Media Capture Theory: A Paradigm Shift?

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Abstract: This paper consists of three parts. First, it suggests that a paradigm shift has taken place in political communication, as the advent of social media allows political elites to assert and frame their agendas in more efficient and economical ways than the capture of legacy media. In consequence, a paradigm shift is taking place in media studies as well: because traditional media capture theory does no longer fully account for contemporary media/politics interactions, media systems scholars now study the effects of disintermediation on media and political landscapes. Then this paper returns to traditional media capture theory and discusses some definitional issues. Finally, it recalls how party colonization of the media, a version of media capture theory, accounted for the deficit of media freedom in the former communist countries a decade ago.

Keywords: media systems research, media capture, Central and Eastern Europe

A PARADIGM SHIFT IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION – AND IN MEDIA `STUDIES

Studies on media capture have been an important paradigm in comparative media systems research since the early 2000s. Based on theories of state capture in political science, they establish a link between political and media systems, and help explain variations in media landscapes, especially in levels of media freedom and pluralism. Media capture theory is particularly popular in young democracies such as the countries of Southern Europe and of Eastern Europe where media freedom is often curtailed by political elites (but media capture is also prevalent in many other countries such as Taiwan, Turkey, and South Africa, among others).

Owing to changes in communication technology, however, a paradigm shift has taken place in political communication in the 2010s and, in consequence, in media studies as well. These changes include at least five key developments:

1. *Direct communication:* Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter allow politicians to directly communicate with voters. Politicians may now assert and frame their agendas, bypassing legacy media and professional journalists whose gatekeeping function has been undermined (Papathanassopoulos & Negrine, 2019). Social media also enable them to gather instant feedback and shape their messages accordingly.

2. *The weaponization of fake news claims:* The frequent use of the term 'fake news' as a political label to describe and to discredit independent critical media allows populist politicians to undermine trust in all media, and particularly in outlets that those politicians associate with liberal values (cf. Reuters Institute, 2022, see also Bajomi-Lázár & Horváth, 2023).

3. *Influencers:* The enhanced role of social media in news consumption enables politically motivated influencers to deliver micro-targeted messages to particular groups of voters (Reuters Institute, 2021) in more economical ways than the capture and funding of traditional news organizations (e.g., Hanula, 2022).

4. *Disinformation:* The decentralization of news production allows politicians to systematically disseminate disinformation via online platforms, manipulating public opinion both at home and abroad (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).

5. *Smear:* Character-killing campaigns that cause a chilling effect enable politicians to discredit and silence critical journalists and public intellectuals (Örnebring, 2012). On social media, such campaigns are accompanied by civil volunteers harassing those targeted, thus boosting the efficiency of said campaigns (cf. Tófalvy, 2017).

In short, new communication technologies allow for more efficient and economical methods of information management and manipulation. Overall, the emergence of new platforms of communication means that politicians seeking to manage and manipulate information no longer need to control, formally or informally, many media outlets to get their messages through to voters and to marginalize, or silence, critical voices.

The traditional media capture approach does not account for these recent developments. Hence a growing body of literature has addressed the question of how the new means of political communication affect relations between media and politics. A new explanatory theory accounting for the issues above and modelling their effects, however, is still to be developed.

MEDIA CAPTURE THEORY: SOME DEFINITIONAL ISSUES

Early writings in media capture theory discussed media capture as a phenomenon synonymous with the political instrumentalization of the media (cf. Mancini, 2012) or with informal censorship. For example, Corneo (2005, p. 2) suggests that "captured media can seriously distort collective decisions" while Besley and Prat (2006, p. 721) argue that "media capture (…) affects the voters' information and hence their voting decisions" and "the presence of media capture reduces political turnover". Petrova (2005 p. 1) states that "mass media, being the most important source of information on public affairs for the general public, provides a convenient means for manipulating public opinion." In other words, media capture is a means to convert political capital into media capital, and then media capital back into political capital again, i.e., it establishes a dynamic link between political and media systems.

This approach, however, is problematic in that it assumes that media have a major influence on voters' decisions, as reception studies looking into the political impact of legacy media tend to question this assumed impact, at least in democracies with plural and free media landscapes where most of the relevant research has been conducted (cf. Hall, 1980; Morley, 1980). While the situation may be different in countries with less diverse and less free media landscapes where hegemonic media might exert a greater influence upon voting decisions, it remains that electoral behaviour is also dependent on a number of factors other than the media, including personal experiences and interpersonal communication with opinion leaders. Yet from this assumption it follows that the primary reason behind media capture is the management of information, while other considerations are largely or entirely overlooked.

