. This is an obvious case of the adoption of a European model that is already effectively complete, but which is also clearly exceptional. The political and economic consequences of rapid and complete union with the largest and most successful state on the continent have meant that many of the obstacles to change which have proved difficult to overcome elsewhere could be swept aside either by Federal money or Federal politics.

As an example of the other extreme we may consider Bulgaria. There, it has not yet been possible to adopt a new legal framework for broadcasting. Control of television is directly and obviously in the hands of politicians. As Dina Jordanova shows in this volume, changes in government more or less automatically mean changes in the leading personnel in broadcasting and changes in direction of development of the institution. While there has certainly been change here, it is difficult to say that this represents the establishment even of the rudiments of a new and stable broadcasting formation.

The majority of the other countries occupy intermediate positions between these two extremes. With the very prominent exception of Hungary, the other countries have established new media laws and most have begun the process of establishing commercial broadcasters to run alongside the old channels. What to call these latter is something of a problem. Many are, in theory, dedicated to the European tradition of independent "public service," but are effectively controlled by the government of the day and are thus in reality closer to being state broadcasters. Here, I have settled on the ugly, but suitably comprehensive, general term of "non-private" to differentiate them from the new, privately owned and commercially driven channels.

Beyond these particularities of national differences, however, it is possible to discern four aspects to the reorganisation of television which are, in different measures, common to all instances. It is the common outcome of these different aspects which seems to justify the application of the "European" label to these broadcasting systems.

It would greatly strengthen my argument here if I could show that there was a common set of steps through which each system had passed. Unfortunately, that is not really possible. Although there is a certain sense in which these different aspects took place consecutively, and thus might be seen as different phases of development, there were not, in reality, sufficiently sharp and clear divisions between the periods during which one or another aspects were central as to allow us to consider them as a true succession with a uniform order of occurrence. So, for example, the outstanding example of the struggle for political control of Hungarian broadcasting took place before the passage of a new broadcasting law, whereas in other countries, like Poland, it was present in different forms throughout the entire period. I have therefore called them "aspects of," rather than "phases in," the overall development.

The first aspect is the nature of the collapse of the old system. The broadcasting

institutions all lost their former monolithic, militant and communist character. In the case of Hungary, this was clearly a protracted process which began well before the political collapse of communism. In other cases, the former East Germany and the former Czechoslovakia for example, not to mention Romania, the collapse in broadcasting was extremely rapid and consequent upon the political upheavals. It is noteworthy that, in almost all cases, the collapse of communist control over broadcasting was negotiated between the reform wing of the old communists and the new oppositional forces. It was usually accompanied by a continuation of the basic structures, and even of most of the senior personnel. So far as I know, only in East Germany and, very briefly, in Czechoslovakia, was there any serious challenge to the existing management structure from within the broadcasting organisations. Elsewhere, the changeover was one whose most striking feature was the degree of continuity. As Ildiko Kovats shows in this issue, not only were the structures inherited, but so too were many of the problems that went with them.

The second aspect was the passage of new broadcasting laws. This has proved an immensely protracted process in some countries. In Hungary and Bulgaria, there is still no new law. Even in the relatively rapid case of the Slovak and Czech Republic, it was two years before the old federation passed a new law, and it was amendment to this which allowed the new republics to begin life with an established regulatory system. One main characteristic of this aspect of the change was that attempts at extending the range of those who are responsible for licensing services and controlling broadcasting beyond the political elite, were squashed. The new Councils which have come into being as a result of the legislation are, in most cases, directly responsible to parliament and are thus highly politicised bodies. Virtually nowhere have the new parliaments attempted to realise the old oppositional aim of "empowering civil society" in broadcasting. Even when, as in Slovenia, there is a formal mechanism for realising this aim, it is argued in this volume by Slavko Splichal that, in fact, the political elite continues to exercise control over broadcasting.

The third aspect has been the struggle over political control of the broadcasters. This has arisen directly from the direct dependence of the bodies controlling broadcasting upon the political elite. In Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republics, there have been major fights over control of the Broadcasting Councils. In each of these three cases, the principle of a Broadcasting Council reaching independent decisions on the basis of professional criteria has been rejected. In its place, the composition and activities of the Councils have been more or less subjected to political scrutiny and sanction. It goes without saying that, in these countries as well as in others, the senior posts in non-private broadcasting have themselves also often been the subject of hot political contention.

