



香港浸會大學

HONG KONG BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

Re-conceptualizing Media Systems

Colin Sparks

Centre for Media and Communication Research

Hong Kong Baptist University



Introduction

- Outline what is at stake in comparing media systems
- Briefly rehearse the claims of the most influential contemporary theory
- Consider some of the major objections
- Sketch a more robust alternative



Two common-sense media systems

- It is possible to make a case for the US
 - Essentially a commercial media
 - Operating within a clear legal framework
 - Arguably a system-maintaining function
 - Arguably an autonomous system
- It is possible to make a case for China
 - Essentially a political media
 - A clear and explicit system-maintaining function
 - A coherent organisation mapped on to four levels
 - Certainly not an autonomous system



Theoretical frameworks

- A project with a long history
 - Reaches back to at least *Four Theories of the Press*
- Invariably has a *national* dimension
 - Until very recently, entirely justified
- Most attempts have a strongly *normative* dimension
 - Often lack much empirical grounding
- Invariably suggest the *unitary* character of a media system
 - Usually ruthlessly *selective* of the defining features



Recent thinking

- Dominated by the 2004 Hallin and Mancini book
 - An explicitly “structural functionalist” account
 - Referencing both Parsons and Luhmann
 - “Differentiation” a key concept
- Attempted to analyse relationships between politics and the media
 - Only applied to “western, democratic” societies
 - Nevertheless people have applied these ideas very widely
 - To Hallin and Mancini’s dismay
- Identified a number of key indicators
 - Does the press have a wide circulation?
 - Is journalism an autonomous profession?
 - How high is the level of state intervention?
- Found three basic types in Western Europe and North America



The Liberal system

- Liberal media system
 - High journalistic professionalism
 - High differentiation between media and parties
 - High media autonomy from state
 - Lower differentiation between media and economic forces
- Also marked by large-circulation press
 - USA, UK, Canada, Ireland



Polarized pluralist system

- Polarized Pluralist
 - Low journalistic professionalism
 - Low differentiation between media and parties
 - Lower media autonomy from the state
 - Higher differentiation between media and economic forces
- Also marked by a small-circulation elite-oriented press
 - Italy, Spain, France, Greece



香港浸會大學
HONG KONG BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

Democratic Corporatist

- Democratic Corporatist
 - Moderate to high journalistic professionalism
 - Moderate to high differentiation between media and parties
 - Relatively high media autonomy from the state
 - Moderate differentiation between media and economic forces
- Also marked by a relatively high circulation press
- Germany, Sweden, Norway, Denmark



Three kinds of problems

- The privileging of politics
 - How far can we identify systems with one dimension?
 - How adequate is the dimension selected to account for the system?
- The presumption of coherence
 - Can we begin by seeking evidence of systemic coherence?
- The analytic categories
 - How far do the categories they employ produce the results they claim?



The privileging of politics

- Hallin and Mancini are very clear that their “primary focus is on the relation between media systems and political systems” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 1)
- Is this (ruthless) selection an adequate basis to compare systems?
 - Perhaps 10 per cent of television
 - A tiny proportion of radio
 - A contested proportion of the press
 - Almost no part of the magazine industry
 - Almost no part of the cinema
 - Almost no part of music
- Surely what they are comparing is one element of the media?
 - Certainly a very important element
 - But in reality a very small element
 - Comparing aspects of systems, not systems



The presumption of coherence

- Functionalist theories operate with a notion of coherence:
 - ‘Differentiation’ means the emergence of a particular subsystem of society by which the characteristics of system formation, especially autopoietic self-reproduction, self-organization, structural determination and, along with all these, operational closure itself are realised.” (Luhmann, 2000, p.23)
- Is it possible to make this claim for actually-existing media “systems”?
- Most European systems do not readily fit this criterion
 - Broadcasting with a high level of regulation and often a strong state or public dimension
 - Newspaper press much less regulated and usually entirely market-driven
- Surely systemic coherence is a possible conclusion of an analysis rather than a starting point?



