

WHERE DO DANGERS TO MODERN MEDIA COME FROM? “CAPTURED MEDIA: EXPLORING MEDIA SYSTEMS IN AND AFTER TRANSITIONS”, LISBON, DECEMBER 5–6, 2022

INTRODUCTION

Threats to media freedom are real and worrying global trends. More than that, their impact on the state of democracy is truly dangerous, especially for young democratic states, which experience country-specific difficulties in building strong and viable media ecosystems. In these countries, political and economic pressures, self-censorship and the absence of serious criticism of power-holders have become a daily practice. Within this context, the concept of captured media signifies the complex risks that may effectively undermine the public function of the media and stifle the fundamental role of freedom of expression in democratic societies.

THE BEGINNING – HALLIN AND MANCINI’S THEORY

In their renowned book *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*, Hallin and Mancini (2004) talk about political parallelism, the effect of which depends on “the strength of connections between the media and political actors and on the balance between the advocacy and neutral/informational traditions of political journalism” (p. 27). The narrower concept raised by the authors is the “party-press parallelism proposed in some of the earliest work on comparative analysis of media systems.” In their discussion of political parallelism, Hallin and Mancini conclude that it has “a number of different components, and there are a number of indicators that can be used to assess how strongly it is present in a media system” (p.28). According to the authors, “most basically it refers to media content – the extent to which the different media reflect distinct political orientation in their news and current affairs reporting, and sometimes also their entertainment content” (p.28). In its extreme form, political parallelism can lead to radical political instrumentalization – a situation in which the media lose their editorial independence under pressure from either or both the government and private companies. “The concentration of media ownership in the hands of a limited number of businesses, often associated

with politicians or government officials, is the main factor that enables such consolidation” (Dragomir, 2022). A similar deviation from media independence is party control over the media or “party colonization”, which is widely spread in Central and Eastern European post-communist countries (Bajomi-Lazar, 2014). This is how we arrive at the idea of captured media which, according to the definition by Alina Mungiu-Pippidi and Ghinea (2012), is a situation in which the media is controlled “directly by governments or vested interests,” seeking political influence rather than profit. The result is the creation of a hybrid regime somewhere between the democratic and the totalitarian state.

THE CONFERENCE – MAIN IDEAS

The conference “Captured Media: Exploring Media Systems in and after Transitions” brought together researchers from five continents to Universidade Católica Portuguesa in Lisbon from 5 to 6 December 2022. The conference debated how political structures and economic groups in countries that do not have a strong tradition of freedom of expression and adequate political safeguards have taken over the mass media and journalists. In politically unstable societies such tendencies could be particularly destructive due to the close ties between media organizations and the political class, the lack of a strong civic culture and the perception of a lack of media independence and ineffective regulation.

Mireya Márquez-Ramírez from the Iberoamerican University of Mexico (“Theorizing Media Capture: The Conceptual Challenges of a Widespread Phenomenon”) and Peter Bayomi-Lazar (“Media Capture Research: Some Observations”) gave keynote speeches. They highlighted the changes in the approaches to the concept of captured media which, from the narrow understanding of the early 2000s have become too broad and encompassing today based on the borrowings from political science theories. They have evolved to encompass any phenomena that hamper the independent functioning of the media and their role as the fourth power. The boundaries of the concept were one of the topics of the conference discussions. Another comprised national examples from various countries and the factors undermining media contribution to democracy.

Africa and the state of media freedom there was the focus of several reports in Lisbon. In the Afrobarometer surveys of 18 African countries in late 2019 and early 2020, most citizens stressed that corruption had increased, and governments were doing very little to control it. Perceptions and experiences of corruption vary widely across African societies but most of the respondents complained that they risk retaliation if they become involved by reporting corruption to the authorities. This situation also affects freedom of expression and, accordingly, media systems, which are in significant decline. Against this backdrop, Teddy W. Workneh and Harrison Lejeune, Kent State University (“The Politics of “Fact-checking”

Communities in Ethiopia: Origins, Actors, and Networks”) concentrated on the policies pursued by the “fact-checking” communities in Ethiopia: origins, representatives and networks. They also painted a broader picture of Ethiopia’s media environment which proved to be rather troubled. Ethiopia’s unfolding political transition is characterized by hyper-partisan media relationships, which in turn have spawned an epidemic of disinformation on social media. For a long time, the practice of journalism has been characterized by state-sponsored threats, intimidation and violence, which in turn have resulted in severe self-censorship, exile, imprisonment and the assassination of journalists.

