EDITORIAL

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Media Capture and Transitional Settings: Towards Theoretical and Empirical Developments

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INTRODUCTION

Media capture is rampant around the world. There are easily recognizable instances throughout the global North and South. There are oligarchs seizing, through questionable tactics, struggling media houses as part of their more extensive business portfolio and executives of privately owned media who serve in boardrooms of the institutions in charge of regulating the media industry. Agents of the state are known to grant broadcasting licenses to their cronies and may include political websites that pop up during election time to sell news coverage to the highest bidder. State and political agents typically seek to control the media, news agendas, and news content via legislation, funding, ownership structures, market distortion, and other means. For their part, media owners, executives, and business cartels often use their own media organizations to attempt to influence politics for their own advantage and business interests.

Across a broad range of disciplinary studies—from economics to political science to media and journalism studies— the concept of media capture has become an encompassing term to typify some of the most pressing issues related to media control and power. So far, the most cited definition was coined by political scientist Alina Mungiu-Pippidi (2013), who in taking a step forward from earlier studies on the subject, broadened the concept to include various perpetrators of capture beyond just the State. Mungiu-Pippidi defines

it as "the interference of influential actors and vested interests in the news media, as individual parties act on their benefit, for private purposes, and to the detriment of the public interest and the democratic functions of journalism" (2013: 40-41). Scholars around the world now follow that lead. They use the concept to refer to cases, in which State or corporate agents act to gain control of the media or intervene in news decision-making processes to obtain benefits at the expense of professional standards, norms, and societal functions.

In doing so, the concept of media capture has invertedly helped bridge some of the most contrasting arguments –from the radical and liberal perspectives— about the role of media in the face of governments and the market: the liberal argument of the State controlling the media to curtail their watchdog functions and the radical argument of media corporations exerting undue power for their own benefit to maintain the status quo. There is an argument from earlier proponents of the concept still insisting on distinguishing media capture from media power by claiming that the former concept only occurs when the government, rather than other actors, actively attempts to influence media markets or media ownership (Besley & Prat, 2006; Prat, 2015). However, the conceptual and empirical expansion of contemporary stances on media capture now recognize various facets of capture perpetrators, mechanisms, and outcomes that overlap with traditional forms of media control and media power (Petrova, 2008; Shiffrin, 2017; 2018). The term's increasing flexibility now allows for the freely characterization of the multiplicity of actors, interactions, strategies, and outcomes, including corporate and State perpetrators involved (Enikolopov & Petrova, 2015; Atal, 2017). Media capture can encompass the undue influence on regulation, investment in media firms, the funding of segments of the media through political advertising, paid articles or subsidies, or the new dominance and business models of digital platforms (Petrova, 2008; Shiffrin, 2017; 2018; 2021; Dragomir, 2019).

Media capture studies nowadays adopt more tangible macro, meso, and microlevels of analysis to account for the phenomenon's complex features, shapes, and directions. Capture can affect or characterize entire regional news media systems, markets, and regulatory frameworks (Guerrero & Márquez, 2014) or specific media segments like public service broadcasting (Dragomir, 2019; Dragomir & Horowitz, 2021; Milosavljević & Poler, 2018). Capture can materialize primarily in the ownership structures of media houses (Bignon & Flandreau, 2014), in journalists' interaction with their sources (Au & Kawai, 2012) or the news routines that are specific to a news desk (Atal, 2018). Capturing forces and actors can also be transnational (Frisch et al., 2018), digital (Nielsen, 2017; Shiffrin, 2021), and platform-centric (Usher, 2021). Capture can involve sponsors (Gabor, 2021), advertisers (Gurun & Butler, 2012; Beattie, 2020), or technological infrastructures (Nechushtai, 2018; Napoli, 2021) affecting and shaping media content. Digital

media outlets can, directly and indirectly, increase the possibilities of capture because original news from traditional media has a limited exclusive supply period due to copying by cut-and-paste digital outlets (Choi & Yang, 2021). The capture agents, victims, and strategies have become increasingly complex, whereas the outcomes of captured relations mostly result in limited journalistic autonomy, curtailed freedom, distorted content, and misinformed citizenry.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CONCEPT

