Media Transformation and Political Marketing in the Post-Communist World

Peter Gross & Karol Jakubowicz (Eds.), **Media Transformations in the Post-Communist World**, Lexington Books, 2012, 236 pp., $70.00 (hardcover).
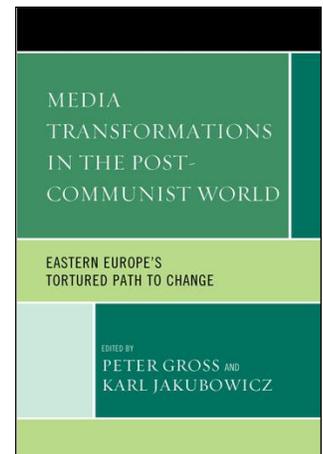
Jennifer Lees-Marshment, Jesper Stromback, & Chris Rudd (Eds.), **Global Political Marketing**, Routledge, 2009, 320 pp., $49.99 (paperback).

Josef Trappel, Hannu Nieminen, & Lars Nord (Eds.), **The Media for Democracy Monitor: A Cross National Study of Leading News Media**, Nordicom, 2011, 366 pp., (price N/A).

Reviewed by
Mark Hannah
University of Southern California

Recent popular uprisings and political revolutions in the Middle East have been analyzed, both in the academic literature and the popular press, through the lens of media transformation. Communication and international relations scholars are investigating the emerging media systems that likely contributed to the so-called "Arab Spring," including the catalytic influence of social media and the disruption of state-run media monopolies by pan-Arab satellite television channels. The question of whether and how these post-revolutionary governments will transform—and be transformed by—their respective media systems arises (Feuilherade, 2011), and the broader interrelation between political institutions and media systems has renewed relevance. Fortunately, a few recent books present useful theoretical and empirical research on this topic in the context of a prior wave of geopolitical transition: the fall of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe.

In *Media Transformations in the Post-Communist World*, editors Peter Gross and Karol Jakubowicz set out to answer the questions, "Is the post-Communist transition and transformation over? When can it be considered to be over?" Their and their contributors' analyses are wide-ranging and thoughtful, though perhaps less existential and more retrospective than those two questions might suggest. In the introductory chapter, Gross and Jakubowicz acknowledge the disparate sociopolitical, economic, and cultural conditions under which media liberalization took place in that part of the world. The recent history of feudal and autocratic regimes was bound to produce a public culture that lacked a solid foundation for media freedom and plurality. On the media side, in the immediate wake of liberalization, thousands of aspiring journalists were "ready to imitate Western styles [of journalism] that they hardly knew or fully understood, and others who considered journalism simply an avenue for self-expression or indeed political advocacy" (p. 6).

Accounting for this underdeveloped state of journalistic professionalism in Central and Eastern Europe is the agenda of the chapter by Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini (authors of the widely respected *Comparing Media Systems*). Just as in their book, Hallin and Mancini emphasize a "path dependent" transition, in which the legacy of Communist media models leaves residual tendencies in the newly democratic arrangement. Journalists' ardent "civic attitudes," originally the basis of state-supportive media activities, were not quashed so much as redirected toward support for specific partisan or party causes. Further complicating the transition were (and *are*) the unpredictable role of foreign influence and ownership in the new Eastern European media systems, the "weakness of civil society" in the region, and the "political demobilization of society following the initial transition period," all along with an attendant dip in public interest in political life (p. 27).

The later chapters on the introduction of digital and participatory media into the post-Communist world are particularly elucidating. These new media were still inchoate during the political transitions, so democratization didn't immediately precipitate the introduction of digital media so much as it created the conditions in which it could eventually arise a decade later. As John Parris-Sprowl observes, "by importing the technology, the post-Communist countries were allowing in the basis for a potential radical restructuring of the media into something extremely difficult to control" (p. 93). It occurs to this reviewer that user-generated decentralization could be considered a third phase of media transformation—following liberalization and deregulation—and perhaps is the most democratizing of the three. But that democratization could have an unanticipated dark side. After documenting the dearth of attention being given to public service media online, Inka Salovaara-Moring notes that the introduction of digital media "holds potential for an unprecedented variety of voices and services, but it also gives free rein to corporate-driven and entertainment-led modification of Central and Eastern European media systems" (p. 111).