Johanna Mack from the Technical University of Dortmund, Germany (“Media System Transformation in a Context of Stable Instability: Conceptualizing Media Development in Guinea-Bissau”) presented her findings on the transformation of the national media system in Guinea-Bissau. For Mack, the object of research is a media system that is unstable and prone to changes (whether positive or negative). The role of international cooperation for media development proves to be important in this respect. Influential models such as Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) cannot be unconditionally applied to the media environment in many African countries. Here, the transformation that takes place, according to Dragomir (2019), Voltmer (2019), Frère (2018) and Harris (2018) can best be followed by focusing on the role of actors in media processes. This approach entails carrying out interviews and organizing focus groups, field research and experimentation for „participatory mapping” of the various stakeholders in Guinea-Bissau.

For Jeff Conroy-Krutz of Michigan State University, USA (“Media Capture & Popular Support for Media Freedoms”) the decline in the overall support of freedom of speech in Africa is due to the frequent cases of media capture in many countries, which manifests itself in expressions of bias, lack of trust and sometimes inflammatory hate rhetoric. To test this claim, a collaborative experiment was conducted using nationally representative surveys in four African countries: Ivory Coast, Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda. The experiment shed further light on the origin of people’s concerns about the media in Africa and the factors that can weaken support for such vital democratic freedoms. It is striking that subjects do not agree with particularly harsh penalties against radio stations accused of partisan bias, lies, or hate speech. Kenya is the exception, where the legacy of 2007–8 post-election violence seems to have made the population particularly sensitive to harsh punishment for hate speech. Findings mainly suggest that other accusations against the media, including the failure to pay taxes and providing platforms for armed groups are significantly more likely to garner support for government-imposed restrictions than bias or lies.

Two other countries, Iraqi Kurdistan and Mongolia, whose media systems we know little about – were also on the agenda in Lisbon. Jiyan Faris, from the

University of Antwerp in Belgium (“Advertising and Media Capture in Transitional Democracies: The Case of Iraqi Kurdistan”) explained the theoretical and methodological aspects of advertising in an opaque media market in a transitional democracy. The financing of media organizations in Iraqi Kurdistan is non-transparent: ownership structures are hidden; circulation, consumption and revenue information is controlled by media owners, while public broadcasting information is controlled by the government. Faris’ analysis related particularly to corporations, political parties, NGOs, as well as state institutions, which preferred to allocate advertising to specific media groups in a dubious manner. The results provided original empirical evidence on how uncertain socio-economic conditions compel media professionals to develop informal networks with advertisers (e.g., face-to-face meetings, telephone conversations, brokering, patronage links, and informal points of contact). In turn, this approach allows powerful social players to use advertising as a tool to influence news media and expand their networks with ruling political parties. The findings also point to the creation of deliberate legal loopholes under pressure from the major players and particularly regarding legislation on media transparency and accountability.

Political science researchers rarely pay attention to the role of the media in processes of regime change and subsequent transition (Votmer, 2019). Moreover, media scholarship has only sporadically dealt with the long-term role of the media in consolidating democratic processes. This conclusion also applies to Mongolia, where current media research is limited (Baasanjav, 2021). The boom in commercial print newspapers in the 1990s and private television stations in the 2000s, alongside the mushrooming of online news sites and social media since 2010 show that Mongolian legislation has somehow established an open and pluralistic media system. However, the political culture, prone to clientelism, corruption and the mental legacy of communism supplies the main conditions for the appearance of a media sector with significant market defects, dominated by media subordinated to political and business interests. In such an unfavorable environment, Mongolian journalists work within conflicting professional frameworks. Some have abandoned journalistic autonomy and have “renegotiated” the norms of free journalism in favor of the pragmatic acceptance of financial and political benefits. Others, however, strive to adhere to Western principles and standards. A small group of exceptional investigative journalists face constant accusations of libel. Under these circumstances, it seems uncertain how long these new forms of investigative reporting will survive if the authorities, including police chiefs and judges, are reluctant to investigate corruption or, even worse, simply side with powerful figures. Researchers involved in the presentation of “Media and Democratization in Post-Communist Mongolia” were Undrach Basanjev, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, Munkhmandakh Myagmar, Mongolian Press Institute and Poul Erik Nielsen, Aarhus University, Denmark.

