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*MONITORING MEDIASCAPES. A PREMISE OF WISDOM-BASED EU MEDIA
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This volume is a result of the EU-funded research program “Critical Exploration of Media Related Risks and Opportunities for Deliberative Communication: Development Scenarios of the European Media Landscape (Mediadelcom)”, which lasted from February 2021 to February 2024. The program had many qualities, which other commentators will also observe, highlight and analyse. Among them I will briefly mention: a) the large research base, comprising 14 countries; b) the case studies prepared according to an interesting grid, which summarizes the media landscape in those countries; c) the complex theoretical model, which researchers participating in the project developed; d) the clear research methodology (although not always respected by the authors of country reports) and e) transversal analyses. The latter focused: a) various other media transformation monitoring projects in these countries; b) legal regulations and media accountability; c) the study of the profession and its transformations; and d) investigating media usage and consumer skills. These aspects of the project provide a lot of useful information, interpreted by the project members in thematic summaries, which can always become the starting point for other research.

I would like to focus only on one aspect—the theoretical frameworks—on which this project was based, and particularly on the models and paradigms that underlie this construction. The theoretical model generates the major frames by which the research of the 14 case studies was carried out and also provided the frameworks for interpreting the data. The Mediadelcom team started from the idea that deliberative democracy needs the institutional bases of deliberative communication: “Deliberative communication is interrelated with media monitoring in the four research domains analysed within the Mediadelcom project: legal and ethical regulation, journalism, patterns of media use, and media-related competences” (p. 15).

The book starts from the premise that, in order to understand media transformations and at the same time generate the appropriate media policies, “a strong capability of monitoring mediascapes” (p. 4) is needed. This concept is revealed as the “capability of monitoring risk and opportunities emerging from the news media transformation” (p. 13). In other words, this broad theoretical perspective

provides a holistic integrative framework for the analysis of media monitoring capabilities, with a particular focus on structures and agencies: thus, the monitoring process is defined “both from the individual (agent) as well as from the institutional (structural) perspective” (p. 21).

Pursuing this perspective, the authors consider that four variables should be taken into account: (i) the structure; (ii) the agents; (iii) the hierarchy of heuristic instruments; and (iv) the context in which media monitoring is conducted. The last variable refers to the existing technological conditions, legal regulations, economic and financial conditions and, of course, to the human capital (p. 30).

Of these variables I would like to focus on the agents, because the concepts of both structure and context are sufficiently clear and do not require any reflection. The authors distinguish between corporate agents and primary agents and they point out they are defined by the competence and motivation to implement certain norms; in this case those of deliberative communication. The authors also stress the importance of the relationships between these agents, defined by several elements such as the type of cooperation between them, their motivations, their ability to apply the knowledge acquired and the necessary skills to do so. This model applies to the agents studied in the 14 media systems, but an interesting example of how the model materializes can be found within the project team; in an overwhelming majority of the team members are representatives of the academic field or research institutions; this means that through training and experience they have the conceptual and methodological competence to carry out such research; at the same time their motivation is scientific and it is evident that they have a tradition of academic cooperation. This perspective is quite idealistic, suggesting that agents are detached from the determinations of what Pierre Bourdieu called “habitus.” Even members of the academic field, not to mention those from other fields (such as NGOs or the media) can introduce different biases into their descriptions and evaluations, so that the idea (affirmed apodictically) of the project’s capacity to provide “a strong capability of monitoring mediascapes” requires multiple nuances and a more reflexive self-evaluation.

An essential idea of this project is to overcome the simple production of knowledge, obtained from the collection, but also the analysis of data, by reaching what the authors call wisdom production:

In other words, for an assessment of media monitoring capabilities, knowledge and wisdom have critical importance: the capability of media monitoring concerning the ROs for deliberative communication depends on whether, and to what extent, data and information can be collected and processed in a particular country to generate knowledge and wisdom about changes

in the structure and the activities, competences, and interactions (relationships) of various agents (p 29).

This is necessary because evidence-based policies are built from a knowledge that does not always provide an integrative and nuanced view of the media landscape.

This arborescent theoretical construction, inspired by systems theory, leads to a sum of indicators, the conjunction of which places the various countries in one of the three categories of risk and opportunity (RO): low, medium, and high risk. This placement is considered a reliable basis for designing various media governance strategies: “The central idea of this book is the concept and method of evaluating the capability of monitoring mediascapes (CMM). From the outset we have argued that CMM is needed to develop evidence-based media policy into wisdom-based media governance” (p. 212).

Although attractive in its aspect of irrefutable mathematical proof, this model raises some theoretical problems:

- Reification: the essentialization of concepts considered to be indicators of a higher or lower degree of risk; many of the phenomena that circumscribe media life in different countries cannot be formalized because they encounter unpredictable developments, and are modelled by subjective, not objective factors.
- The deterministic character: it is not mandatory that the absence, for example, of European projects should be an indicator of a low level of media research; or that the low number of state-commissioned reports that assess trends in freedom of expression and of information should be a risk indicator for the monitoring of the freedom of expression.
- The character, that while not utopian, is extremely optimistic. As the Conclusions state:

A good CMM allows for the development of wisdom-based media governance. In the context of the Mediadelcom project, wisdom is defined as agents’ accumulation of experience and knowledge. Wisdom also presupposes orientation towards learning from others. Hence, the pathway to enhanced wisdom-based media governance requires a focus on cooperative engagement, mutual learning and a shared commitment to transparent, accountable and value-driven mediascapes (p. 215).

Press history, not only in post-communist countries, shows the non-linear (slightly chaotic) character of press developments, determined by several factors: the functioning of a liberal market and economy; the rise and fall of power structures from authoritarianism to liberalism. Other factors include the diversity

of interests of media institutions, the poor media culture and implicitly professional solidarity, the dependence on the oscillations of public opinion, and the threats of new technologies, etc. It is difficult under these circumstances to believe that political structures, economic forces or professional bodies will manifest a “wisdom-based media governance”, ignoring specific interests in favour of ideal normative values.

It is rare that a volume of media landscape studies in several countries goes beyond the stage of a coagulation of analyses, many of them often interesting. It is more rare that we encounter a volume that provides a homogeneous theoretical model, which it applies to a large number of cases, to provide transversal analyses and projects to apply the results to other situations. The work coordinated by Epp Lauk, Martín Oller Alonso, Halliki Harro-Loit is an excellent such example, stimulating, primarily for theoretical and revealing reflection, but also for the transversal thematic perspectives and for most of the case studies.

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