The Researching and Teaching Communication Series

Journalism, Representation and the Public Sphere

edition lumière
Bremen 2015

Bibliographische Information der Deutschen Bibliothek

Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliographie; detaillierte bibliographische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.ddb.de abrufbar.

ISBN: 978-3-943245-37-0

JOURNALISM, REPRESENTATION AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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Series: The Researching and Teaching Communication Series
Series editors: Nico Carpentier and Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt
Photographs: François Heinderyckx (section photographs)
Print run: 600 copies
Electronic version accessible at: http://www.researchingcommunication.eu and http://www.comsummerschool.org

The publishing of this book was supported by the University of Bremen, the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) and the Slovene Communication Association.

The 2014 European Media and Communication Doctoral Summer School (Bremen, August 3-16) was sponsored by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and significantly funded at the expenses of the Federal Foreign Office (AA). It was also supported by the University of Bremen, ZeMKI, Centre for Media, Communication and Information Research, the „Communicative Figurations“ research network, the Graduate Center of the University of Bremen (ProUB) and by a consortium of 22 universities. Affiliated partners of the Summer School were the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) and the International League of Higher Education in Media and Communication (MLeague).

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Three levels of the crisis of the media – and a way out

Hannu Nieminen

Abstract

In the course of the past 30 years, the role of the media has fundamentally changed. Together with other epistemic systems, including the education system and cultural institutions, the media — first newspapers, then radio and television — was once elemental in the construction of civic identity and citizen subjects; which was necessary for the consolidation of European national democracies. As a result of the globalisation and financialization of the economy, however, the competence of nation states to provide welfare for their citizens and to serve their national economies has withered. This has weakened the ability of the media to bring nations together in the same ways it did in the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, it is claimed that the media has lost its historic role in serving the process of the formation of the political subject (an informed citizen). To re-establish the historical relationship between media and democracy, it is argued that because of the changes in the modes of production, the growing level of education, and the increase in free time, civic subjectivity has already transformed and continues to change into a more self-reflexive and autonomous individuality. And it is here, in the organisation and mobilisation of the new global political subject, where the media in all its different forms can play a crucial role today.

Keywords: media crisis; media system; communication policy; media regulation

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Nieminen, H. (2015) 'Three levels of the crisis of the media – and a way out', pp. 131-143 in L. Kramp/N. Carpentier/A. Hepp/I. Tomanić Trivundža/H. Nieminen/R. Kunelius/T. Olsson/E. Sundin/R. Kilborn (eds.) *Journalism, Representation and the Public Sphere*. Bremen: edition lumière.

1. Background

As a result of major transformations in the capitalist mode of production between the 1970s and the 2010s, fundamental changes have taken place in all areas of social and cultural relations. Although these transformations began in the economic sphere in the late 1960s and early 1970s, their repercussions were fully felt (and understood, at least partly) in the media much later, from the 2000s onwards.

In the development of the modern state, the role of the media — originally the newspaper press, then radio and television — has been elemental, as its central function was the national organization of interests. In this way, the media has been pivotal in the social and cultural construction of modern nations and can be compared to other major nation-building institutions, such as the education system, the church, the national army, and the civil service.[1] They all can be characterised as epistemic institutions, creating and reproducing a form of knowledge that is centrally constructed around national concepts and symbols (see Nieminen, 2010).

Different media sources have served this process in different ways. The early newspaper press was established, from one viewpoint, to allow the organization of competing interests (between different classes and social strata). This competition was housed firmly within national frames, requiring the recognition of different interests, but sharing a common imaginary or symbolic reservoir (as in the concepts of Englishness, Finnishness, etc.). As a result of this form of external pluralism, something like a class-based understanding of citizenship emerged, promoted by the newspaper press, with the shared concept of citizenship as a common denominator.

European radio broadcasting (and later television), represented a different form of interest organisation. Instead of the particular interests presented by newspapers — and the form of external pluralism that they represented — radio broadcasting epitomised public interest, in a sense that particular interests were negotiated and organised within a single medium. This form of internal pluralism promoted the idea of universal citizenship rather than class-based citizenship. The commercialised newspaper press, which took over from the party press of previous decades in Europe between the 1930s and 1970s, offered still another way of organising national interests based on universalised internal pluralism: a market-based organisation (consumer identity) in which the market became a non-partial arbiter of particular/private interests.