Moving to Latin America, participants delved into the Brazilian context and the processes of “de-democratization” there. Ricardo Ribeiro Ferreira, University of Edinburgh (“Understanding the Roles of Journalism in the De-Democratisation of Brazil”) argued that the “regress” of democratic regimes to authoritarianism was characterized by the decline of institutions (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) and the contribution of the media to this state of affairs is considerable. Studies on post-Soviet states (Knott, 2018), India (Rao & Mudgal, 2015) and South Africa (Rao & Wasserman, 2015) show that journalism facilitates and, in practice, shapes “de-democratization” because of the ways news outlets fail or avoid either or both scrutinizing politicians and publishing content that is essential for vigorous public discussion. For this reason, cited studies concentrate on journalism’s lack of success in performing pro-democracy functions – i.e., on journalism’s “negative capacity”, which is often explored through the theory of “media capture”. However, this framework does not fully explain what is currently happening in Brazil. The quality of democracy in the country has been steadily declining since 2016 (V-Dem Index, 2022) and journalism can be considered to be the active factor in the process (Araújo & Prior, 2020; de Albuquerque, 2019; van Dijk, 2017).

The most typical case of media capture in Europe is the established power pyramid in Hungary, in which the state, the media and Orbán’s party have all merged into one. Due to this situation, the conference was particularly interested in the contributions of the Hungarian colleagues, who provided details “from within.” Gábor Polyák and Kata Horváth, from ELTE University (“Disinformation Infrastructure and New Tools of Credibility in the Hungarian Media System”) discussed how the execution of the Hungarian media policy since 2010 had resulted in the complete transformation of the national media ownership structure and financing. Economic and professional decisions were replaced by political choices and loyalties to the ruling party and the topics, arguments and overall vocabulary of public discourse were determined solely by the government and the party in office. Among the entire arsenal for propaganda and suppression of critical voices applied in the Hungarian political discourse, disinformation occupies a prominent place.

Today, filter bubbles are one of the crucial phenomena that have the potential of tearing apart the democratic public sphere in Hungary. Although normally associated with social media, fragmentation, a world of parallel, contactless representations of reality has already reached traditional media. In this regard, the Hungarian case is interesting, not only in and of itself, but also because it is a model for many populist politicians in Europe and beyond.

In the same vein, Attila Bátorfy’s presentation (ELTE University, Budapest, entitled “Conflicts between Fundamental Rights, the Government’s Subsidized Speech and the Public Interest in Hungary”) drew attention to the problem

of the restrictions in communication imposed by the Hungarian government and their impact on fundamental citizens' rights. The issue was subsidized speech, capable of distorting the democratic public sphere without the classic tools of negative media control. Subsidized speech is a less spectacular instrument than outright censorship, physical threat, and intimidation, but it can ultimately be just as dangerous to democratic public discourse. Adam Shinar argues that subsidized speech is already a structural challenge in three countries: Israel, Poland and Hungary (Shinar, 2021). The problem lies in what Shinar calls "majoritarian entrenchment", which he claims is designed precisely to hamper democratic change. Although democracies have mechanisms to prevent entrenchment of political majorities, these focus on elections and related aspects, while the negative impact of entrenchment has to be also extended to the speech context in order to be properly understood. In conclusion, Bátorfy cautions that the Hungarian government's subsidized speech practice through public advertising could severely violate fundamental rights, a risk that future legislation should consider.

Papers about other European countries, including Bulgaria, revealed both specific and general problems in their media systems. In this respect, a gloomy picture of the Balkan media was painted by several presenters. "Media Capture, Prima Facie Pluralism, and Savage Polarization in the Greek Media Landscape" by Dr. Michael Nevradakis, College of Eyre (CYA) in Athens, Greece, summarized the basic characteristics of local media environment. In recent years, Greece has witnessed a sharp decline in its ranking according to the Reporters without Borders (RwB) media freedom index, to the lowest levels in Europe and the conditions which have led to this should be thoroughly explored. The author emphasized that media capture is a key feature of the Greek media reality. Several factors illustrate this in the Greek case: a "revolving door" between politics and journalists; generous (and far from impartial) government subsidies to the media; "iron triangles" and oligarchic positions held by a handful of economically and politically powerful media owners; the supremacy of political and party interests at the expense of objective journalism; lack of political independence of the public broadcaster ERT and almost complete absence of non-commercial and non-profit media; an online environment that largely reproduces the biases of traditional media; and threats and wiretapping of journalists, leading to the total absence of investigative journalism.

The struggle for media independence and freedom of the press as a vital liberty in a democracy in Turkey have devolved into the resistance against basic control at the publication/editorial level and the complete blocking and filtering of all information (Murat Akser, University of Ulster, "Media Capture in Turkey: From Compliance to Resistance"). The sad conclusion by Akser is that over the past 20 years, Turkish media has witnessed media capture and control of dictatorial

proportions. Media oligarchs are deploying new intimidation tactics against reporters, ranging from populist discursive attacks to self-censorship. The system of institutional intimidation has managed to accomplish top-down political coordination at the highest levels with distance interference through NGOs, or discreetly, through individual trolls on the government payroll.