Early capture theories focused almost exclusively on the regulatory field (Stigler, 1971) by noting that regulatory agencies tend to be dominated by the interest agent they are meant to regulate. Media capture therewith became an extension of the more established concept of state capture, where certain actors and sectors successfully manage to twist public reforms and policies in their favor, primarily through illicit or opaque methods (Hellman & Shankermann, 2000: 546). Transferring the idea to the media, the regulatory bodies that oversee the media and audiovisual sectors would have their independence compromised, as players would act on behalf and in favor of the sector and not the public interest. This type of regulatory media capture is, in fact, paramount across European States (Dragomir, 2019), where control over public media's governing bodies or the fragility of independent regulators is commonplace (Fernández Alonso, 2022). However, the capture direction has diversified, placing the State not only as the main perpetrator and beneficiary of capture but also advancing a more sophisticated model. Besley and Pratt (2006), for example, put forward one of the first frameworks to show how specific features of the media market determined the ability of governments to exercise media capture and influence political outcomes such as corruption, voting turnover, electoral results, and, ultimately, political accountability. Biased content is the proxy of media capture; politicians, interest groups, and media actors are capture enablers; media property and market structures are the mechanisms; and a misinformed electorate and null accountability are the outcomes. Undoubtedly, the research literature gained sophistication and complexity with these conceptualizations.

Moreover, these early studies argue that balanced and plural media markets help safeguard against media capture and protect media independence. Distorted market structures and barriers to entry in the media market led to more capture and worse political outcomes, whereas media plurality is said to safeguard against it (Besley & Prat, 2006: 729). Increased wealth concentration raises the probability of corrupt media. It provides them with a patron with much to benefit from manipulating the electorate. However, differences with respect to endowments, preferences, technologies, and market structure will generally lead to various

political–economic equilibria (Corneo, 2006). Competition in the mass media market does not always hold a universally positive influence in deterring media capture by bad politicians (Trombetta, & Rossignoli, 2021). Therefore, the types of interaction between states and market structures are paramount to understand the directions and facets of media capture. This in turn prompts the need to adopt meso – and micro-levels of analysis to examine all the types of interactions, agents, structures, and organizations. Even if not explicitly branded as such, capture can involve the whole market (Besley & Prat, 2006) or selected news media only and can take place at several levels of the news ecosystem (Corduneanu-Huci & Hamilton, 2018) or target key inside agents (McMillan & Zoido, 2004). Loius-Sidois and Mougin (2021) distinguish two types of capture where a principal can either influence journalistic investigation (internal capture) or let the media investigate and pay to suppress news stories at the publication stage (external capture).

Evolution in the media capture concept means that research has gone further than pioneering studies like Besley and Prat (2006). Recent typologies or classifications of media capture do not always consider state agents as the sole or primary perpetrators or beneficiaries of media capture; neither do they place the focus at the macro-level alone or just focus on the market structure. For example, Enikolopov and Petrova (2015) divide studies into capture by the State, capture in media content, and capture by other interest groups like media owners, advertisers, journalists, politicians, or private companies, suggesting the enabler, mechanisms, strategies, and outcomes vary.

At the macro and meso levels, Dragomir (2019) observes the existence of regulatory capture, control of public service media, use of state financing as a control tool, and ownership takeover. For his part, Stiglitz (2017) proposes a taxonomy of media capture that goes from macro to micro levels of action and includes ownership, financial incentives, censorship, and cognitive capture. Meanwhile, Atal (2017) proposes that state, plutocratic, corporate, and intersecting capture play out together, especially in the global South, where independent media institutions are still consolidating in the context of the shift to digital forms of communication. The study by Mabweazara and colleagues (2020) suggests the existence of "interconnected driving forces of media capture," which coalesce around legal and administrative regulation, financial and economic enticements, and the dynamics of media ownership.

MEDIA CAPTURE WORLDWIDE

Transitional democracies tend to present us with many types of media capture where State agents, corporate agents, or a combination of both enable assorted forms of capture. In these regimes, boundaries between political and business actors are blurrier due to the prevalence of media and political alliances forged for the benefit of a few players. Hence, capture can materialize at intersecting levels due to corruption, the weakness of both the rule of law and the media markets, instrumentalized public media, and discretionary allocation of State funding. There is also the matter of clientelist and patrimonial political cultures, as states do not always resort to repressive measures of media control, but to more subtle means of interventionism..

In countries across Eastern Europe, media systems often tend to operate between "democratic theory and not-always democratic practice" (Gross & Jakubowicz, 2013: 11), as the media are deeply embedded into the clientelist system that enables elite-to-elite communication (Örnebring, 2012). The transitional period from the Communist era was characterized by the continuity of elites as the former bureaucratic ruling class restructured itself in the new market economies. This restructuring resulted in former state agents and their cronies becoming the primary owners of private capital and instrumentalizing emerging media for their self-serving purposes. One such consequence is that, across Balkan countries, "opaque and corruptive local business-political networks" exercise leverage over the ownership and editorial structures of domestic outlets, which, in turn, enable Russian media influence in the political debate (Filipova, 2018: 11).