Other motivations behind media capture may be numerous, including the extraction of media resources from the media such as well-paid senior positions, airtime, radio and television frequencies, state advertising revenues, newspaper subsidies, and funds dedicated to public service content production. All these resources may be used for the purpose of clientele building, i.e., in the final analysis, for the purpose of consolidating the incumbent political actors' rule. Media capture theory should also account for these possible outcomes.

Recent studies have echoed the definition of media capture in the seminal work by Alina Mungiu-Pippidi (2008, p. 92) in that it is a situation where the media are lacking autonomy because "vested interests, and not just the government, [are] using them for other purposes". In this sense, it is a "government-business cartel" that is politically instrumentalizing media. More precisely, the aspect that "fundamentally distinguishes media capture from other forms of government control of the media is the involvement of the private sector" (Dragomir, 2019, p. 4), i.e., politicians commission oligarchs to extend their informal control

over the media. This approach certainly allows for the inclusion of other motives behind media capture such as financial considerations.

However, while the early approach seems narrow and restrictive, the more recent one is too broad and inclusive and only offers a too vague definition, which makes it practically impossible to distinguish media capture from all other forms of political instrumentalization of the media including informal censorship. What kind of political interference is not media capture then? What about, for example, state advertising in private media owned by government cronies with the intention of influencing political coverage, which is the case of Hungary under Viktor Orbán's rule (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2019)? Some scholars argue that this is also a media capture strategy. For example, Dragomir (2019) suggests that media capture has four components, including: 1) regulatory capture, 2) the control of public service media, 3) the use of state financing as a control tool, and 4) ownership takeover. But the question once again arises: what is *not* media capture?

I cannot come up with a better definition for media capture. Instead, during my former research, I have suggested introducing the notion of 'party colonization of the media' as a potentially more accurate concept. What follows below is a brief outline of this approach. Before offering some details, I should add that I conducted my research a decade ago. This means that my research focused on legacy media, and my findings may be of a limited use in the contemporary media environment defined by the emerging new communication technologies described in Section 1 of this paper.

PARTY COLONIZATION OF THE MEDIA IN EASTERN EUROPE

The historical freedom of the press data issued by Freedom House suggest that media freedom has been compromised more often in Eastern than in Western Europe. These data also suggest that there have been major variations in the level of press freedom in and across the countries of Eastern Europe in the post-transformation period. These quantitative assessments are in line with numerous qualitative descriptions. My research, published in the monograph *Party Colonisation of the Media in Central and Eastern Europe* (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014) aimed at explaining the relative deficit of media freedom in Eastern as opposed to Western Europe, and the spatial and temporal variations in media freedom within Eastern Europe[1].

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1 For a brief description of my findings in the *Central European Journal of Communication*, see Bajomi-Lázár (2015).

Following the tradition established by Seymour-Ure (1974, p. 157) who observes that "there have been very obvious historical associations between press and party systems," I tried to explain variations in media freedom in terms of variations in party systems. But why parties and not other political actors? I focused on political parties for the simple reason that parties in Eastern Europe have a *de facto* monopoly in the regulatory process and are therefore the single most influential actors shaping media landscapes. Media regulation is often the outcome of inter and intra-party bargains and deals and is therefore shaped by the relative powers of parties and party factions. In contrast, other potential agents such as Presidents, trade unions, religious institutions, and professional and civil society organisations are not in any position to exert much influence on the regulatory process.

The research team of *Media and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe* (2009–2013)*,* a European Commission FP7 project based at Oxford University, was led by Jan Zielonka and Terhi Rantanen, and involved Henrik Örnebring, Václav Štětka, Ainius Lasas and myself. We conducted over 300 interviews in 10 former communist countries that had joined the European Union in the 2000s. The interviewees included senior politicians, as well as state administrators, media policy experts, leading journalists, civil society representatives and media scholars. One of the recurring findings in multiple countries was that many of the political elites did not think that the media could affect voting behavior. Instead, various interviewees repeatedly suggested that control over the media may eventually backfire in terms of election outcomes. This suggested that other motivations for media capture should be considered.

