

# Between neutrality and engagement: Political journalism in Hungary



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**ABSTRACT:** After the political transformation, Hungarian journalism organizations and media policy makers attempted to introduce the standards and practices of neutrality-seeking journalism, yet most news outlets continued to offer engaged accounts of political events and issues. Why was the professionalization of journalism interrupted? This paper attempts to answer this question by offering an overview of the comparative media systems literature in search of the factors shaping journalism practices and by placing Hungary on the map of media systems. Then it suggests that different audience needs may be an additional factor explaining the dominance of different journalism practices in different media systems, with the public in transition societies seeking confirmation rather than information when using the media.

**KEYWORDS:** audience needs, media systems, objectivity, professionalization, journalism.



## **THEORY VERSUS PRACTICE: JOURNALISM IN HUNGARY**

After the political transformation in 1989–1990, journalism organizations and media policy makers attempted to introduce the standards and practices of neutrality-seeking journalism in Hungary. For example, the code of the Hungarian Journalists Association states that it is “both the right and the duty of journalists to provide fair, objective and well-funded information.” The 1996 Broadcasting Act prescribed in a similar vein that “information must be plural, factual, timely, objective and balanced.”

There are several reasons why the liberal (Anglo-American, objective, fact-based, neutral, fair, balanced or internally plural) tradition of journalism has become a model to follow in Hungary. After the rise of satellite news television channels such as CNN International and BBC World in the late 1980s, the standards of Anglo-American journalism became widely known across the globe (Bayer, 2005). During the transformation years, many journalists in Hungary wanted to break away from the propaganda model of the party state (Sipos, 2013). In the 1990s,

multinational companies launched new outlets on the Hungarian market, bringing along their own professional ethics and practices (Zöldi, 2001; Sipos, 2010). Political elites made an attempt to transform state broadcasters into public service broadcasters, following the BBC model (Bayer, 2010).

However, while codes of ethics and laws promoted the objectivity doctrine, most news outlets continued to offer engaged accounts of political events and issues in Hungary. As Lázár (1992) observed in the early 1990s, “the *one-party* model of the press has not disappeared completely but has been transformed into a *multi-party* model that is still far away from the *nonpartisan* model of the press.” Vajda and Kaposi (2001) noted a decade later that the Western standards of journalism were unimplemented in the newsrooms. Another decade on, Sipos (2010) found that editorial boards were still lacking autonomy vis-à-vis political institutions.

With the adoption of media regulation safeguarding media freedom and the privatization of the media, the legal and economic conditions occurred to favor the professionalization of journalism in Central and Eastern Europe, but, as Lauk (2009) observes, efforts to adopt the liberal model have failed throughout the region. In the Czech Republic and in Slovakia, journalism evinces the failure of the liberal concept of the press, which is “reflected in a lack of impartiality” (Školkaý, 2001, p. 116). In Poland, the Media Charter of Ethics prescribes the standards of objectivity, but most journalists continue to “represent partisan politician viewpoints” (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2012, pp. 41–43). In Moldova and in Romania, despite attempts to adopt the standards of the liberal model of journalism, there still is a “discrepancy between professional ideology and real journalistic practice” (Milewski et al., 2014, p. 108). In the Baltic states, “political and economic forces [...] interfere with editorial independence and autonomy” (Balčytienė, 2012, p. 62). There are, however, differences between the former communist countries; neutrality-seeking journalism has taken deeper roots in Poland than in Romania and in Moldova, for example (Milewski et al., 2014).

In Hungary and in many other Central and Eastern European countries, the line between news and views is often blurred; outlets routinely use double standards when reporting on political events, and tend to offer a black-and-white picture of the real world (Bajomi-Lázár & Sükösd, 2008). While the majority of news outlets are now organizationally independent from parties, many are still informally linked to parties via owners. For example, the broadsheet Magyar Hírlap, owned by Gábor Széles, is according to its headline a “civic forum for public affairs,” but has in real life been supporting the Fidesz/Christian Democrats party alliance for years (Štětka, 2012). Many journalists have become part of the political and business client systems, and act like “party soldiers” rather than “democracy watchdogs.” For example, the news site Pesti Srácok made a deal with the Ministry of Agriculture: in exchange for financial support, the editors sent over articles for

approval to the ministry before publication.<sup>1</sup> Advertorial and kompromat are not specifically Hungarian phenomena, but are practiced across Central and Eastern Europe (Örnebring, 2012). Journalism organizations typically do not represent the entire profession in an effort to jointly protect journalists vis-à-vis political and business pressures, but only parts of the community (Lauk, 2009).

