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A critical look at the concept of media system

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Round Table 1: Media systems in the BRICS countries
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Outline

1. Tradition of research on media systems
2. Assessment with Colin Sparks
3. Prospects with a BRICS project

Tradition: Landmarks

- Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, *Four Theories* (1956): Authoritarian, Libertarian, Soc. Resp, Soviet Comm.
- Williams, *Communications* (1966): Authoritarian, Paternal, Commercial, Democratic
- Altschull, *Agents of Power* (1984-1995): West/Market, East/Communitarian, South/Advancing
- Schudson, *The Power of News* (1995): Advocacy, Market, Trustee
- McQuail's *Mass Communication Theory* (2000-2005): Market, Public Interest, Professional, Alternative
- Hallin & Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems* (2004): Liberal, Democratic Corporatist, Polarized Pluralist

Tradition: Variants

- Martin & Chaudhary (eds), *Comparative Mass Media Systems* (1983)
- Blumler & Gurevitch, *Towards a Comparative Framework for Political Communication Research* (1995)
- Kleinsteuber, *Mediensysteme in vergleichender Perspektive* (2002)
- Blum, *Bausteine zu einer Theorie der Mediensysteme* (2005)
- Dobek-Ostrowska & Glowacki (eds), *Comparing Media Systems in Central Europe* (2008)
- Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng & White, *Normative Theories of the Media* (2009)
- Hallin & Mancini (eds), *Comparing Media Systems Beyond the Western World* (2012)

...of these, three examples:

Table 1. The three models: main political and media system characteristics

Characteristics	Polarized pluralist model	Democratic corporatist model	Liberal model
Political system			
Political history: conflict vs. consensus	Late democratization, polarized pluralism	Early democratization, moderate pluralism,	Early democratization, moderate pluralism
Consensus or majoritarian government	Both	Predominantly consensus	Predominantly majoritarian
Individual vs. organized pluralism	Organized pluralism	Organized, democratic corporatism	Individual representation
Role of State	Dirigisme	Strong welfare state	Liberalism
Rational Legal Authority	Weak, clientelism	Strong	Strong
Media system			
Political parallelism	High. Politics-over-broadcasting	External pluralism, politics-in-broadcasting with substantial autonomy	Internal pluralism (external in the U.K.), professional broadcast governance, formally autonomous system
Professionalization	Weak	Strong	Strong
Role of state in media	Strong	Strong, but freedom of media protected	Market-dominated (but strong PSB in U.K. and Ireland)

Source: (Hallin, Mancini, 2004, pp. 67–68).

Table 2. Media development scenarios in the 1990s

Model	“Standard model”	“Westification”	Germanification	Italianization	“Gaulization”	Continuation of two media cultures	Perestroika in W.E.
Authors or supporters	Johnson (1995) Gross (1996) Sparks (1999)	Fabris (1995)	Fabris (1995)	Splichal (1994)	Školkey (2007 (based on Sparks 1998)	Fabris (1995)	Fabris (1995)
State – media relationship	Ideological pluralism and/or relative independence of public service media	Acceptance of the dominant Western media philosophy		Strong state control of the media	Public TV and radio under control of the government	Authoritarian and semi-fascist regimes (exc. Czech Republic)	Repoliticization of the public sphere
Civil society – media relationship	Free press, popular and serious, sometimes with political affiliation	Market segmentation	German language predominance	Pronounced political partisanship of the media	Free but politicized press	No civil society	
Market – media relationship		An additional market for W.E. production	German investment	Close integration of media and political elites	Some access of opposition to public media, especially during election	W.E. influence only in the market	Questioning commercialization and commodification of the media
Ethics	Common standards of ethics in journalism			Lack of consolidated and shared professional ethic	Various media ethics		
Examples	Sweden, Denmark, United Kingdom	Hungary – print media Czech Republic	East Germany in general	Central/Eastern Europe	Slovakia, Hungary and Poland	Hungary – broadcasting East Germany for some time in certain sectors Czech Republic	No example

Roger Blum on a theory of media systems (2005)

Dimension	Liberal line	Middle line	Regulated line
1. Regulatory system	Democratic	Authoritarian	Totalitarian
2. Political culture	Polarized	Ambivalent	Collaborative
3. Media freedom	No censorship	Occasional c.	Permanent c.
4. Ownership	Private	Private & Publ.	Public
5. Financing	Market	Market & State	State
6. Political parallelism	Weak	Middle	Strong
7. State control of media	Weak	Middle	Strong
8. Media culture	Investigative	Ambivalent	Collaborative
9. Media orientation	Commercial	Diverse	Public service

Blum's world models based on the 9 dimensions

1. Atlantic-Pacific Liberal model (USA, Australia...)
2. South European Clientelism model (Italy, Spain...)
3. North European Public Service model (D, F, NL, S...)
4. East European Shock model (Russia, Turkey, Iran...)
5. Arab-Asian Patriot model (Egypt, Syria, Tunisia...)
6. Asian-Caribbean Commando model (China, Cuba...)

...and now to assessment with Colin Sparks:



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



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



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



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COMET

Media Systems in Flux: The Challenge of the BRICS Countries - Project 2012-2016

Introduction

Plan

Members

Materials

Meetings

Introduction

This project is concerned with comparing media systems and journalism doctrines in the new coalition in global politics known as "BRICS" – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. This provides a challenge to conventional ways of approaching media systems and the role of journalism in society.

The project examines, firstly, the *theoretical concepts* of

- a) media system
 - b) role of media and journalists in democracies
 - c) freedom and independence of media
- by placing the BRICS countries within a global context.

Secondly, the project examines the *empirical situation* of

- a) citizen participation in and through media
- b) professional orientation of journalists
- c) education of journalists

in the BRICS countries in a comparative context.

Background with references is provided in the Research plan submitted to the Academy of Finland in September 2011. The Academy decided in May 2012 to accept the project for four years of funding, beginning in September 2012.

Project objectives

- Comparing media systems in BRICS countries by noting both similarities and differences
- Locating them in historical and global context
- Aiming at theory building beyond dominant western traditions
- Maintaining critical distance to BRICS concept itself
- Covering journalism against broader information environment including entertainment
- Covering both traditional mass media and new internet-based media

World Democracy Audit 2013

<http://www.worldaudit.org> *“We define democracy via the criteria of Human Rights; Political Rights; Free Speech; and the Absence of Public Corruption.”*

Out of 150 countries in January 2013:

- ***Fully democratic – 37 countries***
Finland Sweden Denmark Norway 1-4,
Germany 11, USA 12, UK 13, France 16, Italy 28
- ***Partly democratic – 33 countries***
South Africa 44, India 50, Brazil 51
- ***Non-democratic – 80 countries***
China 124, Russia 128

Prospects

- Media system is a messy but useful concept
- It invites us to take holistic and comparative look
- But we should not miss details and specificities
- And we should avoid mystifying models
- Emphasis on conceptual levels and dimensions
- Open intellectual examination in the spirit of Hallin & Mancini and Christians et al.



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Thank you!

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[http://www.uta.fi/cmt/en/contact/staff/
kaarlenordenstreng/index.html](http://www.uta.fi/cmt/en/contact/staff/kaarlenordenstreng/index.html)

<http://www.uta.fi/cmt/tutkimus/BRICS.html>