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# Essay

# Comparing Media Systems in the 'West' and beyond

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**Abstract:** Hallin and Mancini's book Comparing Media Systems has been hailed as a seminal work sparking several attempts at applying both the models and theoretical framework to media systems around the world. The following essay discusses important considerations on taking this framework beyond the confines of the Western world.

## Introduction

Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini's *Comparing Media Systems* (2004) has come to be regarded as a 'seminal work' in the field of media studies (Strömbäck & Luengo, 2008, p. 548). Despite some criticism levelled at the models and the theoretical framework, researchers around the world have attempted to 'fit' their regions or countries of study in one of the three models put forth with some trying to adapt the framework and models accordingly. More recently, the two authors have published an edited book with contributions attempting to do just that (2011).

The following essay, an edited version of the commentary delivered by the author following Daniel Hallin's keynote speech[1], begins by briefly reiterating and critically assessing the main theses of Comparing Media Systems. It then moves on to discuss important considerations worth examining upon taking this framework beyond the confines of the Western models. Reservations about the use of the same dimensions and uncritically "fitting" media systems under the three ideal

[1] The following essay is an edited version of the talk the author delivered in response to Hallin's key-note lecture delivered at the Beyond "Center" and "Periphery": (De-)Westernization in International and Intercultural Communication Annual Conference of the International and Intercultural Communication section of the German Communication Association held in Erfurt, Germany, October 27-29, 2011. The conference preceded the publication of Hallin and Mancini's edited book *Comparative Media Systems Beyond the Western World*.

types put forth by the two authors shall also be discussed. The essay concludes with suggested potential salient features that emerge upon considering media systems, beyond the confines of the West.

## Comparing Media Systems

In *Comparing Media Systems*, Hallin and Mancini sought to determine the relation between media and politics by comparatively analysing 18 media systems in North America and Western Europe. They propose a framework consisting of four principal dimensions: state role, professionalism, political parallelism and media markets which are further sub-divided into sub-indicators. In line with these dimensions, Hallin and Mancini distinguish between three different models or "ideal types" of media systems, the Polarized Pluralist, the Democratic Corporatist and the Liberal models. The authors also argue that the differences among their three models have substantially decreased over time and that the media systems in Europe, namely the Polarised Pluralist and the Democratic Corporatist, despite persistent differences, are converging towards the Liberal model as best exemplified by the US commercialised media system.

Despite the praiseworthy contribution to the field of comparative media studies, which broke with past attempts such as the Four Theories of The Press[2] caustically but appropriately dubbed by Nerone and colleagues as rather "one theory with four examples", the framework and work has invited some criticism (Thussu, 2009, p. 17). Indeed, even a cursory look at the models reveals ill-fitting national media systems grouped with others that are quite different or that fit only after several qualifications[3]. For one, Jonathan Hardy's *Western Media Systems* argues that rethinking the three models with broadcasting as the "salient axis" would yield a fourth model, which heeds the American 'exceptionalism', where public broadcasting is limited in comparison to the strong state-regulated public service systems established in other "Liberal media" countries, Britain, Ireland and Canada (Hardy, 2008, p. 232). While many other 'ill-fitting' countries exist, as the authors amongst others acknowledge (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 11; Hardy, 2008, pp. 19–20; McQuail, 2005), Peter Humphreys is correct in reminding that the purpose of this exercise is not to classify countries under ideal types but rather to assist in the exploration of the media-politics relationship (cited in Hallin & Mancini 2011, p. 300).

[2] The FTP tradition of comparative media analysis, especially in the US was tied to modernisation theory, setting world press systems against a liberal ideal of a 'watchdog' press free from state interference or partisan affiliation. Hallin and Mancini sought to evade the FTP tradition.

[3] One striking misfit is the grouping of the UK and the US under the 'liberal' model, which due to its strong public broadcasting tradition would better be placed with the Northern European model. Furthermore, the two are also set apart by the difference in journalistic styles between the British "agitational" press and the more politically neutral US dailies (Hardy, 2008, pp. 127–128).