Another "dark side" topic, raised by Alina Mungiu-Pippidi in her chapter, "Freedom without Impartiality," is outright corruption and media capture (i.e., the process by which liberated media do not become fully autonomous and remain beholden to long-held associations and agendas). Citing a survey by Freedom House's Nations in Transit program, which found nine countries in the region declining in media independence ratings in 2008, Mungiu-Pippidi theorizes the ways in which limited competition (as opposed to open competition) can preclude true media pluralism and lead to media capture—to a sort of half-baked, quasi-free press. She points to three variables that may predict the success of the full transition to a free media operating in a free market: the level of economic and structural development (which contributes to a public that demands government accountability), the strength of the Communist legacy (as a history of strict government censorship may yield a culture of self-censorship), and the level of governmental intervention (where "state subsidies, debt bailouts, preferential distribution of state advertising and tax breaks for media owners are traded in exchange for favorable treatment of the media," p. 42). Media capture is not without historical precedent in the West. Mungiu-Pippidi brings up Tammany Hall as a case study in corruption and media capture (even if it wasn't, in a strict sense, a product of a fraught political transition). The primary upshot of this tale, which she presumably hopes will be a model for Eastern Europe, is that systemic corruption can be curbed only when minority, market-owned media can document corruption and provoke public outrage.

In a chapter by Peter Bajomi-Lazar, the relationship between politicians and the media in the post-Communist media system is expanded upon, with a focus on fundamental changes to the process of political communication. The historical command-and-control tactics of political propaganda are no longer applicable in a democratic media environment, so propaganda has been eclipsed by modern methods of "political marketing." In short, Bajomi-Lazar observes a paradigm shift from an environment in which the media had to be responsive to political elites, to one in which political elites have to be responsive to the media and, in turn, to its audience (i.e., voters). Characterizing three phases of communication in the West as pre-modern (low-budget, grassroots), modern (the introduction of television and public opinion polls), and postmodern ("multilevel dissemination of diversified messages through cable television and on the Internet"), Bajomi-Lazar observes the following:

> [N]o such organic development could take place in the countries of Central and   Eastern Europe, where free and plural political competition and media have no tradition,   except for brief periods. As a result, a few years after the political transformations of 1989–1991, the techniques of pre-modern, modern and postmodern campaigns were adopted roughly simultaneously, and seem to have coexisted to date in the region. (p. 56)

It's worth noting that these three phases of political communication aren't discrete and, indeed, are currently coincident in the United States and Western Europe as well. It's their simultaneous introduction to Central and Eastern Europe that may have been problematic, as these phases may be interpreted as cumulative, with each one refining and expanding upon the strategies and tactics of the previous phase. One can imagine how, without an established capability in public opinion polling or deep experience with grassroots mobilization, political marketing's microtargeting initiatives could be haphazardly designed or executed.

Scholars interested in this topic would be wise to pick up a copy of **Global Political Marketing**, edited by Jennifer Lees-Marshment, Jesper Stromback, and Chris Rudd. Political marketing, as a subfield, has emerged as political communication activities have increasingly come to resemble—and be able to be understood in relation to—the tactics of commercial marketing. Though there are a number of theories that account for these trends, the Lees-Marshment POP-SOP-MOP framework (which describes product-oriented, sales-oriented, and market-oriented parties, respectively) is used for the country-by-country empirical analysis contained within this book. The type of orientation reflects both the extent to which parties are attentive and responsive to public opinion and, relatedly, the quality of their communication. The product-oriented parties (POP) are the crudest, most ideological, and most "devoid of awareness and utilization of communication techniques and market intelligence" (p. 9). The sales-oriented parties (SOP) use market intelligence not necessarily to develop political platforms, but to persuade voters to subscribe to them. The market-oriented parties (MOP) are the most attuned to voter knowledge and opinion, using ideology merely as a means to create solutions to identified public opinion, and shaping themselves to public opinion, rather than vice versa.