The professionalization of journalism has been interrupted in Hungary and in many other countries in the region. The term “professionalization” is used here in line with Chalaby’s oft-quoted article (1996) to describe the process whereby journalism emerges as an autonomous profession independent from both politics and literature, and creates its own discursive standards. It has been an open-ended — i.e., non-irreversible and non-linear — process even in the Anglo-American world, where the ideal of neutrality first emerged. In the United States, neutrality-seeking journalism prevailed mainly in politically peaceful, economically prosperous and ideologically consensual periods, while engaged journalism has re-emerged in times of political conflict such as the Civil War, for example. In the United Kingdom, different news outlets follow different norms: the broadcast media are more watchful of the ideal of neutrality than the printed press. Some radio stations and television channels in the US such as Fox News have been covering politics in an increasingly engaged manner since the abolition of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987, while the law still requires UK broadcasters to observe the principle of neutrality. Even though journalism practices in these countries are admittedly heterogeneous, researchers usually consider the Anglo-American countries as a single model, arguing that neutrality-seeking journalism has taken deeper roots there than in continental Western Europe that has historically evinced a more manifest tradition of engaged journalism. In other words, differences *within* the Anglo-American region are lesser than differences *between* the Anglo-American and the continental countries. The notion of journalism models — or of media systems, in a wider sense — is nonetheless problematic (see Rantanen, 2013). It is for this reason that many analysts prefer to use the terms “ideal types,” “concepts,” “approaches,” “traditions,” “models,” “paradigms” or “practices,” and note that these can be linked to particular countries and regions only at the price of simplification.

The term “professionalization” is thus not used in the normative sense in this paper: it does not imply that neutrality-seeking journalism is better than engaged journalism. In fact, it may be misleading to make universally valid normative statements about journalism, as the ideal of journalism may be dependent on the societal and political context of the day. I will therefore suggest that engaged journalism may under some circumstances be more apt to meet audience needs than neutrality-seeking journalism.

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<sup>1</sup> See the article of the investigative news portal [atlatszo.hu](http://blog.atlatszo.hu). Retrieved February 21, 2016 from <http://blog.atlatszo.hu/2016/02/a-szponzoralt-cikkek-tartalmat-is-egyezetteti-a-pestisracok-a-miniszteriummal/>.

The professionalization of journalism has been interrupted in Hungary and in many other Central and Eastern European countries because the conditions for the adoption of neutrality-seeking journalism practices have been missing (Lauk, 2009). It is difficult, if not impossible, to transplant one element of a complex media system such as the objectivity doctrine into a different one. The dualism of the theory of neutrality-seeking and of the practice of engaged journalism is a typical outcome of “mimetic transplantation” (cf. Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2008, p. 18). One of the key conditions needed for professionalization but missing in much of Central and Eastern Europe is a robust media market. There is no political independence without economic independence. As Pereira observes, the size of the press market and the level of journalistic professionalization are statistically related, as “a small market [...] poses financial challenges to the long-term survival of newspapers, and weakens their capacity to resist political pressures” (Pereira, 2015, p. 235). The press in Hungary and in other countries of the region had been, until the late 1980s, a part of the planned economy and hence mainly subsidized by the state. Even though the mechanisms of the market economy have gained ground in the past 25 years, audience and advertising markets are still limited (Poland being a notable exception with a population of nearly 40 million). With no substantial market income, many news outlets must rely on the financial support of parties and the government, often channeled to them in the form of advertisements. Political support has a price that outlets must pay in terms of engaged reporting.

In addition to market conditions, many other factors may explain the dominance of different journalism practices in different media systems. This paper attempts to identify these in an effort to answer the question of why the professionalization of journalism has been interrupted in Hungary. It does so by offering an overview of the comparative literature on factors shaping journalism practices in different media systems and by placing Hungary on the map. Then it suggests that different audience needs may be an additional factor explaining the dominance of different journalism practices in different media systems, with the public in transition societies seeking confirmation rather than information when using the media.