National epistemic institutions were especially important during the European reconstruction after WWII, when economic recovery required the integration of all social groups. In most countries, the reconstruction process took place from the late 1940s to the end of the 1960s/early 1970s. This period was characterised by the use of an extensive mode of reproduction, in contrast to

the intensive mode adopted later. The central focus was large-scale industrial production: factories, Taylorism, the division of labour, etc. For the effective organisation of industrial production, a policy of social and political pacification aimed at reducing class differences was adopted. This policy was applied in different countries in different ways.[2]

From this 'critical functionalist' perspective, the role and function of the media — like all epistemic institutions — began to change profoundly from the 1970s onward. The basic mode of capital accumulation changed from an extensive to an intensive mode, which did not require the same kind of integrative social and cultural policies. As an early step towards the increasing financialization of economies — that is, the disengagement of a speculative financial economy from the real economy — there was a shift in societal polices. Instead of seeking policies that aimed to equalise societal differences, policies producing social disintegration and segregation were adopted because they promised better economic benefits, at least in the short term. This social shift was the promise of the neoliberal turn that had started to gain a foothold in the US and UK in the late 1970s, with later adoption in most European countries.

At the same time, the traditional global system based on a negotiated balance between nation states, of which the United Nations (UN) was an emblematic example, appeared to have run its course: the political and economic sovereignty of nation states now created an obstacle for the accumulation of global capital. If European countries and companies were willing to compete with the US and Japan in the global market, the establishment of a single European market would be required, supported and enhanced by social and political structures.

This movement towards global competition in the form of a unified European economic and political framework undermined the basic dynamics of the 'old' epistemic order by doing away with the old regime of nation states. The previous epistemic order was based entirely on the idea of nation state democracy and national institutions.

2. Three levels of crisis

To understand the historical context for the changes and crisis in media regulation, it might be helpful to make a distinction between three different levels of the crisis. The first concerns a more general crisis of capital accumulation, which had direct consequences on the functioning of the media; the second concerns the economic crisis of the media system, which is partly a reflection of capital accumulation but has a logic of its own; and the third level is a crisis of media regulation. First, in very general terms, I will clarify how these three levels are related; next, I will study the crisis of media regulation more closely.

2.1 The 1970s crisis

Before the first oil crisis in 1973, Western European countries, together with the US and Canada, had enjoyed a long period of continuous economic growth.[3] This 'Long Boom' brought with it rising standards of living for most of the population. The expansion of educational opportunities provided increasing social mobility. Increased free time combined with new affluence invited the growth of new industrial branches, especially those in the area of symbolic production. Entertainment and leisure industries, tourism, mass media (television, sound recordings, glossy magazines) and other forms of mass culture started to proliferate. All of this — combined with the Keynesian (or social-democratic) welfarist social policy — amounted to the pacification of social relations: the economic growth had a smoothing effect on class conflict.

By the early 1970s, the Western economy began to suffer from structural problems. Starting with the US, economic growth stagnated, joined by rapidly rising inflation ('stagflation'). Social and political stability, long controlled by the fruits of growth, faltered and resulted in increasing signs of mass discontent (students' and workers' revolts in France and many other countries; world-wide movements against the Vietnam War; etc.). Terrorist activities also became prevalent in Germany, Italy, and the US. At the same time, hopes for liberal changes and *'socialism with a human face'* created tensions within the socialist block, resulting in a conservative backlash in Poland and Prague. Political and military tension between the parties involved in the Cold War heightened and led to an escalating arms race.

The Long Boom officially ended in 1973 when the first Oil Crisis paralyzed the Western economy. The economic dynamism (increasing consumer demand in an expanding market place) that had guaranteed constant growth for the previous almost 20 years was worn out, and Western capitalism had to re-programme itself. The new programme was slow in developing and got its shape only step by step, through several new crises. Depending on the criteria, additional periods of recession were experienced in 1979, 1991–92, 2000–02, 2008–09, 2011–13.

Solutions to the crisis and a means to return to higher rates of growth were sought from several directions, some traditional and some new. They included:

- Lowering the costs of industrial production: Transferring production to low wage countries, flexibilizing labour contracts (crushing union power), substituting computerized work processes for human labour (post-Fordism), and removing global and regional trade barriers.

- Reconstructing the financial mechanisms to promote growth (financialization of economy): Expanding the non-productive sector of economy (banking, insurance, taxation), creating a global financial market, and inventing new instruments to intensify the circuit of capital (options and other incentives, hedge funds).
- Exposing the previously non-market functions of society and culture to market logics (the process of commodification of the symbolic sphere): Privatisation of public utilities and services, adopting the *'New Public Management'* principles to public administration, commodification of culture and symbolic production (education and sciences, cultural institutions, and the media).
- Re-redistribution of wealth: Promoting private monopolies through privatising public utilities (windfall profits), rewarding the capital owners and other high income groups with tax redemptions paid by cuts in public services.