The two papers from Bulgaria added more information about the reasons for media capture in this country. The presentation by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ivo Indzhov, University of Veliko Tarnovo, “The Bulgarian Media System: between the “Mediterranean model” and the “captured media?” is based on 30 interviews with experts about the national media system, journalistic culture and media transition. The opinions collected allowed possible parallels with Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) typology of media systems to be drawn. Almost all quoted respondents share the view that, despite the initial successes of democratization in Bulgaria from 1989 onwards, the processes of progressive development stopped relatively quickly thereafter. During the last quarter of the century, the Bulgarian political system followed “a rather ‘Balkan’ logic, and features authoritarian tendencies, lack of rule of law (...) as well as an underdeveloped civil society” (Zhivko Georgiev, sociologist)

Against this background, European funding is the main source of corruption and oligarchic symbiosis in Bulgaria. The state no longer fulfills its neutral role but performs a management-distributive function. From a party or party-oriented, but relatively free press in the 1990s to the politicization of a part of the media environment: this is the conclusion of most respondents, who are of the opinion that during the first decade of democratic transition, Bulgarian media were at their freest, although the beginning of this period was marked by “wars” between party-affiliated newspapers.

The other report from Bulgaria by Dr. Bissera Zankova, “Media 21” Foundation, was dedicated to regulatory capture through the perverted implementation of control by regulators in the media sphere (“Media Regulatory Capture: Problems and Guarantees”). This occurs when private interests penetrate media bodies and divert the performance of their functions from the public interest. This phenomenon can ultimately threaten freedom of expression and undermine democracy. There is a risk that an agency is exposed to regulatory capture by its very nature. The bottom line is that any regulator should be shielded from outside influences as much as possible.

Through the presentation of Ricard Parrilla Guix (University of Salzburg), Ruth Martínez-Rodríguez (Pompeu Fabra University) and Marcel Mauri-Rios (Pompeu Fabra University), the audience became aware of the media ownership structure of the most important news media in Spain as of 2020 (“The Media Ownership Structure of Spain’s Most Relevant News Media in 2020”). The main findings reveal that, in Spain, very complicated and opaque ownership

structures prevail (generally internationalized and including owners from the EU, USA, Mexico, Singapore and the Cayman Islands) and that strong convergence of media ownership with financial funds and instruments, a general lack of transparency about the actual media owners, journalistic staff, finance and government subsidies are conspicuous features of the media system. Indeed, the lack of clarity about media ownership is a basic prerequisite for the occurrence of the “captured media” phenomenon.

The main objective of the paper “Political Media Bias. The Case Study of the Most Popular Nationwide TV Channels in Ukraine” by Grażyna Piechota, Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, Krakow University and Robert Rajczyk, University of Silesia in Katowice was to present a study of the political media bias based on the analysis of the most popular nationwide TV channels including five private and one public television stations in Ukraine, namely: *1+1, Ukraine, ICTV, Inter, Kanal 5 and UA: Pershyi*. These television stations belong to oligarchs, with the exception of *UA: Pershyi*, a Ukrainian public broadcaster channel. To ascertain the relationship between media bias and the agenda, three main issues were considered: (i) the issue of Joint Forces Operation in Donbas (conflict in Donbas), (ii) Ukrainian and Russian Federation relations and (iii) the question of state language because of the introduction of the controversial Law on State Language in Ukraine. These issues stand for the socio-political division of society in Ukraine before February 24, 2022, the date of the outbreak of Russia’s unprovoked aggression against this state. The analysis found that the agenda of the main news programs of the most-widely watched TV channels in Ukraine do not differ in terms of content, but only in terms of gradation, which however, is not dictated by political inclinations.

Most potential conflicts related to journalism are governed by ethical norms, whose compliance is reinforced by institutions and mechanisms of a more informal nature. On this theme, João Miranda (in co-authorship with Carlos Camponez) from the University of Coimbra, Portugal, shared his views about the ““Mandated” Accountability and Transparency of the Media – Subsidies from the Portuguese Experience”. Various examples of “empowered” accountability (Miranda & Camponez, 2019; 2022) and transparency can be identified in Portuguese media, where the voluntary initiatives of news actors and civil society are replaced by legal requirements or recommendations. These procedures require the systematization of the various ways and methods of imposing responsibility measures on the media, as well as an examination of the limits to which state intervention may extend to.