## **TRADITIONS OF DEMOCRATIC JOURNALISM: A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

What explains the emergence and dominance of different journalism practices in different media systems? For any attempt to answer this question, first a brief and non-exhaustive overview of the comparative media systems literature is in order.

Siebert, Peterson and Schramm argue in their famous book *Four Theories of the Press* that “the press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates” (1956/1963, p. 1), that is, history matters as a key explanatory variable. They distinguish between the authoritarian and the libertarian theories of the press as two base models. These are chiefly rooted in dif-

ferent philosophies or “basic beliefs and assumptions” (1956/1963, p. 2) about the relationship between the state and its subjects or citizens. The authoritarian theory of the press, which emerged on a massive scale after the invention of printing throughout Europe, suggests that the public is immature and hence unable to make well-founded decisions; people need guidance by their wise superiors who should decide about what they should read and how they should understand it. It follows that newspapers must orientate their readers. By contrast, the libertarian theory, which emerged during the enlightenment in England and in America, considers man a rational being capable of making mature decisions. Therefore the primary role of the press is to inform neutrally. The authors also describe the social responsibility theory and the Soviet theory as the most widespread mutations of the two base models.

Seymour-Ure (1974, p. 157) observes that “there have been very obvious historical associations between press and party systems.” Journalism is, therefore, marked by the cleavages dividing society — just like the party system. In democratic societies, both newspapers and parties mediate the views and interests of citizens’ different groups to the state. He introduces the concept of political parallelism, defined as a connection between individual papers and parties, as well as one between the range of papers and the range of parties, and distinguishes between high, medium and low parallelism when describing how more partisan and more autonomous newspapers relate to political parties. He notes that the media are also affected by political culture, including society’s dominant views on whether newspapers should speak for power holders, parties, owners, or voters — a view largely in line with Siebert et al.’s theory mentioned above. Geography, political structures, and cultural differences, including religious, ethnic, and linguistic cleavages, are also reflected in media systems and explain whether national or regional outlets dominate the media landscape. Economic factors play a part, too: low national gross product is conducive to weak press markets and hence few titles, while high national gross product leads to robust press markets and many titles.

In a 1995 study on “Professional Journalism and Civil Society,” Høyer and Lauk suggest that there may be a connection between two-party systems and Anglo-American journalism, as well as between multi-party systems and Scandinavian journalism. Journalists subscribing to Anglo-American standards avoid any kind of ideological attachment that would prevent them from providing “objective” reporting, while those following the Scandinavian standards fight for a political, social or religious cause, which is often also included in the program of a party. In Seymour-Ure’s terms, this would mean that Anglo-American journalism evinces low, while Scandinavian journalism high political parallelism. Høyer and Lauk also refer to the Soviet model as yet another journalism paradigm, largely identical with Siebert et al.’s Soviet theory of the press. (This latter model is of course highly different from those in democratic political systems, and will no longer be discussed in this paper.)



Chalaby observes similar differences between journalism traditions in his 1996 study on “Journalism as an Anglo-American Invention,” comparing Anglo-American and French journalism practices between the 1830s and 1920s (but he does not refer to the Høyer-Lauk paper, which was first published in Hungarian, and only in 2003 in English). In the beginning, newspapers were closely linked with political parties in both the UK/US and in France. During the 19th century, however, Anglo-American newspapers began to distance themselves from parties, to offer an internal pluralism of views, to focus on facts, and to dissociate news and views, while the French press continued to report selectively on the events of the day, to mix news with views, to offer more opinion articles, and to report in an engaged, moralizing and emotional manner. The professionalization of journalism began in the first half of the 19th century in the UK and the US, where it became an autonomous profession with its own discursive standards, values, practices and identities. By contrast, in France it was “not a profession but a provisional occupation” (Chalaby, 1996, p. 314), often practiced by writers and politicians, and professionalization began only at the very end of the 19th century.

Chalaby mainly attributes the professionalization of journalism in the UK and the US to the early beginning of the industrial revolution, which had accelerated urbanization and triggered the invention of steam printing. Urbanization created mass audiences, and steam printing enabled mass production, which led to the emergence of robust press markets. By contrast, the industrial revolution arrived later in France, the economy developed at a slower pace, and hence the press market was not robust enough to sustain independent titles. As a result, newspapers had to rely on subsidies granted by parties and by the government.