How is this connected to the media and communications? Briefly:[4]

First, the new political consensus needed popular legitimacy. The media had a major role in constructing public consent to support the new policies, which in many cases involved undermining the previous achievements in social policy and labour relations.

Secondly, as entertainment and cultural industries became increasingly important areas of commerce, media and communications policies were met with new pressures and expectations to open the market by reducing public regulation of these areas (i.e. broadcasting and telecommunications).

Thirdly, the new global economic and financial order required the rapid expansion of a computerised information network — the Internet. In the name of efficiency, all societal institutions and organisations needed to be linked to the network, including industry, administration, and households. The Internet (or new information and communication technology more generally) promised to fulfil several mutually beneficial economic functions:

- providing a necessary conduit for economic and financial information (b-t-b);
- creating a new business arena in itself (Google, Microsoft, Apple, Facebook, mobile telephones);
- opening up new global business opportunities and models for business; creating new unforeseen potential for control and monitoring by authorities;
- offering new ways for interaction between the opinion makers (political, economic, cultural elites) and citizens.

And lastly, the more dependent the global status quo (economic and military relations) has become on the ICT and the Internet, the more intensely both the contents of online traffic and the online behaviour of users have been monitored by the security authorities. This reality has been graphically illustrated by the recent disclosures from Edward Snowden and others (Greenwald, 2014).

2.2 The economic crisis of the media system

There are several possible paths that can be followed when studying the crisis of the media system. However, based on my analysis, the primary crisis is due to a failure of the traditional capitalist economy; out-dated business models did not function any more. Politically, they could no longer provide the socio-political stability and cohesion that they did during the reconstruction period after WWII, and economically, people's consumption patterns changed at the same time that the costs of media production began spiralling.

Before the 2000s

The crisis of the media system in Europe can be divided in two (or three) main phases. As stated above, my starting point is that this crisis is actually an economic crisis that also has significant political and cultural reflections. The sources for this are at least twofold. First, because the media was, as a result of general shifts in the capitalist economy, now considered an independent industry, it was expected to generate significant profits. For a number of years, the media was very profitable. For example, in Finland, the rate of profit in media industries (especially the newspaper industry) was steadily between 15 and 25 percent. Second, because of increasing free time and cultural consumption combined with higher education levels, various forms of media consumption kept rising. The newspaper circulation in Finland was at its all-time highest in 1989: 824 copies per 1,000 inhabitants (in 2011 the figure was 509). Daily average television viewing time in 1990 was 109 minutes (in 2012 it was 183) (Lehtisaari, 2014).

However, from the late 1980s and early 1990s on, changes in people's free time activities and consumption patterns led to a decline in the traditional business models of media industries. People, especially the youth, began to look for other sources of information and entertainment. In the early 1990s, the circulation of newspapers began their long and steady decline. Although radio listening has remained popular, it has clearly declined among younger age groups, along with television watching.

The newspaper market in particular has become more and more competitive as companies are fighting over fewer and fewer readers. Both traditional sources of newspapers' profit became endangered: the number of subscriptions and single copy sales declined from year to year, and the income from advertisements decreased as advertisers paid less for having access to the dwindling number of readers. In 2000, the advertising income of the dailies in Finland was 528 million euros; in 2012 it dropped to 404 million euros (Finnish Mass Media, 2011; Mainostajat, 2013).

In the rapidly developing European electronic communication business, competition has been difficult as well. As the European television industry was, to a great extent, privatized and deregulated in the 1980s and 1990s, new businesses entered the market in great numbers — especially in the fields of cable and satellite television. Although governments attempted to regulate the market by imposing obligatory licensing for access to radio frequencies, the competition for satellite and cable transmission was virtually unregulated.[5] One of the results was a push for control of the market by cross-ownership, leading in many countries to the formation of big media houses, some of which expanded to become major transnational actors (such as Fininvest, Bertelsmann, News International, and Vivendi).

Increasing competition directly influenced media content, too. Commercial value was more heavily emphasized in the selection and framing of news, leading to a major change in the relationship between journalism and reading audiences. This has been characterised as a shift from citizen-oriented to customer-oriented journalism. As stated previously, this has naturally caused a major change in our understanding of the media's role in democracy (see e.g. Curran, 2011; Nieminen and Trappel, 2011; Nielsen, 2010).

