

Media Capture in the Post-Truth Era: Media Freedom is a Function of the Quality of Democracy

Interview with Professor Alina Mungui-Pippidi

Though there are many surveys published, the Freedom House (FH) Reports are considered one of the most authoritative sources concerning the level of freedom and human rights across countries. For 2022, Freedom House reached the dire conclusion that democracy is under threat and that for 16 consecutive years global freedom has been declining. Would you agree?

According to the V-Dem Project, only 34 countries (home to only 13 per cent of the world population) still qualified as liberal democracies in 2021, down from 42 in 2012. The World Justice Project (2021) also reported that 74 per cent of countries covered, accounting for nearly 85 per cent of the world's population saw declines on their rule of law index (which also includes corruption) for 2021. While the current world has an unprecedented number of democracies, it has regressed on democracy, instead of progressing on corruption control, especially since the economic crisis of 2008. So, the high expectations of the nineties that electoral democracies would consolidate and increase their quality over time by reducing corruption have not really materialized.

Can corruption be blamed for democracy backsliding?

No country backsliding among those who control corruption well (are in the top tercile of charts), and all serious backslides are from the worst tercile on corruption. In fact, as I show in my forthcoming book (*Rethinking Corruption*, Edward Elgar, 2023), the worst you are on corruption and the more years you spend without solving your state capture problem, the higher the chances of a backslide. This being said, there are no cases of regression on behalf of corruption

only, since corruption is so widespread across all regimes. Triggers are rather gang violence, drugs, insurgencies and wars—mostly Islamist.

Another Freedom House report underlines the tendency towards hybrid regimes in the “post-Soviet space”. Apparently democratic mechanisms are ineffective, and societies fall victim to dictators and populist delusions. How would you comment on that worrying situation from your perspective as both academic and journalist?

The post-Soviet space – we should stretch it a bit to cover the Balkans, which were not part of the Soviet Union – has never managed to achieve a high quality of democracy, with the notable exception of Estonia and maybe Lithuania. But even countries which did reach a good quality – the Visegrad countries – have been under strain after accession to the EU. Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic are not backsliders in Freedom House scores – understandably, as no journalist has been arrested there. But sadly they have grown more like Moldova or Ukraine, so to speak, without having the same geopolitical challenges. But I would not consider our region to blame, although it is strange that EU influence did not matter more. The consensus of twenty years ago that we were building judicial independence, for instance, has been broken. Now politicians are openly using the judiciary against their opponents in a score of democracies, and where they cannot do that they merely ‘reform’ the judiciary with the same goal. India is the most notable case in point, but also Poland, Israel, Romania, and even Spain. The EU provided such advice with respect to the Western Balkans, Ukraine and Moldova, so it is a total confusion. Francis Fukuyama’s definition of rule of law, whereby politicians do not change the laws preceding them, is trespassed on a daily basis in the name of the good but factually for openly authoritarian purposes. Neither Brussels, nor populists, trust the judiciary to form and exercise its own will and in reality we witness political intervention in name only. It is hard to say that this is a path to develop the rule of law. On the contrary, anticorruption has been a very handy instrument to use against opponents in this context. Countries which do not jail any top politician stand accused of protecting a culture of immunity but maybe it is better to proceed like that, instead of arresting all opponents, as India, the world’s largest democracy (which Freedom House ranked as partly free after ranking as free for many years), seems to be doing in 2023.

Free and independent media is the cornerstone of democracy. However, independent media are increasingly at risk from hostile forces as well as from a lack of sufficient, sustained funding. How is freedom of the press doing?

Not progressing. Indeed, despite the growth of digital citizenship globally – more and more people have broadband Internet on their mobiles, even in sub-Saharan Africa and thus the public is getting gradually more and more digitally empowered – media freedom has been declining on average for many years and no continent is an exception to this. Again, it is a fine matter of quality of democracy because in many countries the government cannot be openly blamed for infringing it, but still few countries have high rankings. The recent achievers are Costa Rica, Uruguay, and Estonia, but you can count them on the fingers of one hand. And I think in some old democracies’ media is not doing so well, either.

At the same time, media are under threat “from within” since they facilitate propaganda, spread disinformation, and become allies of authoritarian regimes. What is your opinion on the role of the media today?

I am mostly a corruption scholar these days, so for me it has always been difficult to explain to my naïve Western colleagues that you cannot just be satisfied that media is a pillar of democracy and public integrity, since in environments which are authoritarian, nationalist, or corrupt, the media will also be authoritarian, chauvinistic, or corrupt. The media is a part of a political system and to cure a deeply defective political system, you need an exogenous, not an endogenous factor. I coined the ‘media capture’ concept years ago to make people understand this but I am not sure they did. Westerners hardly understand the media under Putin these days, for instance, and the fact that its effect is not achieved by one media outlet but by an entire system, where some independent publications are allowed to exist, as long as their reach is controlled.

Here we come to the concept of “captured media”. It is no longer a metaphor but a despicable reality. It is one of the risks for free journalism and media. The latest report by the Council of Europe’s Platform to promote the protection of journalism and safety of journalists (2022) explicitly refers to different cases of media capture in Europe. These are no longer isolated examples. According to your definition, media capture is a situation in which the media are controlled “either directly by governments or by vested interests” which seek political influence rather than profit. The result is the creation of a hybrid regime, halfway between democracy and totalitarian state. Could you explain how this phenomenon flourishes in the current political situation? Are there any vivid illustrations of this?

