

## Studying Media Systems in the Era of Digital Media

### Interview with Professor Daniel C. Hallin

/// This year there is the 18th anniversary of publishing a book entitled “Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics”, you co-authored with Paolo Mancini. Looking back all these years, what major changes across media systems have you noticed?

There are two main sets of changes that interact with one another. One of them is, obviously, the rise of internet. It is connected to the whole broader restructuring the media markets. The traditional legacy media declined, more in some systems than in others. One can see a fragmentation of the media. The old, broadcast era of mass media that are centralized is over with the much more targeted media. It is also connected to shifts in professionalization and standards in journalism. Still, there is a huge debate over how much of continuity, and how much change is actually there. The other thing is that in Western countries there is a crisis of the existing party and institutional system. This crisis is reflected in decline of many traditional political parties and the rise of populist leaders. Some of these changes had already started when the book was published, but they become more severe in a current period. It has disrupted the relationship between the media and traditional political structures. It has also created new kind of dilemmas for journalists, straining traditional routines based on trusted sources in the established political order.

/// So, what would be your suggestions for those who are trying capture all these changes in their studies on the media systems these days? Do you think we should add any new domain to the ones you used in your studies on the media systems?

I think that domains we used in the book still work pretty well. They are quite general. They have to do with the relation of the media to the economic structure of the media market, the political institutions, including the state

and political parties, as well as internal structure of journalism, in the sense of professionalism. So, I think the domains are still relevant, but what one has to do is to think through what are the new values and conceptualizations that you have to put forward within those domains. For example, how is political parallelism different in the era when existing political parties have collapsed and new political actors come along? The biggest changes are in the media markets. We have to deal with the fact that media markets are much more complex, fragmented, and targeted than they used to be in the past.

In terms of methodology, studies on media systems became challenging. Before, there was a limited number of the media that were central to the system, and you could study only those. And now, the system is much more fragmented, which means that you have to be a little bit modest about any claim you are making about any particular study. This is a bit of methodological advice I have always given: you have to put together lots of different studies and take a look at the picture they are giving. It is even more important than it used to be. You just cannot do one study and say that “this is the relationship between media and politics”. It takes much more of a community of researchers working on different aspects of relationships and different conjunctures. Then you need to synthesize those to draw bigger conclusions.

/// **How would you describe the U.S. media system these days? What changes this particular media system has been facing?**

The biggest change in the US is an increase in political polarization. It had started a long time ago, around the 1970s, but it has intensified a lot lately. It is a change in the political system, but it is a change in the media system, too. With the re-emergence of the partisan media, particularly Fox News and other media on the right, many people have observed an asymmetrical increase in partisanship in the media. It changes the nature of the media system, and it changes the relationship of audiences to the media system. Audiences of a lot of media now are structured by politics – much more than they were before. It changes a lot for journalists and their professional routines. Journalism is now fragmented, too. While some journalists still follow the routine of objectivity, some others reject it. But even for those who try to follow this routine, it is increasingly challenging. When you have actors clearly violating what used to be norms of political order or spreading misinformation, journalists have to decide how explicit are they going to be while calling these things out. This is one of the most interesting

things in the US. There is a lot of debate among journalists: what is objectivity? Should we follow objectivity? What would be an alternative to it?

At the same time, there is – to some extent – a decline of professionalization in the sense that there is less consensus on what the professional norms in journalism are, there are more competing subcultures within journalism that have different norms, and there is also a lot of blurring the boundaries of professional journalism. It is much less clear who is a journalist and who is not a journalist. The mainstream journalists have much more competition for their role. They are not gatekeepers in a way they were in the previous era. I would not exaggerate the decline of professionalism too much, because in many ways journalism is still very strong, but professionalism has definitely declined, particularly, in the sense that consensus and the centrality of journalism has gone down.

/// **Indeed, political and economic factors are affecting journalism to a huge extent. Can you also see changes among journalists across generations in the US? Is a new generation of journalists different than those who entered the profession some time ago?**

I would say there tend to be differences caused by political orientation of the media outlets you are working in rather than generations. But yes – there are some generational difference, too. Younger journalists tend to be impatient with constraints of the routines of objective journalism. They are more oriented toward social media and digital media which tend to be more opinionated, generally. They are also more open to the idea that journalists should play different role, namely, to be open about their judgements. So, one of the big changes in the journalistic culture is a shift from an authority of journalism that is based on being neutral and detached to the authority of journalism where people trust journalists because they feel journalists are sincere, authentic, and share their world views. I think that younger journalists tend to be more comfortable with relating to the audience and less attached to the old idea of journalists being neutral, detached, and dispassionate.

