

Media Culture Kaleidoscopes: The Core of a Media System

Interview with Professor Peter Gross

/// In the Interview for the Central European Journal of Communication in Fall of 2014, we discussed an urgency to reorientate our scholarly studies from systems to cultures. You said we need: “The cultural kaleidoscopic prism through which one can examine media systems is yet to be tested”. How does that look from the lenses of media and communication scholarship over the last decade?

Many of our colleagues have for some time recognized that culture is intrinsic to understanding the character and ways of functioning of media systems. However, a cultural approach to the study of these systems was hampered by the absence of both theoretical and methodological shortcomings. Specifically, the argument that the values, beliefs and attitudes of media owners/elites, political elites, and the media systems’ rank-and-file, in the larger context of their national cultural characteristics, remained undeveloped. Most importantly, the articulation or outlining of cultural values that are germane to assessing was not available.

/// Why that’s so difficult? Is it through various media policies and the dynamics of changing contexts (human-machine communications, Generative AI)? Or that’s about the divergence of cultural path dependencies and imaginative futures?

Not alone among their academic colleagues, media scholars have shied away from constructing cultural approaches partly because these are qualitative ones and, additionally, politically suspect in some academic quarters, something I briefly flag in my latest book. Suffice it to say, overall, the cultural and psychological legacies of the past requires that an explanation be provided as to why the new political, social and economic system functioned as they did immediately after 1989 and beyond. Meaning that studying the transition and transformation of East and Central European societal systems demanded either

a departure from the reigning political and economic approaches or at the very least their accompaniment by a culture-based understanding of their evolution.

/// You recently published your new book, “The Cultural Core of the Media Systems. The Romanian Case” (Lexington Books, 2023). What are the key findings?

My book’s starting point was the question, if East and Central European countries now share democratic systems and free markets, how is it that the nature and manner of functioning of their media systems is in large measure different from those of their Western counterparts?

I constructed a hybrid framework for a cultural-driven consideration of media systems by starting with six of Lawrence E. Harrison’s ten elements of his “progressive-static” division of societies that are most pertinent to the functioning of media systems (time orientation, community, justice and fair play, ethical code, merit, and authority). These values encompass the short-term vs. long-term orientation; collectivist vs. individualist; industrial vs. post-industrial dimensions; “power distance” notions; the effects of corruption and levels of trust, and “uncertainty avoidance” factors. In many ways, each is at the core of media systems’ hierarchical structures and the media owners/elites influence on them, on the nature and functioning of the systems and their individual media outlets. This framework provides a cultural prism for assessing media markets, political parallelism, clientelism and instrumentalization, as well as the nature of the relationship between the media and political actors, professionalism, and the degree and nature of state interventions.

When looking at the Romanian media systems through the cultural prism, it provides us an underpinning explanation for the impetuses that describes why and how they evolved in this Eastern European country after 1989.

/// What’s the story behind the concept of Kaleidoscope? How to apply the Cultural Prisms concepts juxtaposing theory with practice?

By kaleidoscopic, I simply meant the varied factors that describe and are part of a cultural approach, as related in my answer to the question above. The cultural prism that I offer is really a work in progress, as is a cultural theory of media system. It is my hope that my book offers a starting point that allows for refining a theory, framework and a methodology. I consider the cultural prism that I outlined to be much like a Lego set. That is, pieces can be added or left out, which is a necessity both in and outside East and Central Europe, because while there may be cultural differences between regions there are also between the countries of each region.

/// What have been the key methodological researchers' challenges, studies on organisational culture, values, people and their perceptions/emotions?

In the last few decades, as a generalization, scholars have created discipline-specific silos. There needs to be an across-the-board reversal of this trend. I have based my cultural prism predominantly on the work of sociologists, social psychologists and cultural studies' scholars. The results of a cultural approach to studying media systems may in turn inform their work.

/// How universal can the Kaleidoscope method be, a tool to assess the cultural diversity in Romania, Central and Eastern Europe, and beyond?

By employing my cultural prism, both similarities and dissimilarities among East and Central Europe media systems and their ways of functioning can be detected. In my view, this takes comparative studies in the field beyond the assessment of political and economic differences, similarities and influences, which as mentioned, are themselves affected by the values, beliefs and attitudes of the media elites and rank-and-file.

/// What are the next big things to come in global media culture research?

In my estimation, the ubiquity and growth of digital media will require even greater attention to their cultural underpinnings. Perhaps we will find that either great cultural divides or increasingly fewer differences are at the core of the reasons for, nature of and ways of functioning of media systems, and their effects on audiences, national and/or international public spheres. Will cultural differences be reduced to the point where we can talk about a European public sphere and a Europe-wide media system? Or are cultural differences so very entrenched that despite their slow but changing nature, they will re-create the same kind of media systems, generation after generation for the foreseeable future in each country? These questions are some that need to be asked and not only regarding media systems but also the political, social and economic systems in every country.

Ultimately, in my view media systems typologies, tied to judgements that are solely predicated on the political and economic systems, are no longer sufficiently descriptive or explanatory explanations of the nature and ways of functioning of these systems. Values, beliefs and attitudes underline the individual and group behaviors and practices of those who lead, influence and carry out the work in and of media systems in every society and, in fact, provide a more fundamental way of deciphering the functioning of all societal systems.

Peter Gross was interviewed by Michał Głowacki

Peter Gross, PhD, is a professor emeritus and former Director of the University of Tennessee's School of Journalism and Electronic Media (2006–2016). His research focus is East and Central European societies, media, journalism, and cultures. Among his 12 authored and co-authored scholarly books, textbooks, and co-edited book collections are: *Entangled Evolutions. Media and Democratization in Eastern Europe* (2002) and *Media Transformations in the Post-Communist World: Eastern Europe's Tortured Path to Change* (2013), which he co-edited with Dr. Karol Jakubowicz (Poland). His latest book, *The Cultural Core of the Media System: The Romanian Case* was released in June 2023.