The fourth aspect has been the licensing and operation of the new commercial franchises. Very often, the award of these franchises has been the occasion of some of the most intense political interference, with different political forces identified with different groups of bidders. Once in place, the evidence suggests that the commercial operators are relatively sensitive to the political climate in which they operate, and show few signs of developing robust independence. The Czech commercial TV channel Nova, for example, in September 1995 voluntarily offered the Prime Minister a

weekly slot to broadcast his own views.

There are two possible ways of interpreting these developments. One way, influenced by the legacy of Cold War thinking, is to see them as passing difficulties. They can be explained either as hangovers from the recent past, or as the result of the political inexperience of the new governments. The other is to see them as particular variants of widespread European broadcasting phenomenon. It seems to me that the weight of evidence is such that one is obliged to accept the latter explanation. The former communists, whom one would expect to be most deeply marked by the legacy of the past, do not appear to be behaving qualitatively differently with regard to television than do the parties issuing out of the former opposition. There is no evidence that the communist-successor government in Hungary is more interventionist in broadcasting than was its nationalist predecessor. Neither are the politicians who are intervening in the running of broadcasting throughout the region political naïfs, who soon see the error of their ways and come to behave with greater sophistication as time goes on and they learn better manners. On the contrary, all parties see control of broadcasting as part of the spoils of office, and to show no signs of an increasing reluctance to intervene.

It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the evidence from television shows that what are emerging are dual systems of private and non-private broadcasters who are subject to a relatively high level of government interference. These are characteristics of European-type media systems.

Turning to the press, there are three clearly identifiable elements to the emerging structures. The first concerns ownership. In most countries, the bulk of the newspaper press is in private hands. This includes both the titles inherited from the old regime, which have mostly fallen into the hands of the journalists who used to work for them before 1989, and the new journals founded in the aftermath of the collapse of communism. A number of titles, both amongst the old and the new newspaper press, have come under foreign ownership or have significant foreign shareholdings. The case of Hungary is the best known and probably the most extreme (Giorgi 1995, 54-58).

Secondly, these newspapers now operate in competitive commercial markets. Even in small countries like Slovenia, there are a number of competing daily newspapers. *Delo*, formerly a paper of the Socialist Alliance but now in the hands of its journalists, is still the market leader. Partly as a result of this competition, the old monolithically "serious" communist press has fragmented. While there are certainly some papers which continue to pursue the traditional news agendas and focus on politics and economics, there have also been some successful launches of "yellow" newspapers, concentrating on scandal and sensation. To continue with the example of Slovenia, the strongest contender for market leadership in the daily press is the sensationalist *Slovenske Novice*, also incidentally controlled by the same company as controls *Delo*.

The implication of this is that as the advertising market matures and income differentiation becomes established, the press will evolve into a stratified system of different papers with audiences inhabiting different social niches. It is extremely likely that there will be a reduction in the number of titles as the economics of the press mature. This process is already under way in some countries and, in the smaller countries, it is possible that there will emerge monopolised newspaper markets on the

US model. In the larger states, however, it is more likely that there will continue to be a plurality of titles and competition. Structurally, then, the prevalent model of the press is closer to the European norm than that of the US.

The third and final aspect is a little less tangible. It is generally agreed that the dominant forms of journalism are rather far from the traditions of objective and impartial reporting. On the contrary, many observers claim that both press and broadcast journalists continue with a politicised form of journalism. In this, it contrasts quite sharply with the current US model of journalism, which has perfected a neutral and impartial reporting style, at least with regard to internal matters.

Whether one calls the kind of writing prevalent in post-communist countries propaganda, or a form of interpretative journalism, and whether one regards it as a good or bad thing, are matters of opinion. What it certainly is not is a simple hangover from the previous regime. Journalism then certainly displayed these characteristics in an extreme form. They are present, however, in one form or another, in much of western Europe and constitute the most highly esteemed type of journalism. Indeed, the defence of pluralism in the media, which currently occupies so much of the attention of European bodies, only makes sense if it is predicated upon the notion that much of the output of the media is at least opinion-influenced. If it were simply the self-evident and unchallenged facts that were being reported, plurality of outlets would be redundant, since all versions of the world would be identical.