/// **And how should we consider an audience in the contemporary analyses of the media systems?**

I think that the audiences come in lots of different parts of the analysis. One dimension of political parallelism has to do with is how the audience relates to the media. Namely, do audiences choose media close to their own political orientation, or not? The behavior of the audience is a part of how we define political parallelism. Obviously, the dimension of the media markets has to do centrally with the audiences: how they are divided up, how they are targeted. Also, journalistic

professionalism that has to do with norms of journalism is something that is not purely internal to journalism. Norms of journalism are related to the whole wider social context and to the way the society sees the role of journalism. You do not have a high level of journalistic professionalization unless media owners accept these roles of journalism and unless the public accepts these roles of journalism. If the public comes with different expectations of what journalists should do, then, it is hard for journalists to stick to particular set of norms that violates audiences' expectations. So, I really see professionalism as something that is a broad social development, not something that is purely internal to journalism.

Now, I would like to ask you about studies on the media systems in non-democratic regimes. Such studies are challenging due to a limited access to information and censorship. At the same time, digital media provide an opportunity for non-democratic regime to spread misinformation. What would be your advice for those who are conducting studies on the media systems controlled by political power?

First of all, non-democratic regimes are diverse. Hence, you will have a different theoretical perspective and – to some extent – different methodological approaches, depending on particular kind of regime you are studying. I have always thought that this is important for communication scholars to be engaged with the literature in a comparative politics, political sociology, and so on, to try to understand what kind of regime this is, how the system of power works, and understand the media within that context. It is important to understand the non-democratic regimes in their own right rather than simply interpreting them as not having characteristics that we associate with liberal democratic regimes. I think we also need to understand their complexity. We cannot always understand them as top-down propaganda, in a totally centralized way. They have their own forms of political parallelism in the media due to the fact that sometimes there is a competition between fractions within the ruling elite; there are conflicting ideas about the functions of the media should be. There is usually no dichotomy that you can draw between “zero press freedom and journalistic agency” and “free system”. Usually, there are some journalists who have some room to maneuver, maybe more in some conjunctures than in others, so you need to understand that complexity.

The authoritarian system I probably know the best, maybe you can call it a semi-authoritarian regime, is Mexico when the PRI [Revolutionary Institutional Party] ruled. It was a one-party dominant regime, so it had its mechanisms of control of the media. But the party itself was very complex, and it had its factions and journalists played a very active role in the society. Also, in China there is a lot of complexity and were many changes in different periods, for example, in how much scope journalists have for critical coverage, how the

mechanisms of control work, how tight they are. So you need to understand an evolution of the systems and the shifts they go through, which are related to tensions within them about how to legitimate themselves.

/// The book “Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics” has inspired many scholars to either revise the concept of media system models you offered in the book or to develop typologies of the media systems in other regions of the world. What do you think about these revisions? And what would be the future of the studies on the media systems?

What Mancini and I was always argued, is that people should develop their own typologies for the kinds of systems they are studying, rather than try to fit things in ours. I think it makes sense to use our typology as a point of reference and look for similarities and differences from them. But generally, the task that we need to do when we are trying to analyze a new kind of system is to develop a new kind of typology that will reflect that. I think there is some important work in that direction. But I also think there is a tendency in scholarship not to attempt a broad synthesis of the sort that we were doing. People tend to do smaller quantitative studies. We took the historical-institutional approach in comparing media systems. Many people are referring to that in their own studies, but not too many people try do that kind of analysis. I think it is related to a pressure to publish lots of articles – it is hard to do this kind of scholarship when you are under such pressure. I would like to see more of this kind of analysis. It think it pushes us forward if scholars do this kind of analysis more.

/// Your book also encourages scholars to look back, into the history, when analyzing current conditions of the media system...

One of the thing I have been thinking a lot working on the media systems in Latin America is that they change a lot. There were periods when they were authoritarian systems and then they moved to democracy, the populist leaders come and go, so you had periods with a high level of polarization, and periods when all the media aligned with government. That presents challenges for conceptualizing media systems, when you have that pace of change. At the same time, there are often continuities underneath that change. These things need to be theorized – like underlying pattern of clientelism, for example.

/// What would be your general advice for those who would like to conduct comparative studies on media systems?

To do analysis at this kind of level, you have to synthesize across lots of different studies and to look at the bigger picture. Any given study that you do, you need to ask what it is going to contribute to a wider process. I think we should think about how we can put all these studies together to understand a broader pattern. So, it is a holistic approach to the study of media systems. And I think it is very important to be interdisciplinary in order to understand the role of the media in a broader evolution of political and social system.

*Daniel C. Hallin was interviewed by Agnieszka Stępińska on May 9th, 2022.*

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**Daniel C. Hallin** is Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the University of California, San Diego. His research concerns journalism, political communication, and the comparative analysis of media systems. He has written on the media and war; on television coverage of elections, demonstrating the shrinking „sound bite” and offering an interpretation of its meaning for political journalism, and on the rise and decline of journalist professionalism in the United States, and, more recently, health news and the mediatization of health and medicine. He has also focused his attention on the comparative analysis of media systems, focusing on Western Europe and on Latin America, and trying to bring into political communication and media studies the tradition of comparative historical and institutional analysis that can be found in sociology and comparative politics. His book “Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics”, co-authored with Paolo Mancini, has won the Outstanding Book awards of the International Communication and National Communication Associations, and the Goldsmith Book Award of the Shorenstein Center on Press and Politics at Harvard.