This classification provides clean ways of conceptualizing an otherwise complex continuum of political marketing positions, although there have been several criticisms of the model, as Lees-Marshment herself acknowledges (see Ormrod, 2006, for more details). The emphasis on party politics over candidate- or campaign-centered politics is one possible challenge that comes to mind while reading. Jesper Stromback's chapter presents a framework for comparing the three orientations. He acknowledges the "sharp decrease" in party identification in many countries, but suggests that, "when fewer people identify with a party, the incentive to become market-oriented is much stronger, both because parties in such a situation cannot take their own voters for granted and because they might be able to win new voters" (p. 23). This explanation seems, almost paradoxically, to reinforce the centrality of the party in response to dwindling party affiliation. An alternative conclusion might be that these electoral market dynamics have created a demand not for more market-oriented political parties, but for candidates, market-oriented or otherwise, who entrepreneurially defy or transcend party constraints. But analyzing the competitive machinations of political markets is a messy business, and narrower microeconomic approaches to political marketing theories can get to be dubious and downright dismal.
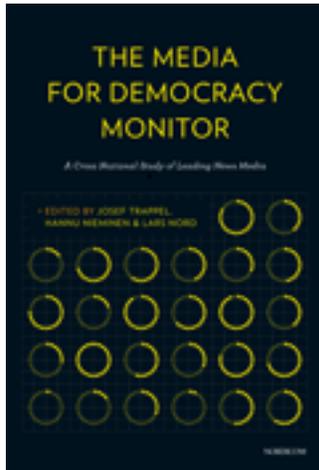
Global Political Marketing includes analyses of several countries spanning nearly every continent, including two representatives of post-Communist countries in Central Europe: Hungary and the Czech Republic. Using the Lees-Marshment framework to analyze the major political parties of each of these, the contributors conclude that Hungary's political system fosters sales-oriented parties, while Czech politics are increasingly market-oriented.

In Hungary, where there's been a concentration of political parties in recent years, "parties have grown more and more independent of the needs and wants of the people" (p. 155). The contributors partially attribute this trend to a media landscape that is "dominated by players who are supporting either the left or the right" in explicit or tacit ways (ibid.). This partisan media landscape is certainly consistent with—and explained by—the contextualization of the region's political transitions provided by *Media Transformations in the Post-Communist World*. In this light, a sort of vicious cycle emerges as a fraught transition of a political system produces a politically hampered journalistic culture that, in turn, impedes a fully free electoral market (i.e., one in which voters' demands inform party platforms).

In stark contrast to Hungary stands the Czech Republic, a country that has only held five parliamentary elections since the fall of Communism, but which is appraised by the contributors as having achieved a market-oriented party system. Despite this, the five-party, multi-polar political system begets coalition governments, and the imperatives of coalition negotiations sometimes limit parties' abilities to deliver on voter demands (i.e., their market responsiveness). The researchers' empirical analysis of recent elections leads them to their conclusion that "the trend toward professionalization has started and political marketing techniques can be expected to be used more in the future" (p. 172). They called out the Social Democrats as the "first party in the country to base its campaign strategy, message, and programmatic offering on a large-scale survey of voters" (ibid.). It's not surprising, based on this attentiveness to voter opinion, that the media transformation and democratization in the Czech Republic was more complete. The authors call it a "radical change," stating that, after the fall of Communism, "the media started to play the role of the 'guardians of democracy'" (p. 160). The Czech media's commitment to non-partisan

neutrality and professionalism reportedly continues through the height of election season, and this restraint likely enables a freer political marketplace.

This relationship between the quality of a country's media system and the quality of its democratic government is the foundation of **The Media for Democracy Monitor: A Cross National Study of Leading News Media**, edited by Josef Trappel, Hannu Nieminen, and Lars Nord. Whereas *Global Political Marketing* presents a theoretical framework for empirically analyzing global political marketing activities targeted at their respective media, this book reciprocally presents a model for evaluating the quality of global media systems that enable democratic governance. The editors create a "Media for Democracy Monitor" (MDM) that is designed to look not at the content produced by media organizations (the more common type of media monitoring), but at the structural features of the production and distribution processes.