Rethinking the transformation of journalists’ work and precarious jobs in the age of digital media was the theme of the presentation by Salih Kinsoun, a PhD student at the University of Essex, UK (“Re-Thinking the Transformation of Journalism: Labour and Precarious Workplaces in the Digital Media Age”).

The paper offered a discussion on the uncertain working conditions and the future of precarious journalism amid the widespread use of the new platforms. The operation of these platforms as captured media was also analyzed by Patricia Anezza from the University of Bergamo (“Social Media as Captured Media: Surveillance Capitalism from a Discursive Perspective”).

The historical elements of media capture in Portugal were Isadora Ataíde Fonseca’s focus (Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Lisbon, “Captured by Elites: The Portuguese Media System during Liberalism (1820–1926)”, and Carla Ganito and Cátia Ferreira, from the same university, reminded us that the defense against domination over the media is another crucial issue and alternative types of media outlets could be one of the paths for this effect (“An Exploratory Study of the Portuguese Alternative Media Landscape”).

CONCLUSIONS AND LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

To prove how workable capture media theory is, comparative studies, both geographically and on specific themes, are particularly useful. It is also necessary to clarify what capturing media means and to distinguish the concept from other cases that refer to assorted problems in the media sphere, such as interference, intimidation, and submission. Applying too broad a concept of “captured media”, which covers almost any shortcomings, deficits, and deviations from the public role of the media, dilutes the whole idea and turns it into a hollow shell. However, more empirical and comparable data are needed to avoid depriving science of its social weight and inquisitive potential. The presence of scientists from a range of traditions and generations at the Lisbon conference is a precious asset for continuity and the enrichment of extant approaches aiming to solve this complex problem. An important step forward will be to discuss how to counteract this phenomenon in the most efficient manner. Particularly a phenomenon that is so difficult to identify and debunk.

The conference “Captured Media: Researching Media Systems in and after Transitions” brought together in Lisbon an international community of researchers committed to examining media systems from a new angle and to apply innovative perspectives. The collaboration between the Research Centre for Communication and Culture at Universidade Católica Portuguesa, in Lisbon and the Bulgarian project “The Media System and Journalistic Culture in Bulgaria (Research in the light of the three models of media-politics relations of Hallin and Mancini)” inspired this pioneering research initiative that could stimulate novel plans and opportunities.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

“The Media System and Journalistic Culture in Bulgaria” is a four-year project implemented by the Veliko Tarnovo University „St. St. Cyril and Methodius”. The team of scientists is led by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ivo Indzhov, expert in political communications and journalism. Funding is provided by the National Scientific Fund. The research point of departure is the well-known “three model” theory of media relations with politics of Hallin and Mancini (2004): Mediterranean (polarized-pluralistic), North-Central European (democratic-corporatist) and North Atlantic (liberal) and subsequent theories explaining the transformations in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond. These have been considered in the light of their applicability in other parts of the world over the past fifteen years, including and through the prism of the specific characteristics of the Bulgarian environment.

The project has been pursuing both international and national goals, the core of which is to present a full picture of the media system and journalistic culture in Bulgaria. An unalienable element is the pilot analysis of 30 expert interviews which revealed many deficiencies of these two and especially in the years after Bulgaria’s accession to the EU. The conclusions have questioned the reliability of the comparison of the Bulgarian media system which was initially considered to be the “closest to ... Hallin and Mancini’s Mediterranean model”. Some similarities but also significant differences have been encountered. Other factors have also been explored such as the semi-consolidated democracy in the country (rule of law entrenchment and civil society strength), the development of media market, advertising and its role, media ownership transparency, concentration and cross-ownership and non-efficient media legislation.

Within the project the National Representative Survey was conducted by the G Consulting Agency. It has provided valuable insights about the position of television in the life of Bulgarian society since it remains the most trusted source of information, followed by friends, relatives and colleagues and social networks at the third place. As usual the Bulgarian National Television (BNT) occupies the highest position in this ranking. Generally, the media is not a respected democratic institution since it “informs mainly about scandals in order to have a larger audience (74.0% of respondents) and fuels the fears of Bulgarians by providing details about murders, wars, natural disasters (70.2% of respondents)”.

So far the project “The Media System and Journalistic Culture in Bulgaria” has produced a variety of publications about the Bulgarian media system, the financing of Bulgarian media, media regulation, media journals during transition and the public image of Bulgarian media – before socialist revolution in 1944 and

before democratic changes in 1989. One of its final propositions will be policy recommendations for the improvement of the Bulgarian media and its study.

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