Since informal rules and practices often subvert or undermine new formal regulations introduced after the abandonment of communism (Ryabinska, 2014), media outlets are typically captured by vested interests – whether market to cartels – often in the quest for political influence rather than for profit alone (Mungiu-Pippidi & Ghinea, 2012). In Poland and Hungary, political parties typically take over the public media sphere and indirectly extort pressure on private media outlets to manipulate discourses (Kerpel, 2017). Capture operates through large advertising favors from the government to connected media in exchange for coverage favors from connected media to the government (Szeidl & Szucs, 2021). In Balkan countries, public service broadcasters display a lack of editorial independence due to pro-government news content promoted by the ruling elites (Milosavljević & Poler, 2018). Another typical media capture strategy devised by the State in the region is public funding (Dragomir, 2018), either in the way of state-administered media; official or public advertising; State subsidies; or market-disruption measures.

Other transitional democracies are not free from these phenomena. In Latin America, for example, there has been a historically strong private orientation

of media ownership and a weak development of public service broadcasting, facilitating hospitable conditions for media-power kind of capture. In tandem with the periods of political authoritarianism of the 20th century, media systems historically developed amidst centripetal factors (Hughes & Lawson, 2005), such as generalized weakness in the rule of law, holdover authoritarian legislation, oligarchic ownership of media outlets or uneven journalistic standards. Coupled with weak advertising markets, for-profit political parallelism, and overall clientelist transactions underpinned by heavy dependence on governmental advertising as the primary source of income, 'liberal-captured' media systems reign supreme in the region after the wave of political democratization (Márquez & Guerrero, 2014). Some characteristics of the pluralist polarized media (PPM) systems (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) have developed. But not necessarily in the Mediterranean fashion of formal state intervention in media policies, public broadcasting, or in the overtly partisan press ideologically aligned to, and instrumentalized by, political parties. The development of PPM characteristics in Latin America occurred in the more subtle ways of media and political collusion that underlies the apparently liberal structures through which private news media supposedly operate. In Latin American captured-liberal media systems, the political neutrality of news content is not necessarily an ideological position or a tenet of professionalism but a commodity to exchange. When high levels of clientelism are present (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002) privately owned, for-profit media outlets tend to survive and even thrive, not from private advertisers in the traditional liberal sense but from political patrons and official advertising. Private media exchange coverage for benefits, such as advertisement contracts, tax exemptions, permits, and license renewals to grow business (Márquez-Ramírez, 2014) or retort to other capturing strategies when economic and political elites wrestle for power (Rivera Robles, 2021). Since party platforms and orientations are not as clear-cut in presidential systems as they are in parliamentarian democracies (De Albuquerque, 2013), political parallelism displays its own unique characteristics in the region –especially with the arrival of leftist popular governments, where distinct political parallelism has emerged (Kitzberger, 2023), all of which facilitate the emergence of capture mechanisms that benefit both State control and media power. In fact, across Eastern Europe and Latin America, clientelism appears to be a cornerstone of media-state and market relations even after processes of political democratization and economic reforms: both State control and media power benefit from the implementation of capture mechanisms.

Other regions also offer their unique instances of media capture. In Sub-Saharan Africa, Mabweazara et al. (2020) link a complex web of phenomena to media capture, such as patrimonialism, clientelist media practices, and brown envelope journalism. Akin to many societies across the global south, in a patrimonial

media system, the media "become subordinate to individuals who wield political power," as patrimonialism affects both state-controlled and private media (Mabweazara *et al*., 2020: 6-7). More straightforward mechanisms of State media capture also prevail, as governments across sub-Saharan Africa seek control of independent media through economic and legal pressures or regulatory measures as well as attacks on individual journalists (Cagé & Mougin, 2022; Höglund & Schaffer, 2022).

Moreover, in recent decades oligarchs originating from autocratic political regimes have also expanded their influence on media markets in Western countries aiming to promote their own agendas. This trend became especially visible following the 2008 crisis with investments by Russian businessmen Roman Abramovich and Alexander Abramov's in the British media and communication sectors and with the acquisition of strategic Portuguese companies by members of the Angolan elite. Two of the most notorious investors in the Portuguese media system were Isabel dos Santos, the eldest daughter of the Angolan president José Eduardo dos Santos and the richest woman in Africa, and Álvaro Madaleno Sobrinho, a member of the regime's *nomenklatura* (Figueiras & Ribeiro, 2013). Together they gained significant control over several media outlets before being involved in multiple criminal charges following what became known as the Luanda Leaks.