Furthermore, the alleged decrease in differences between the three models or the convergence towards the Liberal model also seems to belittle the resistance to media commercialisation in Europe, not least in the broadcasting field, which, alongside the Internet, is largely overlooked in the work. Be it the continuing support for public service broadcasters, or the laws and directives regulating media concentration, EU countries in particular have resisted the full commercialisation of the media. The narrative of convergence also arguably belittles a counter-convergence of the Liberal model, where, in the US in particular, partisan media appear to be on the rise, and tends to exaggerate the rise of a global media culture. Furthermore, the "Triumph of the Liberal Model" (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p.251) has prompted the accusation that, the authors have in effect reproduced "a stagist, evolutionist model that privileges the liberal conception of media independence as a higher stage of development" (Hardy 2008, p.106–107), which in light of their repeated qualifications, is debatable.

Finally, while the ideal unit of comparison in comparative research and the "most clear cut" is still regarded the nation-state (Esser & Pfetsch, 2004, p. 8), this "container-thinking" as Hepp and Couldry argue, may overlook other phenomena which circumvent national borders (2009, pp. 32–43). While a transcultural approach may be enlightening in light of the proliferation of the transnational media and the internet, the nation-state remains very much key for policy, and law (Hafez, 2007, p. 148) thereby corroborating the announcement "the nation is dead, long live the nation!" (Sreberny, 2008, p. 19).

In spite of these reservations, however, the theoretical framework is most definitely a useful springboard for carrying out comparative media research in other regions and against which other models can be constructed.

## Beyond the remit of "the West"

Hallin and Mancini, themselves acknowledged that "it is not clear media models that "work" in one context would also "work" in another very different one" without "considerable adaption" (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp. 6-15). Despite their invitation to remodel and adapt, many researchers have attempted to "fit" countries of study under one of these renowned models. The Polarised Pluralist model characterised by low circulation rates, limited state role, high political parallelism and low professionalism has in particular emerged as the model which may "apply" to most nations[4] beyond the west prompting the label of "dustbin of

[4] Katja Splichal, Angelika Wyka and others refer to the "Italianisation" of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) media systems (Wyka 2008). Meanwhile, in "Research on Mass Media in Central/Eastern Europe and Southern Europe in Comparative Analysis", Andrej Skolkay argues that the CEE countries today fall between the two ideal types "the Liberal Model" and the "Polarised Pluralist" and are "the Liberal Model mixed with the Polarised Pluralist model" (2008, 37-38). Similairly Boguslawa Dobek-Ostrowska, in Hallin and Mancini's follow-up edited book, agrees that while the media systems in the region where Polarised Pluralist, they are today between

the world[5]".

Yet lumping media systems, under these models – or even between them in the form of hybrid models – seems to lose sight of the benefit of carrying out such an exercise. Indeed, a much more useful exercise, is one which addresses the actual indicators suggested by Hallin and Mancini and uses their approach as a starting point rather than applying the framework uncritically.

While the main dimensions of media market, political parallelism, state role and professionalism are key components of media systems and therefore do "travel", some of the contextual sub-indicators, which in the "Western" context may be useful, may fail to reveal any pattern or insight when applied to the "rest" of the world.

The dimension of the media markets, for instance, as conceptualised by Hallin and Mancini is limited to the development of the mass circulation press and its relation to newspaper circulation. This is hardly indicative when applied to some countries, which due to low literacy rates, amongst several other socio-economic factors including cultural differences such as the prevalence of oral tradition, or even the dominance of the electronic broadcasting, either never developed a mass press or have very low circulation rates. The media market dimension therefore needs to be approached in a different manner, depending on the context, with an emphasis on the audiences, fragmentation as well as the size and nature of local and regional advertising markets.

Similarly, the dimension of professionalism with the sub-dimensions of autonomy, instrumentalisation, "devotion to public good" and existence of distinctive norms, emerge as normative, difficult to gauge empirically and to label entire systems as less or more professional (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp. 35–36). Media content, education and capacities, the existence of professional organisations and their efficiency as well as the credibility of journalists and the media are all sub-dimensions, which may serve as more gaugeable features for this indicator.

