

CEE media and communication research on the global map



Interview with Prof. Epp Lauk

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Your publications on journalism cultures in post-communist countries and media accountability are often cited by other researchers. Will you continue research in this area? What other subjects will you raise in the near future?

One of the research interests I never get bored with is, indeed, related to journalism cultures in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. I am curious as to how journalism has been changing and is changing in these countries, and viewing this development from a comparative perspective. The “liberal” or Anglo-American model of journalism has been predominantly used as the frame of reference when interpreting and assessing journalism cultures internationally. Within this framework, national peculiarities of CEE journalisms sometimes appear as deviations from the “right” standards. However, other interpretations, based on national histories and cultures are also possible, and I am intrigued to find out what they could be.

When participating in a research project of the London School of Economics and Social Science (LSE) about the future of news agencies in Europe I noticed how little research exists on national news agencies in the CEE region. The formerly indispensable role of news agencies as the main providers of news for the media has been radically changed. How national news agencies have transformed and adapted their operations to today’s news ecosystem is an issue worth studying.

Recently, I have also returned to the history of journalism, the favourite field of my early scholarly career. Now I am especially interested in how the three tails of devilry — the Communist Party, the censorship system (*Glavlit*) and the state security organ (KGB) — worked together in governing the media in Soviet Estonia. To make life even more hectic, I am also leading a project on how local newspapers in Finland could more effectively use social media platforms for engaging new readers.

You have participated in research projects involving scientists from different countries, such as “Worlds of Journalism Studies”. Do you think such international cooperation is the best way to gain knowledge about journalists and the media? How do you evaluate the cooperation of research centres and scholars in Central and Eastern Europe? What is the position of CEE in the context of global media studies?

International cooperation and projects of journalism research are vital for understanding what is happening to journalism globally. Only in comparisons can we notice what are unique and what are common features in journalism cultures in different countries. Furthermore, having served as the coordinator for CEE countries in the “Worlds of Journalism Study” project’s second round, I have seen how rewarding and productive is the networking of researchers within such cooperation. In addition to the exchange of experience and knowledge, when participating in co-authored publications, CEE researchers gain easier access to highly-ranked international journals and publishers.

I am a founding member of the ECREA’s (European Communication Research and Education Association) CEE Network, which was established in 2010 at the ECREA conference in Hamburg. The network has done a remarkable job in establishing contacts with CEE media and communication scholars, and recruiting them into the activities of ECREA.

Opportunities for individual scholars to participate in international networks and projects depend on the resources they have in their home countries and home institutions. Often the world congresses of international organisations (such as IAMCR or ICA) are arranged in exotic places, which makes travelling expensive. Also, their conference fees tend to be relatively high. The Central and Eastern European Communication and Media conferences (CEECOM) have lower fees and they are arranged annually in one of the CEE countries, which makes them easily accessible for CEE scholars. Furthermore, scholars from other countries all over the world increasingly participate in CEECOM conferences.

Various international networks and projects exist that operate on their own financing (from European and other sources) and do not require direct financial input, but the knowledge and skills of their participants. The most prominent among them is the COST framework (European Cooperation in Science and Technology). I have cooperated with several of the CEE related COST networks. A groundbreaking COST network “East of West: Setting a New East European Media Research Agenda” COST A30 (2005-2009) particularly focused on media research in CEE countries. The network was coordinated by the Centre for Media and Communication Research of the Central European University in Budapest. Of the 24 participating countries, 10 came from Eastern and Central Europe. COST A30 largely focused on theoretical perspectives of media research in CEE countries, and succeeded in providing deep and competent analyses of various developments in the media in transition. The

project produced five books and a special issue of the journal *Medijska Istrazivanja* (Media Research Journal), published in Croatia. Another COST Action (IS0906): “Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies” was carried out in 2010–2014, where 10 CEE countries were represented among 31 participant partners. Currently, a new COST Action (CA16213) — “New Exploratory Phase in Research on East European Cultures of Dissent” (NEP4DISSENT), including 13 CEE countries is under way. The project focuses on cultural resistance and dissent in former socialist Europe in 1945–1989. This COST Action cooperates with a Horizon 2020 financed project called COURAGE (Cultural Opposition: Understanding the Cultural Heritage of Dissent in the Former Socialist Countries). The value of research and cooperation experience offered by such projects cannot be overestimated. In addition, they clearly make CEE media and communication research visible on the global map.

What subjects seem to be currently most often raised by media researchers from Central and Eastern Europe?

Issues of media freedom and the freedom of expression are increasingly coming to the agenda. More or less successful attempts of conservative and right-wing politicians, oligarchs and governments to use legislation for limiting press freedom also put the individual autonomy of journalists under pressure. Journalists are often not free to choose the topics of their stories and/or the angle and tone of how they cover the issue. Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) press freedom reports indicate the increasing strictness of the grip of governments in handling the media in several CEE countries. For example, Poland has dropped in the RSF World Press Freedom Index of 180 countries from 19th in 2014 to 58th in 2018; Hungary from 64th in 2014 to 73rd in 2018, Czech Republic from 13th in 2014 to 34th in 2018.

In a larger perspective, during the 30 years of the development of CEE media and communication scholarship, a degree of ‘de-Westernisation’ has taken place. It became obvious quite soon that the peculiarities of media systems in transforming societies cannot be adequately explained using only the ‘Western’ perspective. ‘De-Westernisation’ does not mean discarding Western research paradigms and theories, but developing integrated approaches that depart from the realities of CEE societies and media. I think scholars in CEE have been quite successful in doing this.

How has the profession of media researchers in Central and Eastern Europe changed over the last 10 years?

I can clearly see a shift of generations happening. More young people have found their interest in media research. Their backgrounds and education differ from older generations, who were educated and began their careers in ‘closed societies’, under the ideological supervision of the ruling communist parties. Today’s youngest scholars are born

What are the biggest challenges facing the CEJC in the coming years?

The CEJC is published twice a year. A big challenge would be increasing the speed of the publishing process and to publish at least four issues a year. I know much depends on resources — both financial and human. Currently, the Polish Communication Association and four supporting universities can jointly maintain the current biannual issues. However, the CEJC has neither a full-time editor nor an editorial assistant. The endless enthusiasm of editors, Bogusława Dobek-Ostrowska and Michał Glowacki, as well as guest editors from among the Editorial Board is the main currency that is driving the editing and publishing process. However, to ensure a firm position among highly-ranked international journals, a substantial amount of hard currency is also necessary. I would really like to see the CEJC among the top journals in the field, not only in CEE and the rest of Europe, but also globally.

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Prof. Epp Lauk was interviewed online by Paulina Barczyszyn-Madziarz, University of Wrocław, in January 2018.