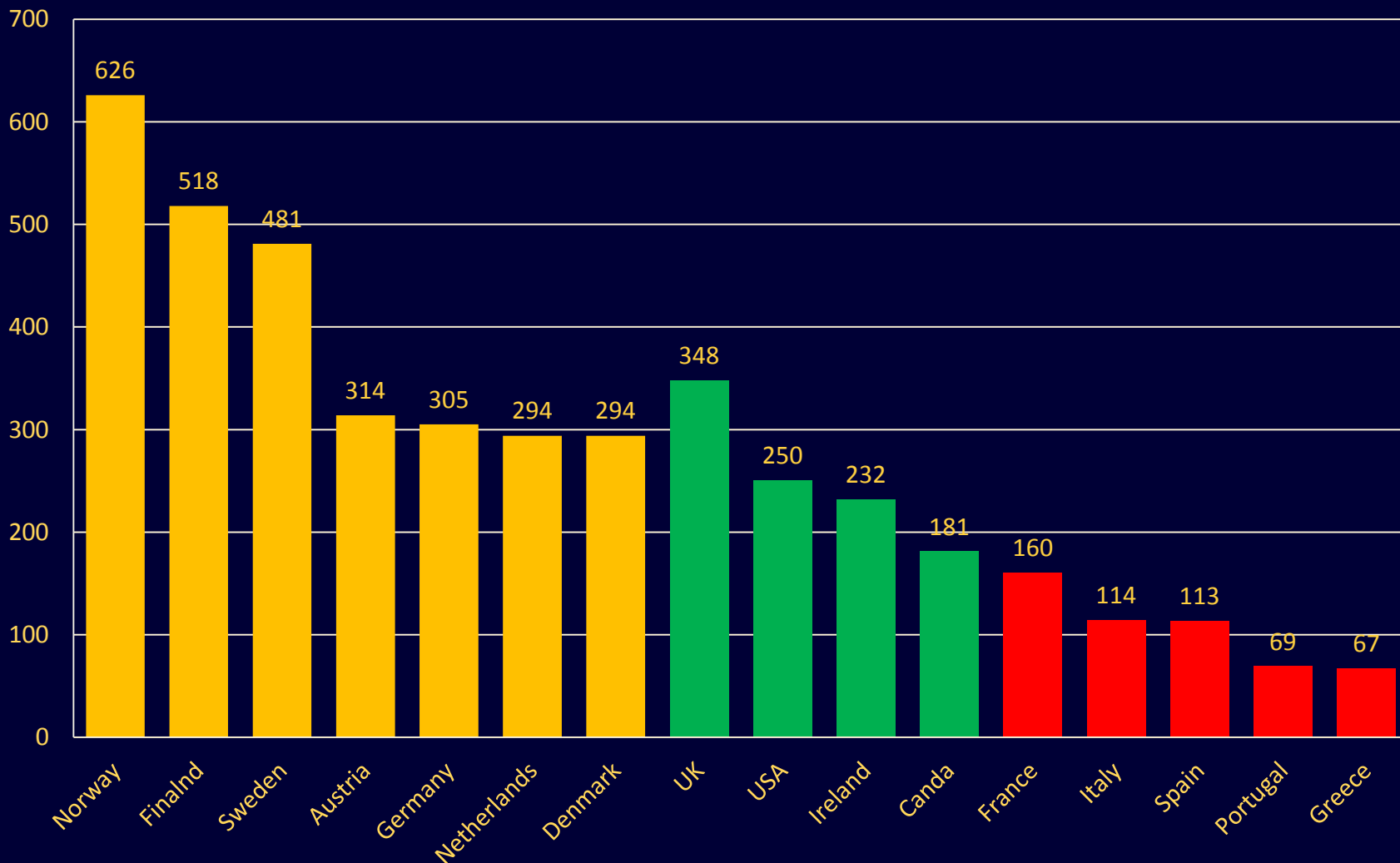
Exceptions and rules

The North Atlantic or Liberal Model...is characterised by early development of press freedom and the mass circulation press, though newspaper circulation today is lower than in the Democratic Corporatist societies. Commercial newspapers dominate, political parallelism is low, and internal pluralism dominates – with the important exception of the highly partisan British press. Professionalization of journalism is relatively strong, though without the kind of formal organization that prevails in the Democratic Corporatist countries. Journalistic autonomy is more likely to be limited by commercial pressures than by political instrumentalization, though the latter is more common in Britain. Information oriented journalism predominates, with a bit stronger commentary tradition in Britain. The role of the state is limited, though more so in the United States than in Ireland or Canada, where concerns about national culture have given the state a large role, and Britain, where public broadcasting and the regulation of commercial broadcasting have both been very strong. Public broadcasting and broadcasting regulation is organized according to the professional model, with relatively strong insulation from political control. (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 75)