Overall, then, the press also is coming to resemble the European model, rather than demonstrating the features of an infant transatlantic clone. Taken together, broadcasting and the press display considerable evidence that what we are witnessing in the former communist countries is a re-alignment with European norms. In that light, perhaps, it might be worth questioning just how fundamental was the difference between communist and more general European media systems.

Objections and Conclusions

There are three important objections to the position I have outlined here. Firstly, it might be argued that, whatever truth there may be in my description of the developments in Central and Eastern Europe, I have erred in my claim that there is a definite "European" model of media system. Slavko Splichal, for example, while using much of the same descriptive material as I have employed here, argues that the emerging pattern in East-Central Europe be understood as the creation of media systems which are best considered as being of an "Italian" type (Splichal 1994).

It is certainly true that there is considerable variety within the media systems of western Europe. The Italian case, and perhaps even more the Greek case, provide examples which have many of the same features as the kind of highly politicised media systems that are emerging in the former communist countries.

In both of these cases, the initial impetus to the system was in the harsh anti-communism of the years after the Second World War. The attempt was made to establish broadcasting systems which rigorously excluded the voice of the main opposition party. In the long run, this proved impossible and there was a careful distribution of media opportunities between different political forces. In Italy in particular the Communist Party was always large enough to support a considerable

press presence, and it came to be institutionalised as the controller of one of the state television channels.

One important advantage of highlighting the southern European experience is that it suggests that the creation of explicitly partisan media is not a peculiarity of the aftermath of communist rule. There is, however, a greater disadvantage. In isolating the obviously partisan systems, it tends to obscure the extent to which there is a more general, if less overt, politicisation in the rest of the continent. The case is fairly evident with regard to the press which, even if no longer the actual dependents of political parties, nevertheless remains distinctly partisan in its coverage and commentary. In broadcasting, the most striking example is Germany. Political representation in control of public broadcasting has long been explicit, and the extension of the western system of control to the *Länder* of the former GDR was manifestly a political process.

The second objection is that it is often argued that what I have here called the “US-model” is properly an “Anglo-Saxon” one, including both the US and the UK. It is probably true that the UK is politically the most US-oriented of European countries, but it is also certainly quite different both in structure and content from any “Anglo-Saxon” model of media.

The “independence” of British broadcasting, and of the BBC in particular, is rightly envied by other non-private broadcasters. It nevertheless remains the case that there has been increasing political intervention in its regulation and content over the last decade or so. The national daily press, too, while not formally aligned with any political party, is clearly and unashamedly politically partisan in a party sense. The mass media in Britain are much more politicised than they are commonly prepared to concede. It is not stretching credulity too far to identify a single European media model, within which the UK is simply one important variant.

The third objection is to say that while I have accurately identified a European media model, it is one which is rapidly passing into history. The development of a global media market will render the idea of national media systems obsolete. The non-private broadcasters will not long survive the process of globalisation, and television will become wholly or substantially commercial. The forces of economic competition will reduce the number of competing newspapers and monopoly, at least within a particular niche market, will become the norm. In other words, commercial logic will mean that, in the long run there indeed be one world media model and it will be that of the USA.

To that, I can only reply: In the long run, maybe. The longer the time scale, the more room there is for debate, because the evidence to support a definite conclusion becomes ever weaker. In the short to medium term, and certainly up to the millennium, there is sufficient evidence to make some hesitant predictions. It seems to me that there is little evidence that the forces of commercialisation and globalisation will be either strong enough or pervasive enough to negate the features of media systems which I have identified as being characteristically European.

For better or worse, it is systems of this character that are emerging in the former communist countries. That is enough to satisfy a scientist, but of course there are also policy consequences. Within the European model, there is a wide range of different concrete types. For example, one can have public broadcasting like the BBC or

government broadcasting like RTVE. One can have a diversity of sources of financial support for different parts of the system, or one can have competition for the same revenue source. One can have journalism which is nothing more than ranting propaganda based on a complete disregard for the truth, or one can have reasoned persuasion based on an honest account of the situation. All these issues, and many others, are alternatives about which there can be a serious debate and over which real choices can be made. That seems to me a much more fruitful way of proceeding than a strategy based on ignoring what is happening in reality, attempting to shoe-horn reality into some inappropriate model, and bewailing the shortcomings of reality when it does not measure up to the ideal model.

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