An early industrial revolution in the UK and the US also strengthened the middle classes, and hence economic differences were less marked than elsewhere; centrist political parties and moderate pluralism became the rule. In France, by contrast, the middle classes were weaker and economic differences were deeper; parties covered a wide ideological spectrum ranging from communism to royalism, polarized pluralism being the rule. Economic, political and ideological differences culminated in a series of “particularly intense class struggles” (Chalaby, 1996, p. 319) such as the 1848 February Revolution and the 1871 Paris Commune. Moderate pluralism is conducive to low, while polarized pluralism to high political parallelism.

Hallin and Mancini (2004) look at established Western democracies in their landmark book *Comparing Media Systems*, and identify three media models. The Liberal or North Atlantic system is largely identical with Siebert et al.’s libertarian theory of the press, including its mutation, the social responsibility model. In terms of journalism practices, it is an equivalent to the Anglo-American model described by Hoyer and Lauk as well as Chalaby. Hallin and Mancini do not treat continental Western Europe as one single media system but make a further

distinction between the Polarized Pluralist or Mediterranean and the Democratic Corporatist or North/Central European media systems. Their Mediterranean system is largely similar to Chalaby's French model of journalism, and their North/Central European system to Høyer and Lauk's Scandinavian model. Qualities of journalism are described in all three systems along two variables, including political parallelism (originally introduced by Seymour-Ure) and professionalization (originally introduced by Chalaby). Historically, parallelism has been high in both the Mediterranean and the North/Central European countries, but professionalization has been low in the former and high in the latter. This difference is rooted in variations in political culture: interest groups tend to undertake conflict in the Mediterranean countries, while they seek consensus in the North/Central European countries.

In search of an explanation for the dominance of different journalism practices in the three media systems, Hallin and Mancini also list early vs. late industrialization, strong vs. weak middle classes, and moderate vs. polarized pluralism in the political sphere. Early urbanization and the early rise of the middle classes explain why the professionalization of journalism is more advanced in the North/Central European countries than in the Mediterranean ones.

Hallin and Mancini stress the role of two additional factors. Religion is key: where Protestantism was strong, the public learned to read early; hence conditions in the North-Atlantic and the North/Central European countries were favorable for mass audiences to emerge, and newspaper circulation figures have been higher than in the Mediterranean countries, where Catholicism prevailed. Weak press markets may hence also explain why the professionalization of journalism was less advanced in the Mediterranean countries. Rational-legal authority is another explanatory factor: a professional and apolitical public administration is conducive to the rise of professional and politically more neutral journalism, because journalists too consider themselves public servants. By contrast, clientelism leads to engaged journalism, with journalists promoting causes and parties.

Chalaby calls journalism an "Anglo-American invention" because its standards have been, since the end of the 19th century, increasingly recognized in France (and, one might add, in other continental countries), which is indicated, among other things, by the English words "interview" and "reporter" becoming part of the French language (and of a number of other languages, including Hungarian). He calls the English language "the best 'media language'" (Chalaby, 1996, p. 322) because of its monosyllabic words and precise vocabulary. The adoption of Anglo-American journalism standards, he adds, was also eased by the leading geopolitical role of the UK and the US during the 20th century.

The Anglo-American tradition began to gain ground in France, according to Chalaby, in 1896 with the launch of the daily *Le Matin*, a newspaper founded by American journalists in Paris. Høyer (1998) observes that the beginnings of professionalization can be traced back to the early 20th century in Denmark, Sweden,

and Norway. Hallin and Mancini (2004, p. 251) also observe “the triumph of the liberal model.” They argue that engaged journalism is on the decline in both the Mediterranean and the North/Central European countries, while neutrality-seeking (or, as they put it, “commercial”) outlets are on the rise. This, they explain, may partly be attributed to European integration, as efforts to establish a common market favor European-level (i.e., politically independent) media empires, and partly to the decline of the traditional mass party, that is, the personalization, presidentialization and professionalization of politics, which has undermined traditional party/newspaper affiliations.

Later, however, Hallin and Mancini suggest in their 2012 book *Comparing Media Systems Beyond the Western World*, mapping non-Western European media systems in a series of chapters delivered by different authors, that the triumph of the North-Atlantic model is not as self-evident as it may seem at first sight. In fact, although no global data are available, one could suggest that engaged journalism is the rule to date in the vast majority of the world’s countries, with only some of the “Western” democracies evincing neutrality-seeking journalism.