After 2000

Although these two long-term developments — the financial decline of the traditional media and the commercialization of media content — began in the 1980s, they were greatly intensified with the introduction of digital media technology in the 1990s and 2000s. On one hand, new ICT opened up new opportunities for developing and improving the production processes in many ways, including the computerization and automation of manual tasks. However, with the advent of the Internet, the traditional strengths of the 'old' media (speed, connectivity, and engagement) were now captured and accelerated by different forms of new media.

The challenge of the new media to traditional media comes from at least two directions. Firstly, because the Internet was able to deliver news and other traditional newspaper contents 24/7 as a 'free' service for users, without the

traditional subscription or single copy fees, Internet news sites gathered an increasing audience. This led advertisers towards the Internet, too, worsening the negative income spiral for newspapers. The decreased number of readers and subscription fees was further aggravated by a loss of advertising money.

The digitalization of television has created the same challenge for traditional television companies. Audiences shifted in great numbers to the competing niche channels first, which led to a decline in advertising money. Traditional television companies attempted to counter by offering additional paid subscription channels for movies, sports, and lifestyles, but this didn't block audiences from shifting to the Internet and its 'free' offerings.

And secondly, social media sites such as Facebook and YouTube are a particular threat to traditional media due to their effect on advertisers. These sites offer much more effective channels for advertisers to target their desired consumer groups, thus diverting advertising money from newspapers, both in their print and online forms. This advantage challenges the viability of traditional media business, especially in small national markets as advertising money begins to flow from national media platforms to the 'global' platforms of Google and Facebook, drying up national advertising income.

Traditional media companies are still struggling to transform their business models and become profitable in the online environment. Newspapers are experimenting with different ways to make money from their online versions, both by personalised advertising and by experimenting with forms of 'pay walls', but at this point, most of them still haven't found a financially sustainable solution.

Television companies have a different problem: although the total audience figures have stayed constant or even increased slightly, because audiences are spread to a number of smaller digital channels, traditional channels are losing advertisers. As a counter tactic, companies are beginning to develop their pay-online services, but have realized that they must compete with specialized international (or US-based) over-the-top OTT service companies such as Netflix, HBO, and Hulu.

For newspapers, the solution has been to seek commercialization at the cost of traditional journalism. The costs of production must be brought down by any means; each unit of 'output' must be able to create income. The whole culture has been oriented towards making money. A reduced number of journalists must produce more material. The 'new' journalism is lighter, more opinionated and personal, less edited, and aimed at being interesting and gathering attention. (e.g. Nielsen, 2012; Barnett, 2009). However, a new dichotomy is forming between high-quality online journalism or 'slow journalism',[6] aimed at an elite audience willing to pay for content, and the cheaply made popular journalism, aimed at mass audiences.

From the viewpoint of traditional representative democracy, with the demise of traditional news and information services and the lack of corrective news and information provision, the ultimate loser is the informed citizenry.

3. The crisis of media and communications regulation

As a result of the changes in media systems since the 1980s, the old regulatory framework was plunged into crisis. The old system of regulation is not capable of facing the new three-level challenge. First, the challenge posed by the neo-liberalist belief in the virtues of the market (a long-term trend); second, the challenge of digital convergence, which undermines the traditional sectoral regulatory framework (a mid-term trend); and third, the challenge of the immediate media crisis after 2008 (immediate crisis).

As the general crisis of the media system has long historical roots, so does media regulation. There are three recent phases in the development of media regulation (see Gibbons and Humphreys, 2012; Michalis, 2007; Harcourt, 2005). The first period, between the 1980s and the early 2000s, was characterised by regulatory liberalisation (de-regulation) and privatisation of public communication facilities. This shift was based on the belief in market self-regulation; governments only provided suitable conditions for the market to survive. In the EU this was exemplified by the Television Without Frontiers Directive (TWFD, 1989).

The period between the Dot Com crash and Telecoms crash (2001–2002) and the crisis of 2008–2009 was, from a regulatory viewpoint, a period when it became clear that market self-regulation is not sufficient and cannot guarantee fair competition and consumer choice as expected. What followed was a regulatory re-engagement of the state to establish proper conditions for competition, or regulation for economic benefits. This included strengthening the role of independent national regulatory authorities. In the EU an example of this approach is the Telecoms Package of 2002–2003.