Developing a universal metric for evaluating the structural and functional success of various media systems in their democratic roles is an ambitious endeavor. The MDM translates McQuail's (2009) four roles of the news media in a democracy—monitorial (information provision), facilitative (creation of a public space), radical (publicizing injustice or abuse), and collaborative (cooperation with the state in the case of a shared national interest)—and translates them into a "root concept" for the MDM. This root concept has three primary concepts: freedom/information ("a guardian of the flow of information"), control/watchdog ("a forum for public discussion of diverse, often conflicting ideas"), and equality/forum ("a public watchdog against the abuse of power in all its forms," p. 23).

While this theoretical framework is straightforward and would appear to have ample face validity, the operationalization of the monitoring system is vulnerable to critique. Each of the three primary concepts contains between seven and 10 indicators, each of which receives a grade on a 0–3 scale. Some of the indicators, however, may reflect the editors' own cultural orientation, and may represent unnecessary conditions for achievement of the media's democratic role. For example, within the freedom/information concept, the editors evaluate media companies based on "internal rules for practice of newsroom democracy," an indicator that lists among its criteria, "newsroom journalists have to arrive at a consensus on how to frame political issues" (p. 33). Indeed, there are a number of times where the MDM model seems as concerned with engendering democratic practices within the newsroom as evaluating the newsroom's ability to encourage and enforce democratic practices in the country in which it operates.

This presents a particular challenge for post-Communist countries which have no tradition of consensus-driven newsroom management and are home to capitalist media models that are more hierarchical than those in Northern Europe (from where the book editors hail). Lithuania scored poorly on the following indicators: "internal rules for newsroom democracy," "company rules against internal influence on newsroom staff," and "rules and practices on internal pluralism." Lithuania's is a case where

the methodology of monitoring structural elements of the media, instead of conducting a content analysis, becomes problematic. Despite the fact that the majority of Lithuanian journalists say they "feel no pressure from the media owners" (p. 182), and that national laws prohibiting pressure to publish biased information would seemingly obviate the need for similar company-specific rules, Lithuania lost points for an absence of such company-specific rules.

Clues into the MDM model's apparent conflation of democratic newsroom governance and a democratic political governance can be found in the book's first chapter, where Josef Trappel laments that "democratic procedures of decision-making are not widespread within media organizations" before espousing the perceived virtues of newsroom democracy (p. 15). A false equivalence, however, is at the crux of his argument, and it can be detected in the assertion—unaccompanied by research that might support it—that "journalists whose profession it is to explain the democratic decision-making of others (parliament, government, etc.) to the public should personally experience the strengths and weaknesses of such procedures at their own workplace" (pp. 15–16). I shudder to consider what Trappel would want journalists whose profession it is to cover violent crime or homelessness to personally experience in the workplace.

To be fair, the MDM is used in this book to analyze almost exclusively Western and Northern European countries (Australia and Lithuania are the exceptions). As such, it's possible that the newsroom culture ideal that the editors describe is, in fact, seen as a primary contributor to a nation's political culture in that part of the world. Before applying the model more broadly, however, the editors may consider revising it to account for democracy-supporting media systems that are characterized by professionalism, neutrality, and a more corporate or hierarchical organizational structure.

References

Feuilherade, P. (2011). Flurry of media laws in wake of Arab Spring. *The Middle East,* 427, 38–40.

McQuail, D. (2009). Roles of news media in democracy. In C. G. Christians, T. L. Glasser, D. McQuail, K. Nordenstreng, & R. A. White (Eds.), *Normative theories of the media: Journalism in democratic societies* (pp. 114–135). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Ormrod, R. P. (2006). A critique of the Lees-Marshment market-oriented party model. *Politics*, *26*(2), 110–118.