## **PLACING HUNGARY ON THE MAP OF MEDIA SYSTEMS**

What lessons do these observations focusing on Western Europe and the United States offer with regard to Hungary and other countries in Central and Eastern Europe? By placing Hungary and other former communist countries on the map of media systems, these findings may help to answer the question of why journalism professionalization has been interrupted.

Since the political transformations starting in around 1989, analysts have tried to describe media systems in Central and Eastern Europe in a comparative perspective, observing that a process of “Italianisation” (Splichal, 1994), “Berlusconization” (Wyka, 2007) or “Iberianization” (Pereira, 2015) has been going on. As Jakubowicz (2008, p. 118) put it, “contrary to what an encyclopedia may tell you, post-communist countries appear to be located — figuratively at least — around the Mediterranean.” In terms of the media systems indicators introduced by Hallin and Mancini, Central and Eastern European countries appear to be most similar to Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and, to some extent, France, with underdeveloped press markets, low levels of journalistic professionalization, high levels of political parallelism, and high levels of intervention by the state (e.g. Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2008), Estonia and Poland being exceptions with higher levels of journalistic professionalization and more developed press markets (MDCEE, 2010–2012). Further similarities between the two regions include the predominance of television over newspapers, the domination of commercial broadcasters over public service television, a recurring pro-government political bias on public service television, and the use of quality newspapers as a means of elite-to-elite communication (Pereira, 2015).



According to Sipos (2010, p. 114), Hungary has been “Italianized” in that “the media have been subdued [...] to political loyalties.” To this, one might add that the media system in Hungary evinces certain similarities with other media systems, too. The boards of trustees of the public service broadcasters included, in addition to the nominees of political parties, those of civil society until 2010, just like in the North/Central European countries; in fact, the 1996 Broadcasting Act was largely based on the German and Austrian experiences. Also, some news outlets with no party political loyalties, including tabloid newspapers (that are non-existent in the Mediterranean countries), apolitical regional dailies and, more recently, the nationwide commercial television channel RTL Klub, abide by the liberal standards of journalism, just like many outlets in the North-Atlantic countries do. (Since the government change in 2010, Hungary’s neo-authoritarian government has begun to transform the country’s media system on the basis of the Russian model, that is, “Berlusconization” has given way to “Putinization” [see Sükösd, 2014]. Similar developments may be observed in Poland since the coming into office of the PiS party in 2015. Whether these are long-term processes or just an episode may be too early to tell as yet.)

Also, unlike the Mediterranean countries, those in Central and Eastern Europe have undergone sudden and dramatic — and, one might add, rather frequent — political and economic changes, a history of foreign domination, including the legacy of communism (Hallin & Mancini, 2013), as well as the politicization of the state by interest groups, political instability, and permanently changing legislative frameworks (Mancini, 2015).

However, analysts are divided over whether Central and Eastern Europe as such constitutes one single media system or not. It is frequently argued that, despite a common legacy of communism, the region’s countries evince to date a pattern of “multiple post-Communisms” (Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2008, p. 25). According to Mancini, Central and Eastern Europe constitutes a hybrid model, because “the importation of external habits and procedures [from Western Europe] has been deeply influenced by the specific conditions already existing in each country [in Central and Eastern Europe]” (Mancini, 2015, p. 33). For example, the level of media freedom varies greatly across the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and is generally higher in the north than in the south.

Despite the differences between the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, however, journalism practices appear to be highly similar in many of the region’s countries, especially in terms of the prevalence of the engaged tradition of reporting. Differences within the Central and Eastern European region are in this respect lesser than differences between the region as a whole and other regions (and are certainly no greater than those between the journalism practices of the United Kingdom and of the United States). While the thesis of “multiple post-communisms” may hold in many respects, it does not appear to be valid when it comes to journalism.

If media and political systems in Hungary and other countries in the region share many similarities with those in Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain and, to some extent, France, then the interrupted professionalization of journalism may be attributed to similar factors as in the Mediterranean region. These may include a weak legacy of libertarian philosophy, a belated industrial revolution and technological development, a history of strong Catholicism (even though Catholicism is not as important in Hungary as in Italy), poor economic performance and unsustainable press markets, as well as weak middle classes.