The third phase of media regulation started in the aftermath of the crisis of 2008–2009, and is characterised by the emergence of a number of issues which neither market self-regulation nor the state's competition regulation were able to solve. New issues included hate speech/mail, protection of minors, protection of privacy, data protection, the digital divide, consumer protection, and copyright infringements. It is expected that regulatory responses must now include more emphasis on the social dimensions of regulation. A possible future regulatory framework may combine all three elements: market self-regulation, state-led competition regulation, and regulations promoting social and cultural

values. The EU's predicament in this most recent phase of regulation can be seen in the incoherence of the European Commission (EC) in its recent discussion on the application of Network Neutrality in Europe.[7]

The main problem facing the future of the media; however, is the deepening systemic crisis of the European economy that has resulted in increasing social and political polarization. Currently, in the summer of 2014, we don't yet know if and how Europe will solve this crisis. Nor is it known how the general European social, political and cultural landscape will look after this.

4. Conclusions and further questions

This paper began with the notion that in the course of the past 30 years, the role of the media has fundamentally changed. Together with other epistemic systems including the education system and cultural institutions, the media — first newspapers, then radio and television — was once elemental in the construction of civic identity and citizen subjects, it was necessary for the consolidation of European national democracies. As a result of the globalisation and financialization of the economy, however, the competence of nation states to provide welfare for their citizens and to serve their national economies has withered. This has weakened the ability of the media to bring nations together in the same ways it did in the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, it is claimed that media have lost their historical role of serving the process of shaping the political subject (an informed citizen).

Based on this foundation, we can present two main scenarios of the future role of the media, one pessimistic and one optimistic.[8]

1) The industrial social contract — which is based on the recognition of mutual interests between owners and workers, and regulated within the framework of democratic nation states — has been dismantled because of the one-sided processes of globalisation and financialization of the economy. There is no sign of a new global social contract being seriously negotiated, likely because no political subject has yet emerged capable of balancing and restraining the forces of the financialised economy.

In these circumstances, the role and function of the media has changed, too: as a result of the downfall of the old social contract there is no longer a democratic political subject to be served. Consequently, instead of aiding in the formation of informed citizens, the media industry is seeking its own profit and promoting one-sided consumer identity. Have we already entered the era of post-democracy, characterised by a majority of 'dumbed down' ex-citizens, consuming tabloids freely online, with a small minority of enlightened elite who enjoy quality journalism and are willing to pay for it?

This perspective does not provide much leverage for the democratic regulation of the media. The playing field is defined and dominated by commercial media, and what they need is competition law to fight monopolization and to promote fair play, not regulation for social and cultural aims.

2) Although still fragmented and dispersed, some claim that we can see (or feel) the elements gathering for the formation of a new global political subject. We should not, however, look for the 'old' type of subjects, organised within the framework of nation states. The claim is that 'society' in the way it was traditionally conceived, organised and mobilised around class-based interests, does not exist anymore. The new political subject and its subjectivity are based not on interests, but on values and universal human rights, which are not tied to the interests of any specific social category or class. Examples of the drive towards the formation of this new subjectivity are the movements and communities concerned with environmental conservation, sustainable development, gender issues, and social and cultural minorities.

Because of the changes in the modes of production, the growing level of education, and the increase in free time, civic subjectivity has already transformed and continues to change into a more self-reflexive and autonomous individuality. And it is here, in the organisation and mobilisation of the new global political subject, where the media in all its different forms plays a crucial role today.

Even if we agree with this optimistic scenario, it does yet provide many conclusions from the viewpoint of democratic regulatory policy. An initial conclusion can be formed based on the level of policy and political initiatives: instead of concentrating on national media reforms, we should concern ourselves more with reforms concerning regional and transnational organisations, such as EU, UN, International Telecommunication Union ITU, World Intellectual Property Organisation WIPO, and World Trade Organisation WTO.

Notes

1 Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined community" is rather thin in this respect. See Anderson, 1991.
2 Ralf Dahrendorf's concept of the peaceful settlement of societal conflicts was influential in these processes. See Dahrendorf, 1959.
3 From the aftermath of WWII and the reconstruction period until the early 1970s, the OECD member countries enjoyed a real GDP growth rate averaging between 4 and 5 percent in the 1950s and 1960s, compared with 3% in the 1970s and 2% in the 1980s. See Marglin and Schor, 1990.
4 For more background, see e.g. Crouch, 2004; Michalis, 2007.
5 In satellite transmission, however, the TVWF directive stipulated the 'country of origin' principle, which functioned as a guiding principle.

6 On the concept of slow journalism, see "Slow journalism spreads fast". Downloaded on 4 November 2014 from http://www.almamedia.com/investors/quarterly/Slow-journalism-spreading-fast/
7 See European Commission's viewpoints: "Net Neutrality challenges". Downloaded on 4 November 2014 from https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/net-neutrality-challenges
8 I follow here at least the spirit, if not always the exact words, of Alain Touraine, 2014.

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Biography

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