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Studying media systems

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Introduction

- I shall be brief
 - These ideas are very provisional
- The idea of a “media system”
 - Exemplified (of course) by Hallin and Mancini
- What does the “media system” contain?
- The problem of “universal” categories
 - Particularly that of “professionalism”



Media systems

- The concept of media system inevitably suggests “structural functionalist” origins
 - Quite explicit in Hallin and Mancini
 - Although downplayed in discussion
- Suggest a system-maintaining function for media
- Suggest a degree of autonomy
 - A self-contained and self-adjusting system (especially in Luhmann)
- Suggests a degree of internal coherence in the media



Three real “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
 - A clear and explicit system-maintaining function
 - A coherent organisation mapped on to four levels
 - At least in theory
 - Certainly not an autonomous system
- What about the UK?
 - Press and TV completely different
 - Press not a coherent whole
 - Relatively diversity of viewpoints although essentially system-maintaining
 - Press arguably autonomous, broadcasting certainly not.



A messy concept

- If we are going to continue to use the term “media system” we have to accept that it is not clearly defined
- The appropriateness of the term is contingent rather than given
- The use of it for comparative purpose can only be provisional
 - It does not define which elements of the media are significant
 - It does not define which elements can be compared



What's in the media system

- Many attempts to use the concept are saved by ruthless selection
 - Usually only compare the media/politics relationship
- This is crippling from the point of view of media systems (however defined)
 - 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
- If we are going to continue to use the concept, then it needs to be inclusive
 - If we are going to exclude, then we should not say “media system”
 - More like the “system of relations between media and politics” or whatever



Universal categories

- The idea of functional differentiation is at the root of concerns with “professionalism”
 - Strong temptation to measure how far behaviour, or attitudes, correspond to notions of professionalism
 - The concept is confused and inappropriate for contemporary conditions
 - It never made any real sense for journalists
- Need to find formulations that do not carry with them this sort of baggage
 - The existential conditions of journalism
 - Even the concept of “journalism” itself
 - What kinds of responses do they provoke?



Some conclusions

- I have not discussed some obvious problems
 - For example, is the national state the correct unit of comparison?
- We should not expect the media system to have a fixed structure
 - We are not necessarily comparing like with like
 - Need to specify what elements of the media we are comparing
- Need to be much more inclusive if we want to speak of “systems”
- We should not expect the media system to have a fixed function
 - Some might be “system maintaining”, others “system neutral”, yet others “system threatening”
- We need to find less “western” categories
 - Provincializing (western) media
- My personal preference is for looking at the interaction of economic and political factors