Frequent political changes may have played an equally important part, as these were usually coupled with ideological changes: new power holders tried to impose their ideology on society and hence politically instrumentalized the media (Szabó, 1988), while curtailing journalists' autonomy. Frequent changes in the political system may also enhance clientelistic practices, including in the media, with the emerging political elites trying to delegate their clients into decision-making positions. This, in turn, may foster engaged journalism.

Besides, as Lauk observes (2008), journalists have played an important part in maintaining and promoting national identity under foreign occupation. Journalism was often considered a vehicle of national culture and language, and journalists regarded themselves as public intellectuals rather than public servants, whose tradition has persisted and has been another obstacle to professionalization.

Further, foreign domination and the resulting exploitation of domestic economies by foreign powers may have hindered the development of the middle classes in many of these countries. The lack of strong middle classes, in turn, has been conducive to social inequalities in economic and to polarized pluralism in political terms — another condition that is favorable for engaged journalism to persist.

Finally, most of the Polarized Pluralist and Democratic Corporatist countries — including Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Sweden — have introduced press subsidies systems in order to improve the financial autonomy and hence the political independence of newspapers, even though some of these countries have also maintained special funds in support of the party press (Humphreys, 1996). These funds may have contributed to the adoption of the liberal practices of journalism across continental Western Europe. By contrast, neither in Hungary nor in other countries of the region have such press funds been available (MDCEE, 2010–2012), as the state has not been actively engaged in the promotion of journalistic professionalization. At the same time, as the example of Hungary suggests, the favoritist distribution of state advertising, distinguishing between outlets on the basis of political loyalties (Lansner, 2016) may have maintained the tradition of engaged reporting.

The rest of this paper suggests that the interrupted professionalization of journalism in Hungary and in other countries of the region may also be attributed to a factor specific to transition societies, and namely recurring political and ideological uncertainty.

## JOURNALISM AND AUDIENCE NEEDS

Preuško et al. (2013) note that comparative media research has paid little attention to audiences, even though uses of the media have a major impact on media systems. Their empirical findings reveal that audiences in many Central and Eastern European countries, including in Hungary, spend relatively little time listening to the radio, reading newspapers and using the web — a pattern that is similar to that in the Mediterranean region. Yet their analysis only looks into audiences' choices, but does not explore what needs people use the media to meet.

It may be the case, though, that audience needs vary across media systems, and that the needs of the audiences in Hungary and in other Central and Eastern European countries may be an additional factor explaining the persistence of engaged journalism. In the political and societal context of young democracies, audiences may expect news media to play a somewhat different role than in old democracies.

Carey makes a distinction in his 1989 book *Communication as Culture* between communication-as-transmission models that focus on the transmission of information, and communication-as-ritual models that view reading a newspaper chiefly as a situation in which nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed. The news offers drama that describes the world in terms of a permanent fight between “Good” and “Evil.” Media rituals, like religious ones, reassure people who feel lost in a world perceived chaotic, and lead them from “Chaos” into “Order.” The media provide them with values they can subscribe to, virtual communities they can join, and identities they can undertake.

Linking the base models of democratic journalism and of communication, a parallel can be drawn between neutrality-seeking journalism and the communication-as-transmission model, as well as between engaged journalism and the communication-as-ritual model. Engaged reporting meets an existing cognitive need. Reading, watching and listening to the news may be seen as a ritual that helps users orientate themselves. The more engaged a news outlet, the more it meets this cognitive need — and the less it meets the traditional requirement, formulated in the spirit of the communication-as-transmission model, that it should neutrally inform the public.

The two base models of communication are not mutually exclusive but overlap; the communication-as-transmission model focuses on the rational, while the communication-as-ritual model on the emotional aspect of communication. Uses of the media for the purpose of confirmation are universal phenomena. It can, however, be suggested that in older democracies, where the political landscape evinces moderate pluralism and there is wide-scale consensus regarding the major societal values, audiences are more likely to use the media to gather information, which favors neutrality-seeking journalism. By contrast, in younger democracies, where the political sphere evinces polarized pluralism (as in Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, among other countries, see Enyedi & Bértoa, 2010), and where

societies have undergone multiple changes since the political transformations starting in the late 1980s, there are more marked political and ideological conflicts. According to Balčytienė, Lauk and Głowacki,

a changing society is characterized by its lack of a solid social or ideological base — in times and conditions of change all conflicting views and criteria are bound to exist next to each other [...] finding consensus on important public issues becomes increasingly problematic [...] All these [...] social trends significantly contribute to increasing political divergence and fragmentation and create a heterogeneous and socially polarized picture in young CEE democracies. (2014, pp. 10–11)