A PATH FORWARD FOR MEDIA CAPTURE STUDIES: PRESENTING THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Together, most capture studies across transitional democracies show that capture is not static, as it can take many faces and operate in multiple scenarios beyond the concentrated markets and corporate types of ownership that prevail in established democracies. Certainly, monodirectional top-to-bottom capture relations are constant, as States are still the most discernible actors in attempting to influence the media through political advertising, regulation, funding, or other more punitive mechanisms. Such processes can be the most common and easiest to identify and characterize, even if they run in parallel to other intersecting forms of capture. As we have shown, capture can be complexly intertwined in many ongoing processes across materialization levels, structures, and agencies.

Undoubtedly, this burgeoning media capture scholarship is empirically rich and has yielded promising research avenues. Media capture has become a useful but overarching concept that permits theoretically dispersed phenomena to be covered and studied under the same conceptual umbrella, often tying media power and media control scholarship together. However, as argued elsewhere (Márquez-Ramírez, 2024), the downside is that the concept can become redundant if used as another word for more theoretically developed terms. For example, studies

can refer to media markets, systems, industries, proprietors, journalists, news routines, newsbeats, and news content as a proxy for "media." For their part, phenomena like distorted regulation, censorship, control, media-state collusion, partisanship, instrumentalization, political parallelism, and biased digital algorithms can all account as proxies of capture, with various external and internal actors and factors in-between (Márquez Ramírez, 2024). Most studies also fail to explicitly declare a macro, meso, or micro-level of analysis, observance, and materialization of capture and its direction.

In brief, media capture scholarship still needs (and is in the process of) theoretical maturing, conceptual systematicity and empirical evidence to move the concept forward and allow for better comparison across various dimensions. The concept's flexibility means there is a need for a more apparent distinction between media controlled by politics and vice-versa. Many media capture studies implicitly adopt a loosely defined understanding of capture while complexifying the participation of a growing number of actors, scenarios, and forces but rarely clarifying the role played by each. Future research should avoid taking media capture for granted, aiming to define more explicitly what exactly is being captured, by whom, and the effects, actors, mechanisms, and outcomes involved in these processes.

Aiming to expand our understanding of the strengths and limitations of the concept of media capture, this Special Issue of the *Central European Journal of Communication* offers a combination of theoretical articles and case studies, authored by young and senior scholars, that together discuss and make use of the concept as an analytical tool. While some authors call our attention to the need to better problematizing the connection between media capture and related concepts such as media instrumentalization and party colonization, others apply it to shed light on how media companies, systems and newsrooms are trimmed in their capacity to scrutinize power structures due to their capture by political and economic political and economic agents.

The opening article by Marius Dragomir is "The Capture Effect. How Media Capture Affects Journalists, Markets and Audiences". Dragomir offers a discussion on the development of the concept of media capture and an analysis of what the author considers to be its four key components and variants: regulatory capture, control of state and public service media, use of state financing as a control tool, and private ownership takeover. After demonstrating that governments and private businesses have succeeded in capturing the media across countries and world regions, Dragomir presents compelling data demonstrating its impact on journalism, media markets, and audiences. Overall, the article makes a persuasive argument about how media capture not only destroys professional norms and distorts markets but also manipulates audience preferences with deep-rooted consequences for the sustainability of the democratic process.

Authored by Ivo Indzhov, the second article in this Special Issue – "Bulgarian Media Since 1989: From Instrumentalization to Capture" – starts by discussing the connections and establishing the differences between media instrumentalization and media capture, arguing that the latter is more adequate to describe the evolution of media systems in former communist countries, marked by a collusion of interests between politics and media owners. The author then applies Dragomir's (2019) four-component model to analyze Bulgaria's media system development after its transition to democracy. It concludes that the political-oligarchic dependencies have become a central feature of the country's media market which poses a serious threat to the advance of democracy. Indzhov concludes by arguing that the situation of Bulgaria is significantly different from that of other countries, namely in Southern Europe, that despite dealing with high levels of media instrumentalization, is less permeable to the influence of an oligarchic elite that exercises a severe control over the communication ecosystem in Eastern Europe.

The third research article, "Media Capture and Perspectives for Media Development in a Fragile Media System" by Johanna Mack, looks at the development of the media in Guinea-Bissau in the postcolonial period. It demonstrates how the successive governments have taken measures to ensure the control of the media system. Based on documental analysis, interviews, and focus groups with journalists and media experts, the article presents a three-level analysis of the country's legislative, political, and economic systems, media companies, and the freedom allowed to journalists. Mack offers an insightful view on what one may expect from the media in fragile states, in which political actors can easily restrict the autonomy of independent outlets. As Mack highlights, the case of Guinea-Bissau, marked by regulatory capture, presents similarities to other Sub-Saharan countries where the media ecosystem is captured through legislation, with the few independent media being dependent on subsidies from non-governmental organizations and religious groups.

