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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Labio-Bernal, A., Rubira-García, R., & Pocevicienė, R. (2024). Comparing Media Systems: A New Critical Academic Reading. *Media and Communication*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.8357>

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Comparing Media Systems: A New Critical Academic Reading

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Submitted: 13 March 2023 **Published:** 15 May 2024

Issue: This editorial is part of the issue “Communication Policies and Media Systems: Revisiting Hallin and Mancini’s Model” edited by Aurora Labio-Bernal (University of Seville), Rainer Rubira-García (Rey Juan Carlos University), and Rasa Poceviciene (Šiauliai State Higher Education Institution), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i430>

Abstract

The year 2024 marks the 20th anniversary of the publication of *Comparing Media Systems* (2004), by Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, a book that established three major media models in the Western world. Subsequently, the same authors published *Comparing Media Systems Beyond the Western World* (2011), which extended the work to other countries such as Russia, Poland, and China. In both cases, the interest was in the comparative analysis using a series of variables that made it possible to classify the media structures of the countries into differential groups. For their analysis, the authors included different study categories that need to be reinterpreted considering technological evolution, changes in consumption habits, or the irruption of social networks. This thematic issue is a proposal for a review of media models in different countries and aims to be a starting point for future lines of research on this subject. A total of 10 articles are presented to address an academic debate on the scientific relevance of Hallin and Mancini’s work, its contribution to comparative media studies, and its necessary re-reading in a historical-temporal framework different from the moment in which it was published.

Keywords

communication models; comparative studies; critical analysis; Hallin; Mancini; media systems; political economy

1. Introduction

Hallin and Mancini (2004) established in their book *Comparing Media System* three major blocks: the polarized pluralism model, which included Greece, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and France; the corporate

democratic model, which included Belgium, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Finland, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden; and the liberal model, to which Great Britain, Ireland, Canada, and the US belonged. Two decades later, technological changes and the evolution of economic and systemic dynamics recommend a new reading of the information structure to test the validity of the models. Thus, the development of the media market or political parallelism, as well as the evolution of journalists' professionalism and state intervention are appropriate issues to continue describing media models, but they are seen as limited variables in a global context. The emergence of the Netflix business model has led to a boom in online platforms, which has displaced traditional media in pursuit of other digital initiatives (Lobato, 2018). At the business level, changes in the sector also show that new developments are taking place in content consumption, establishing an alliance between internet operators, telecommunications, and traditional media companies (Birkinbine et al., 2016). Meanwhile, in the press sector, there is evidence of the weakening of paper newspapers and the search for paid or subscription business models, as well as the incorporation of the online-only press as new political agents (Labio-Bernal & Pineda, 2016).

The present thematic issue takes up the final recommendation of Hallin and Mancini's (2004, pp. 302–303) work that recognized the exploratory nature of their book and encouraged further studies in the face of a foreseeable scenario of homogenization of media systems characterized by secularization, the trend towards the liberal model and commercialization, which raises tensions between the market and democracy. Furthermore, in *Comparing Media Systems Beyond the Western World*, the authors themselves recognized, following Humphreys (2009), that “we did not want to encourage the reduction of comparative analysis to a categorization of cases, in which a label becomes a substitute for ‘more concrete explanation’” (Hallin & Mancini, 2011, p. 300). We cannot forget, likewise, the recommendation made by Paolo Mancini when he stated that “the idea of media system itself must be readapted and reshaped to the new media ecology” (Mancini, 2020, p. 5761). Thus, the scientific anniversary offers us the opportunity to review and study, from a more current and complex perspective, the proposal made by Hallin and Mancini in 2004. The objective of this monograph, in which they analyze some cases, allows us to continue to legitimize the validity of the models, not as unique categories but as a basis that allows us to delve into the characteristics of different media structures.