Also, the regulatory role of the state has been largely overtaken by market forces on the labor market and in the health care system, generating a sense of uncertainty and insecurity among the public (Balčytienė et al., 2014). Political polarization has been coupled with economic polarization. In the transition societies of Central and Eastern Europe, including in Hungary, a country that underwent ten different political regimes during the 20th century (cf. Szabó, 1988), audiences may be more responsive to confirmation than to information. This context may favor engaged journalism. Arguably, the more divided and insecure a society, the more the ritual function of the media is needed, because people are more likely to seek orientation. The media must play by the rules of competition, as editorial boards try to make a living on the market. If they fail to observe people's spoken or unspoken expectations, they will go bankrupt. It is in their best interest to meet their audiences' needs, including the need for confirmation.

While it may be difficult to get an empirically based representative picture of how audiences in general use the news media in Hungary, an email communication sent to the author of this paper on 12 February 2016 by Ágnes Lampé, journalist of the markedly left-liberal weekly 168 Óra, may be worth quoting as an illustration of audience expectations:

Whenever our newspaper came out with the portrait of a politician of the [right-conservative] Fidesz party on its front page, our circulation figures fell. [A reader once asked me,] “Why interview these idiots all the time? [...] Who wants to know their opinions? All they do is lie, anyway.” [If, however, the representative of Fidesz] does not perform well in the interview, readers are quite happy. Then I get approving comments, and readers do not mind the publication of the interview. Rather, they get relaxed as they feel confirmed that their own beliefs or political views are correct. (Lampé, 2016)

A similar statement has been made by Ottó Gajdics, editor-in-chief of the right/conservative talk radio Karc FM. As he put it in an interview,

people like the outlet that transmits their own thoughts. Should one try to convince them that their pre-conceptions are mistaken, they would be frustrated. [...] Should I try to invite a representative of the other [political] side for an interview, listeners would go mad and suggest no one is interested in all the nonsense he or she has to say. So I just would not invite him or her. Not because it is not important, but because I do not want to lose my listeners. (Gajdics, 2016)

In short, the persistence of engaged journalism in Hungary and in many of the countries of Central/Eastern Europe may also be attributed to the audiences' need for confirmation, which in turn may be explained by a lack of firm societal values, including a political and ideological consensus.

It should follow that normative standards of journalism may have no universal appeal, but should be formulated in line with the specific societal and political circumstances in each country. In transition societies, journalists might better meet their social mandate by supporting certain causes or parties than by reporting neutrally. This is, however, not to say that controversial practices such as advertorial and compromat should also be acknowledged as legitimate.

## **SUMMARY AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

This paper asked the question of why the professionalization of journalism has been interrupted in Hungary and in many other Central and Eastern European countries. It argued that these countries share a number of similarities with those in the Mediterranean region in terms of journalism culture. The interrupted professionalization of journalism in the two regions may hence have similar explanations, including society's dominant authoritarian views of the role of the media, weak press markets, the late advance of the industrial revolution, weak middle classes, foreign occupation and the role of journalists in preserving national culture, a legacy of Catholicism, and clientelism.

In addition to the above, audience needs may also shape journalism practices. People do not only expect information but also confirmation. The more engaged a news outlet, the more it meets the need for confirmation, and the more insecure a society — that is, the younger a democracy — the more need there is for engaged news outlets. A causal link between swiftly changing ideological values and an increased need for engaged journalism that provides audiences with confirmation may be difficult to empirically demonstrate, yet it may arguably be another factor that explains the persistence of engaged journalism in many of the young democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, including in Hungary.

While there may be little doubt that journalists must be perceptive of audience needs on plural media markets, comparative empirical research is needed to establish whether audiences in Hungary and in other Central and Eastern European countries expect more confirmation from the media than those in the Anglo-American world. This could possibly be done by a content analysis of comments posted by readers under similar news items. Such a research should look into how emotional or rational these comments are, to what extent they focus on the subject matter or attack the other commenters' personality in countries where engaged and where neutrality-seeking journalism practices dominate.



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