In "Captured by the Elites – The Portuguese System in Liberalism (1820-1926), Isadora Ataíde Fonseca takes us back to the colonial period. She argues that media capture can be a useful theoretical construct to understand how elites used and appropriated the media across historical contexts. By discussing the cases of the press in Macao, Angola, and one newspaper published in Lisbon targeted to those living in the Portuguese Empire, the article argues that print media functioned as an important tool for forming an 'Imperial Public Sphere' controlled by the elites. Fonseca demonstrates how newspapers produced or targeted at those living in the colonies were capture by the economic, political, and military elites, thus offering an unfair representation of the social relations in the colonies.

The following article by Péter Bajomi-Lázár, entitled "Media Capture Theory: A Paradigm Shift?", argues for the need to rethink the concept of 'media capture'

and to consider its limitations. Due to the epistemological changes being proposed, the article is part of the section "Methods & Concepts" through which the *Central European Journal of Communication* aims to contribute to the discussion of new methodological and theoretical constructs capable of opening new research avenues. Bajomi-Lázár offers a critical reflection on media capture and questions its relevance in a context marked by social media that allows political elites to bypass traditional media systems and reach out directly to audiences. Besides arguing that the concept of media capture is experiencing a paradigm shift, the manuscript suggests that scholars may better use other terms, such as 'party colonization of the media,' to describe the level of freedom allowed to the media across political contexts. Through an analysis of several party configurations in Eastern European countries, the author concludes that one-party colonization leads to much lower levels of media freedom when compared to a multi-party alternative.

Along with the research articles presented above, the Special Issue also offers a Section with two research reports that present a diagnosis of the media systems in Mongolia and in Greece in the post-2010 crisis. Both shed light on understudied cases and reveal the profound entanglements between traditional and new forms of media control. Written through the lens of media capture, the research reports demonstrate how media outlets, including the digital-specific, fall under the control of political-business elites that aim to control the public discourse. In the first manuscript, Undrah Baasanjav, Poul Erik Nielsen and Munkhmandakh Myagmar provide a diachronic analysis of the media system in Mongolia from the country's transition to liberal democracy to the present. Based on documental analysis and interviews with media experts, the article provides an insightful characterization of the media market development, the legal and regulatory frameworks in which it operates, and the state intervention. The author conclude that only a few independent media companies were able to establish themselves, while most of the Mongolian media ecosystem is owned by politicians and businessmen in a traditional scenario of media capture.

The second research report is authored by Michael Nevradakis who looks at the case of Greece with a particular focus on the role played by social media in bolstering the Greek public sphere following the 2010s economic crisis. As the article demonstrates, the crisis fueled the emergence of several online media initiatives that were presented as a forum for expressing new opinions and ideas that were then absent from traditional media. Nevradakis investigates two case studies in detail, the Independent Greek's social media, and the Nikos.gr news portal-blog. He concludes that, despite having been launched to expand the range of voices that reached the public sphere, these initiatives ends up being controlled by the same political and business elites that have captured traditional media.

The Special Issue also includes an interview with Alina Mungui-Pippidi, professor of Comparative Public Policy at the Department of Political Science

at LUISS Guido Carli in Rome, who is a renowned researcher on the corruption phenomenon. In the interview conducted by Bissera Zankova, Professor Mungi--Pippidi comments on the regression of democracy, the fragility of democratic institutions in the post-Soviet space, and the role played by the media, namely in contexts of authoritarian politics and corruption. The interview is followed by a report on the conference "Captured Media: Exploring Media Systems in and after Transitions", that took place at the Catholic University of Portugal in Lisbon, in December 2022, sponsored by the Research Center for Communication and Culture and the research project "The Media System and Journalistic Culture in Bulgaria" implemented by the "St. Cyril and St. Methodius, Veliko Tarnovo University". The event functioned as a forum to discuss the evolution of the concept of media capture and how it can be used as a conceptual tool to understand the development of media systems across geographies.

In its various sections, the Special Issue offers valuable manuscripts produced by authors originating from various geographies and whose work covers a wide variety of countries from Eastern Europe to Africa and East Asia. The Special Issue presents a new outlook on the topic of media capture. It demonstrates the concept's strength as an analytical tool while also advocating for its limitation and its interconnections with other theoretical constructs to be revisited and reconsidered.

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