Analytic categories

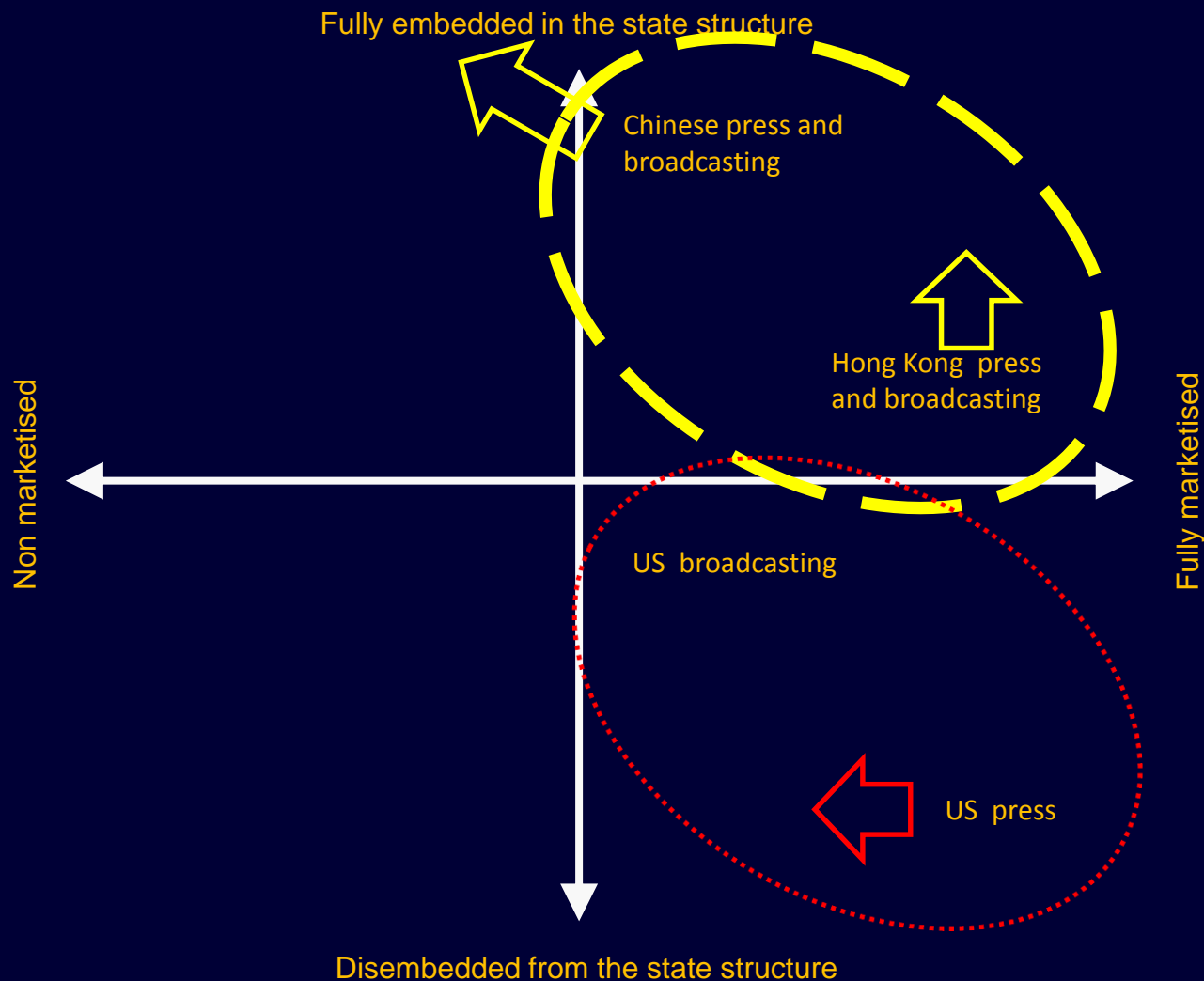
- It is not clear why these categories have been selected
- Professionalism of journalists
 - Can we sustain the notion of a “public service” ethical commitment
 - Confusion between the technical and social dimensions of the activity
- Political parallelism
 - Is this parallelism with parties or political positions?
 - The issue of overall alignment with the “common sense” of a society
- The mass press
 - Can we sustain the distinction between the “horizontal” functions of the press and its “vertical” functions?
 - Do the data they cite support their categorization?
- The role of the state
 - Not so problematic
 - There remain issues about state and government





Towards an Alternative

- More than a decade later, we need to make two immediate modifications
 - The role of online media
 - The challenge to state boundaries
- A much “fuzzier” conception of media systems
 - Provide for different elements with different dynamics
 - “The ensemble of media relations”
- A less teleological account of developments
 - Is it the case that we are moving to the liberal model?





Some conclusions

- It is difficult to sustain the notion of coherent media systems
 - Certainly we cannot simply talk about journalism and politics
- We need a more flexible concept
 - Even within boundaries there are contradictions
 - The degree of coherence must be established rather than assumed
 - The elements within a systems might be moving in different directions
- National boundaries remain important
 - They are eroding at uneven rates
- There does not seem to be convergence on the liberal model