Political science has studied 'state capture' for long (World Bank, 2000). Political parties in young democracies are young and have weak social roots (O'Dwyer, 2004; Kopecký, 2006; Kopecký & Scherlis, 2008), and need "to compensate for their feeble position in society by a strong grip over the public sector" (Kopecký, 2006, p. 264). Kopecký (2006, p. 258) further describes 'party colonization of the state' as a strategy whereby "state resources are traded for political support." These are 'cartel parties' that rely on subventions and other benefits and privileges afforded by the state (cf. Katz & Mair, 1995).

Following this tradition, I suggested introducing the concept of 'party colonization of the media', to be defined as a strategy aimed at extracting resources from the media and channeling them to party supporters to reward them for past and future services. This observation is in line with several qualitative assessments describing how political parties have divided media resources (Jakubowicz, 2012; Balčytienė, 2013). For example, Sparks (2012, p. 44) observes that:

> …the allocation of [media] resources was very often directly the product
> of political factors. The protracted wrangling over the legal position

of television, and in particular the bitter struggles over the award of commercial franchises is an obvious case in point.

Now, differences in levels of media freedom between Western and Eastern Europe may be explained in terms the different levels of embeddedness of political parties in society. Parties in Western Europe have twice as many members (Mair & Biezen, 2001) and twice as much public trust (IDEA, 2007) than those in Eastern Europe. Also, electoral volatility has been about three times higher in Eastern than in Western Europe (Mainwaring & Torcal, 2005). It follows that parties in the West could rely on membership dues and local party structures for party organization and voter mobilization. Parties in Eastern Europe, by contrast, had to compensate for their weakness by capturing the state *and* the media, which explains why media freedom is more often curtailed in the East than in the West.

But what explains variations in media freedom in and across the countries of Eastern Europe? I argued that different party configurations in parliament may lead to different patterns of party colonization of the media. I compared 10 governments with even mandates, i.e., potentially similar opportunities in terms of party colonization of the media, in five countries in the period 1993–2013, involving Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovenia. I identified three recurring patterns, including: 1) one-party colonization, 2) multi-party-colonization with a dominant party, and 3) multi-party colonization without a dominant party (see Table 1).

Table 1. **Patterns of party colonization and levels of media freedom in five former communist countries and the pertinent political leaders in 1993–2013**

Pattern of party colonization	Media freedom	Country and Political Leaders
One-party colonization	low	Hungary: Orbán (2010–) Poland: Marcinkiewicz and Kaczyński (2005–2007) Romania: Năstase (2000–2004)
Multi-party colonization with a dominant party	medium	Bulgaria: Kostov (1997–2001) Poland: Miller and Belka (2001–2004) Slovenia: Janša (2004–2008)
Multi-party colonization without a dominant party	high	Bulgaria: Simeon II (2001–2005) Hungary: Horn (1994–1998) Romania: Tăriceanu (2004–2007) Slovenia: Drnovšek (1993–1996)

Source: author

The bottom-line is that one-party colonization of the media leads to lower levels of media freedom than multi-party colonization. The more parties are involved in the colonization of the media, and the more evenly they are involved, the more veto points there are in the system. Veto points make sure that there

is no political party in the position to control all media, which leads to higher levels of media freedom.

The recurring pattern in the five countries studied is that the more centralized the decision-making structures within a government, the greater the likelihood of one-party colonization, and the more fragmented a government's decision-making structures, the smaller the likelihood of such colonization. In other words, the stronger the government, the weaker the media, and vice versa.

What has been the main lesson of this research? It suggests that media freedom is not just a function of media regulation, which in consequence alone cannot improve the status of media freedom. It is the constitutional framework of the nation that in the final analysis defines media freedom. Proportional electoral laws that favor coalition governments and party laws that improve party funding and internal party democracy may ultimately restrain parties' needs and opportunities to colonize the media and hence may be conducive to higher levels of media freedom. If you want to improve media freedom, focus on the constitutional framework, not on media law, for even the best media regulation may be poorly implemented if veto points are missing from the system.

Are these findings still valid in the new, changed, media environment? This is difficult to answer. To be sure, media freedom is still lacking in many of the former communist countries, and media capture remains an established practice, even though the means and methods of political communication have changed a lot. But if we suggest that media capture, or the party colonization of the media, is motivated by factors other than just the management of information, and in particular the extraction of resources that parties can use to ensure informal party support, then these findings may still have validity.

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