2. Notes on the State of the Art

As a starting point, we consider it important to analyze the quantitative impact on the scientific production of the work. In this sense, the article by de la Mata et al. (2024) with which this monograph begins is an excellent example of the evolution and interpretation of the Hallin and Mancini model by the scientific community, both in terms of its strengths and limitations and potential areas for development. It is a bibliometric work, based on the analysis of almost 3,500 articles published in Web of Science, which have dealt with Hallin and Mancini's proposal and which offers us an interesting x-ray of the areas, authors, and types of studies that have been developed in this respect. The authors use a software tool, SciMATT, developed by Cobo et al. (2011), to analyze the sample of articles between 2004 and 2022, although they divide them into three periods that they justify scientifically and that make a more comprehensive reading of the results. The importance of public opinion, democratic quality, and political and technological changes gravitate toward the themes that connect with political communication, the importance of the media, and citizen participation when studied under the prism of Hallin and Mancini's model. Interesting findings are found on studies that insist on the adaptation of this theory to current circumstances, dominated by globalization and cross-border technological development.

3. A European Perspective

The article by Lorena R. Romero-Domínguez (2024) is included in this monograph on the challenges that cross-border investigative journalism poses for studying the media models proposed by Hallin and Mancini. The author performs a quantitative analysis, through an automated content analysis, on the conceptualization of this type of journalism in the successive editions of the European Investigative Journalism Forum, Dataharvest, between 2014 and 2023 through about 1,000 documents containing the summaries of the sessions. The idea that journalism today also develops through cross-border network models where different traditions, narratives, and practices come together serves as a basis to support the renewal of the classical theory that, supported by Hallin (2020) himself, understands as fundamental the impact of transnationalization and the internet. An interesting aspect of the article focuses on demonstrating the existence of other types of journalistic organizations linked to foundations, as well as a transnational parallelism focused on making visible issues such as human rights in the European framework and an objective less linked to business and more to independence.

By countries, the work of Fernández-Viso and Fernández-Alonso (2024) analyzes the communication policies and regulatory bodies in Spain, France, and Portugal to study the changes in the so-called Mediterranean model. The evolution of the sector over the last 20 years leads the authors to propose a review of state intervention in the three countries, focusing especially on the governance of public media, the role of independent regulatory bodies, and funding through state advertising. The methodology, of a qualitative nature, has been carried out through the analysis of legal texts, organizational charts, and reports of regulatory bodies and, finally, a review of public and critical information on media subsidies in the three countries. The study concludes by confirming the prevalence of the polarized pluralism model with a strong presence of government intervention in the Mediterranean media systems studied.

The article by Wandels et al. (2024) offers an interesting point of view by offering a comparison between the Northern European model of Belgium and the liberal model represented by the US through an evolutionary analysis over time, specifically between 1980 and the present day. From a critical perspective and taking as a fundamental basis the development of neoliberalism and its impact on journalism, the authors carry out an exploratory qualitative analysis of the two case studies mentioned in the context of the last decades. The intellectual approach of the field theory developed by Bourdieu (2005) is fundamental to understand, according to the authors, how journalistic *doxa* is marked by the power logics of neoliberal hegemony and the dominant thinking on both sides of the Atlantic. The methodology has been developed through semi-structured interviews with editors, section chiefs, and US and Flemish journalists. In addition, this information has been triangulated with other sources, such as records, company data, autobiographies, and other literature, using NVIVO software to categorize everything.

The article by Lombao et al. (2024) delves into one of the variables of the model: political parallelism in the media (or the degree of influence of parties), in this case, governments, on the public media in the EU. These authors also study other aspects: the intervention and development of regulation, at the national and supranational level; financing and audiences, as well as structural and management changes in these public systems. They also focus on the variation in professional culture and the evolution of the concept of public service of these media in the digital context. All this to discover, finally, those novelties in the national public media two decades after the description made by Hallin and Mancini. The authors study these variables in all EU countries, except for

Malta and Luxembourg, with references even to Great Britain, between 2011 and 2021, offering quantitative data on the development of audiences, funding, governance, and pluralism. Despite the diversity of countries, the authors draw interesting conclusions regarding the degree of political dependence of Public Service Media in the EU. The article is thus a wake-up call for all European governments and their public services, highlighting, in this regard, the conclusions drawn from the Media Pluralism Monitor that place most countries between medium and high risk in terms of pluralism in public media.

4. Changes in Eastern Europe

An important part of the review of the proposed models is found in the study of the media systems of what is known as Eastern Europe since the 1990s. Bălăşescu et al. (2024) thus carry out an analysis of commercial television in Romania and Bulgaria in relation to the political and governmental framework in both countries, taking into account their recent incorporation into the group of democracies after the long communist period. The authors thus consider that, in spite of the mixture of different elements, both countries can be defined within the model of polarized pluralism. The study reviews the introduction of commercial television in both cases, as well as a description of its financing and consumption. Of special interest is the section on the analysis of the journalistic profession, detecting a limitation of informative practice and freedom of expression. Commercial television, in both countries, presents many similarities that connect with pressures coming from both the political and economic business spheres.