The dimension of political parallelism or the links between the political parties and the media and the manner in which diversity is represented also requires adaptation in some cases, where political parties never took root and where primordial, tribal, sectarian, or even "supra-national forces" reign supreme (Kraidy, 2011, p.180).

Finally, the state role in the media system is another dimension worth revisiting particularly in weak states, where the state and its institutions are hardly

the two aforementioned types (2011, 26-50). Meanwhile Aukse Balcytiene argues that the Baltic countries media policies are structured along the lines of yet another hybrid- liberal corporatism (Balcytiene, 2009, pp. 41–42)

[5] Barbie Zelizer referred to the Polarised Pluralist model as the "dustbin of the world" during an intervention at the 2011 IAMCR conference in Istanbul.

"superstructural in relation to the whole series of power networks" (Foucault, 2002, pp. 122–123). Here it is worth addressing the "de facto" rather than just the "de jure" (Fandy, 2007 pp. 67). In the case of Lebanon, for example, it would appear that the state has a strong role in so far a Ministry of Information and state television exist and the fact that there are laws in force regulating and organising the media However, despite appearances, it is the non-state actors who are in a position to hinder or trigger state action, and who are largely responsible of having weakened the public state broadcaster in the interest of their privately owned media. It is also these actors, who serve as primary definers of the news and subsidise some media, thereby effectively taking over the state role.

Additional factors, which the Hallin and Mancini framework does not take into consideration and have been deemed important in comparative studies, include state size. The 'small state' has been put forth by Manuel Puppis, amongst others[6], and acknowledged by Hallin as an important factor (Hallin, 2009, p. 101). Despite the term's "definitional problems[7]" (Maass, 2009, 67), small states tend to share structural peculiarities that have implications on the media landscapes and media regulation (Puppis, 2009). In small polarised and pluralistic markets political/sectarian/tribal or other forms of parallelisms may in fact be exacerbated with political subsidies supporting media the small market can otherwise not support.

Yet, it is not always the case that a small state translates as small market as these nations may enjoy high purchasing power. Furthermore, in regions sharing a language, such as the Arab World, media systems in small states can tap into a larger transnational market[8].

Yet another important factor which may prove instrumental is the nature of the political culture. In countries embroiled in political or violent strife, and where politics are highly divisive, as briefly mentioned above, the media is rendered very much part of the political battle. Media, which would otherwise not survive if market logic was allowed free reign, are often propped up by political or sectarian actors. Indeed, as delineated by Yoram Peri in his chapter on Israel, "war and the culture of national security" can limit a system's "liberalism" (Peri 2011). In some cases, in times of crisis, commercial logic is suspended, and the media falls into its particularistic and political trenches.

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[6] In Media Regulation in Small States, drawing on a series of other works on the topic, Puppis points to four structural peculiarities of small media systems namely the shortage of resources and capacity, small audience and advertising markets, their dependence on policies and developments in regional or neighbouring states and finally vulnerability to foreign takeover, as well as broadcasting overspill (Puppis, 2009, pp. 10–11).

[7] Small state can refer to population, territory, GNP, or all of these characteristics with the acknowledgment that the line between small and large states "will always be arbitrary" (Puppis, 2009, p. 8).

[8] Here too, whether due to political culture or social or economic factors, the small states of Qatar and Lebanon, have shown that they are by no means lacking in capacity.

In conclusion, as briefly delineated above, simply fitting media systems or applying the Hallin and Mancini's theoretical framework, without empirically-grounded, context-based analysis, may indeed render Hallin and Mancini's *Comparative Media Studies* the "new *Four Theories of the Press"* (Hallin & Mancini, 2011, p. 2). It is therefore necessary to adapt the more applicable conceptual framework based on the context of the media systems at hand. As shown above, while there are a number of dimensions or factors that are applicable to most systems, these require some adaptation, relevant sub-indicators and at times also the factoring in of new context-specific dimensions which heavily influence a media system. Finally, it is also important to note that while classification of systems can be helpful in "enlarging our thinking about that which has been classified", as Weber put it, (Patterson, 2007). The purpose of this study is theory-building thereby recalling the power of comparative research, epistemologically, to help in the formation of ideas (Esser et al. 2004, p. 7).

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