At the time I came up with this (2007–2008), even if the most cited article “Freedom without Impartiality: The vicious circle of media capture” (*Media Transformations in the Post-Communist World: Eastern Europe’s tortured path to change*. ed. Gross, P. and Jakubowicz, K., Lexington Books, 49–66) appeared

only in 2012, there was no social media. So I was talking only about legacy media and I was trying to explain the phenomenon we witnessed in the Balkans and the FSU, where media had become plural without becoming independent. I found a compromise theory in the Italian '*lotizzazione*' (allotment) because I was interested in public media (having been a reformer of Romanian public broadcasting in my youth). Italy was a good example of a particularistic society divided by interest groups that also divided media – you have pluralism and even truth if you piece the whole together but you do not have objectivity BBC style (the way BBC looked then). No owner thinks of media as a business in itself, just as an outlet to trade influence.

We have been accustomed to believing that the captured media phenomenon is typical of countries in transition or with unstable and weak institutions, or generally where the rule of law is disrupted. What are the conditions for the appearance of captured media and are there various models of such media?

Meanwhile, social media occurred and *lotizzazione*, in other words, a fragmented media system where each group promotes its own truth has become the norm, except that this is no longer part of an agreement between elites, it is just a fact. The internet ruined legacy media by making it more vulnerable to capture, so this triple loss of – authority, economic sustainability, and audience – made even top media outlets in the West vulnerable to capture. In the well proven case of the Gupta family, some South African oligarchs, it was shown that they purchased space in the venerable British media through PR agencies, space which promoted favorable content without indicating that it was advertising. I was offered to write op eds in a couple of most influential language newspapers in the EU by PR agencies, whose clients recommended me when my public positions seemed to side with what they promoted at the time. A market exists presently of op-eds which are sponsored, but not indicated as such. To know who the captor is, you should be able to see in detail not only the agency who purchased the op-ed space but also its clients, and there is no such transparency presently. We battle Sputnik, but our roots are also infiltrated.

Hallin and Mancini speak about the instrumentalization of the media. How do the two relate to one another? Or maybe captured media is the extreme form of instrumentalization?

Instrumentalization presumes that media is an autonomous agent which can be manipulated, while the media is a passive actor and not a contributor in the scheme of captured media. The media was instrumentalized in Wikileaks and in all the leaks. We look at the Pandora Papers, and Putin is not in there with

his fortune, but Zelensky and the real estate of his group was, the war came, and people did not bother to analyze this anymore. Who selected this and why? Of course, the media cannot resist the leaks, there is so much information there, and they may fall victim to a selection bias, but the media are not part of it, they try to do their job, even if they may end up being manipulated. In the captured media theory, media outlets are not autonomous but play in the influence games of its owners – very much as the media was in US and Europe in the nineteenth century and as it is in the greatest part of the world today – an industry where black and white PR government and political propaganda dominate, not information based on facts. I recommend the Netflix miniseries inspired by a Jack London story (London was a journalist) “*The Minions of Midas*” – for how perverse the media freedom game has become.

Public service media: The European Media Freedom Act proposed by the European Commission in 2022 explicitly points out that PSM comprise one of the pillars of free and independent media in Europe: “Independent public service media – where public service media exist, their funding provided should be adequate and stable, in order to ensure editorial independence. The head and the governing board of public service media will have to be appointed in a transparent, open and non-discriminatory manner. Public service media providers shall provide a plurality of information and opinions, in an impartial manner, in accordance with their public service mission.” We have been dreaming of such ideal public service media systems since the beginning of the democratic changes in CEE more than thirty years ago.

You can dream on; this is legislation for the twentieth century and completely behind the times. Capture these days is like the pandemic – in order to cure yourself you need a general lockdown and in order to cure the media, one should address the entire media system. That requires a wide package with social media regulation, full transparency of ownership and advertising for legacy media, and regulations on universal state funding of the media. The public service is an anachronism, a problem and not a solution, due to its lack of audience. Exceptions remain – in Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands and Germany, but Hallin and Mancini are right that the roots of a media system are old – one hundred years or more, so if a country never had an independent public service prior to TV without borders directive and the internet, it will not have one that matters in the future. It’s just water under the bridge.

Prof. Pippidi, you are a renowned scholar who has examined in-depth the transitions in Central and Eastern Europe as well as governance and corruption, and you have had the privilege of working with another legendary scientist in media studies

— Dr. Karol Jakubowicz. Both of you belong to a generation where you acted not only as researchers but also as fighters for democratic values. What is your assessment of media science and its contribution to media practice and democracy today?

I have stepped down from being a media scholar per se for some years now and I have noticed that another generation has kept the flag up, that ‘media capture’ is used more than before and became a small brand which rallies people, that the European Commission, for instance, has passed some rules of ownership transparency which would not have happened otherwise. We used to live in post-truth in former Communist Europe even before the appearance of social media due to plain capture. Now, due to social media, everybody lives in post-truth, and it’s our job to help sort this out. Especially since we are not naïve. The main danger these days – and an impediment – is the war. Wars are times when propaganda flourishes. I became a journalist during the Romanian Revolution, and I still feel scarred by the sixty thousand dead at Timisoara, which were reported by most of West European media at the time, and which turned out to be a hundred and twenty or so. We should care for victory, but we should care for the truth more, and the role of academia is to be even more independent than the media, and to find some solutions in an environment where almost nobody welcomes the truth anymore.

*Alina Mungui-Pippidi was interviewed
by Bissera Zankova
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