To complete this study, Botan's (2024) article tests the credibility and quality of journalism in Romania through a mixed qualitative methodology that uses both secondary data and other data extracted from surveys and in-depth interviews (with politicians related to media regulation and journalists). The authors confirm a high level of political and business intervention in news reporting, which erodes public trust and compromises professional ethics and the democratic quality of the country. The article takes as inspiration Hallin and Mancini's proposal, but the authors consider it fundamental to problematize the model to national contexts and, specifically in this case, to the reality of Romania, taking into account the multifaceted changes related to the digital market, commercialization, and post-communist heritage.

These studies on the so-called Eastern Europe are completed by Izquierdo-Iranzo and Sayadyan (2024), who present the case of the media system in Armenia. The authors rightly provide a socio-historical context of the country and claim the opportunity of a case study of a state that does not normally occupy academic attention. The methodology uses interviews with 20 media representatives, academics, and experts as a fundamental tool. The variables on which these testimonies have been worked are media structure, political parallelism, journalistic professionalism, and state intervention, all taken from Hallin and Mancini's proposal. The characteristics of the country offer a clientelist media model that fits with that of polarized pluralism and offers very particular nuances, such as the existence of an Armenian media market through communities created through the diaspora, although the authors also take into account new variables related above all to technological evolution.

5. Beyond the Western World

Halfway between Europe and Asia, Akser and Baybars (2024) analyze in this monograph the case of Turkey as a country where the relationship between media and power is a matter of concern. The authors take as

variables for their work the increase of political parallelism, the erosion of journalistic professionalism, and the role of the state connected also with corporations. The thesis of the work maintains that the evolution of the media system in Turkey, especially after 2011, has produced a capture of the sector by the political-corporate power, moving from a model of polarized pluralism to absolute polarization. The work even highlights intimidation tactics, on the part of the state, against those media and information professionals who oppose the government. The result of all this contributes to a professional practice that moves away from ethical sense and social function to work at the service of political-economic interests and disinformation.

This issue closes with an article by Jones and Hadland (2024) which raises an interesting critique of the work of Hallin and Mancini for the case of South Africa, considering its characteristic of a young democracy within the Global South. The article also aims to overcome the idea of a possible “Africanization” of the theses of the three models raised through the subsequent study by Hadland (2012) to provide an update on the relationship between media and politics in the country. To explain these issues, the authors take into account the works of Rodny-Gumede (2015a, 2015b, 2020) and Wasserman (2020) that explain the changes and challenges in the last decade, both internally and in the international context, in the media landscape in South Africa. The authors focus on highlighting problems that occurred in the country, such as the censorship and discrediting processes that occurred against journalists between 2014 and 2017 carried out by the Bell Pottinger company to destabilize the political system. They also criticize the corporate capture and political subordination of different media outlets as a form of “South African state capture,” which directly affected social peace and democracy. The authors also delve into the study of the media market and political parallelism, identifying a high degree of government clientelism in both private and public media, which seems to lead the country toward the idea of polarized pluralism. However, the authors conclude by pointing out that, despite the importance of the theses of Hallin and Mancini (2004, 2011; see also Hallin et al., 2021), both in their early and later studies, and the work of Hadland (2012), it is more appropriate to apply a hybrid model and create a new typology not centered on the West but on the complex postcolonial context.

6. Conclusion

It is beyond any discussion that Hallin and Mancini’s work is a world reference for media studies with a comparative perspective. In this sense, the review proposed here is more than a critique of the work, but a new academic reading of the exceptional contribution made by these authors in 2004. This thematic issue does not include all the countries analyzed previously, but we do include an interesting sample that allows us to analyze issues such as technological changes, political polarization in a hybrid media system, new audiovisual actors, the transformation of the press business model, and the situation of public media in the digital context. We propose perhaps, as a future line of work, to produce a new monographic issue that expands with more African countries and also includes research from Latin America and Asia.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Raquel Silva for her editorial support throughout the preparation of the thematic issue.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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