

IJoC

Structural Media Pluralism

*Introduction*¹

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BEATA KLIMKIEWICZ

Jagiellonian University

Institute of Journalism and Social Communication

The traditional concept of *structural media pluralism* normatively corresponds with a media system as a whole, referring to the existence of a wide range of media outlets, organizations, and services reflecting various points of view, recognizing diverse cultural representations, and offering different ways of interaction and use. This framing also implies an existence of diverse ownership, not only in terms of various entities owning media outlets, but also presupposing different “types” of media ownership, such as state, private, non-profit, church, minority, etc.

At a first sight, such understanding of “structural” media pluralism seems to be identical with “external” media pluralism. The concept of a dichotomic divide between “external” and “internal” pluralism, largely inspired by a German tradition of media regulation, has been widely used in media policy, as well as in the academic field.² However, a second, reassuring look reveals theoretically useful

Beata Klimkiewicz: beatak1@hotmail.com

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² An instructive example would be the CoE’s Activity Report of the Committee of experts on media concentration and pluralism (MM-CM) which conceives pluralism as

internal in nature, with a wide range of social, political and cultural values, opinions, information and interests finding expression within one media organisation, or external in nature, through a number of such organisations, each expressing a particular point of view. (MM-CM, Council of Europe’s Committee of Experts on Media Concentrations and Pluralism, 1994)

For other similar interpretations, see K.U. Leuven et al. (2009). The frequently drawn distinction between *external* “plurality of autonomous and independent media” and *internal* “diversity of media contents available to the public” can also be considered from a relational perspective. Despite the fact that the research has not yet unanimously proved that this relationship is casual (a strong link between plurality of ownership and diversity of content cannot be easily demonstrated in practice), many scholars sustain that extensive media concentration leads to promotion of corporate values and political preferences of media owners and advertisers in media contents. There is, however, another aspect of this relationship: Internal

nuances. The external/internal dichotomy has been drawn from the perspective of a single media organization, not the media system as a whole. Thus, "external" stands for diversity located outside a particular media entity, while "internal" refers to diversity inside it, basically reflecting differentiation of contents and services offered to general or more specialized users.

The point of departure for conceptualizing structural media pluralism starts with a media system as a whole. Structural pluralism, very generally speaking, refers to a condition where diverse, independent media entities exist within a system and are arranged together *in a particular way*. A normative layer would be manifested in a belief that such a condition is socially desirable and beneficial for the sake of democracy. A first conceptual problem appears, however, with a distinction of media systems not only in empirical (the question of geographical or technological boundaries), but also theoretical terms. Disregarding a whole dispute about the nature of contemporary mass media, grounding conditions of media systems entail their differentiation and relative autonomy. In neo-functionalist theories, media systems, differentiating themselves from other spheres of actions, have been constituted and reproduced through their own operations, or more precisely, "observing operations" (Luhmann, 2000; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). A code that enables such systems to distinguish from the environment and organise their own "reduction of complexity" is the distinction of information and non-information (Luhmann, 2000, p. 17). Autonomy of the system does not automatically imply internal diversity, but pluralism can only be achieved if its constituting elements are independent—autonomous. Thus, necessarily, any form of media system organisation requires a certain degree of coherence, and at the same time, sufficient redundancy and variety. Hereby, close organizational links between political parties and the media, for example, can not only be seen as indicating a lack of differentiation of the media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp. 79–80), but also a lack of pluralism of *autonomous* media outlets. In other words, a normative search for structural pluralism would direct the enquirer to such conditions and arrangements that allow media to "be autonomous in the regulation of their own selectivity" (Luhmann, 2000, p. 24).

Media regulation plays a crucial role in supporting or balancing such a process. Dennis McQuail points out that any given system seems to be as much the outcome of chance (or self-organization) as of policy design, and that there are always gaps and inconsistencies (1992, p. 152). Yet, "self-organization" of structural differences, such as forms of financing, genres and types of media services, ownership patterns, production and distribution chains, or sectors of operation, obviously depends on different, sometimes contradictory forces and logics of action (market, professional autonomy, public interest, political, or cultural representation). Structural regulation thus seems to generate the most complex type of media pluralism, because it attempts to engineer the whole environment within which media, as institutions, outlets, and services, operate (Hitchens, 2006, p. 65). It should also be noted in this context that "structural media pluralism" as a concept used within the framework of "structural regulation," especially in the American tradition, was adapted to media market analysis from the economic and competition law perspectives. As such, it has often been analyzed and described through the lens of

pluralism seems to play more important role in media systems with a relatively limited external pluralism (for instance, in the case of very small media systems), while external pluralism may be more important in media landscapes where internal pluralism is confined (for instance, in media systems where there is a tradition of politically-oriented journalism).

economic operation and competition policy. Economic prerequisites (e.g., multiple owners) do not necessarily guarantee media pluralism's being ready-to-be-used by potential media users. Also, media control and hegemonic influences are not only exercised through ownership patterns and structures, but through a whole set of dependencies (e.g., political) that cannot always be translated into marketable value.

Media systems are very complex sets of contingent and intended arrangements (originated both within and outside system boundaries), aggregated over time in particular cultural and geopolitical contexts, and saturated with divergent interests. They have been traditionally organized around institutions (outlets) and technologies of dissemination (print press, broadcasting, cable, satellite, Internet). Changing perimeters of media conceptualization (less as institutionalized and coherent centers of a media system, and more as the net available services) reflect not only internal system arrangements, but also the system's own operations, and thus, they also impose new criteria for internal differentiation. Structural media pluralism presents *a potential*. Its full usage depends on multiple, individualized factors, such as users' abilities to access different platforms and contents, to read (also critically and against the production routines) the "media script," and to use and interact in various ways with the available media services. Also, it seems important in this context to consider forces of audience fragmentation, including users' tendency to gravitate toward media services that reflect their own viewpoints and cultural preferences.

If it is generally assumed that structural pluralism refers to the ways that diversity is organized at a macro-level of the media system, media ownership and control play a crucial role in the internal differentiation of media structures. Media entities (usually institutions) and their operations are most often aggregated or grouped according to ownership links. Relatively similar ownership patterns might, however, result in various levels of service diversity: Some owners invest in media outlets that reflect a broader range of viewpoints and cultural representations, while others make specific uses of their media to achieve political and economic benefits. Ownership patterns intersect with horizontal levels of media sectors (such as print, broadcast, and the Internet) and vertical production and distribution chains (news production, advertising, and distribution). Current media business structures make it more difficult to paint ownership borders of media entities, as most of the influential players engage in manifold alliances, joint ventures, networks, and forms of co-operation that lead to diffusion of control and require reconciliation of multiple interests.

Structural pluralism may also be studied through distinguishing media services which differ in the ways that they function, are constituted, or are financed (e.g., public service media, community media, non-profit media, regional autonomous media). Useful categories of distinction (geographical, political, cultural, type, and genre pluralism) were proposed in the Independent Study on Indicators for Media Pluralism in the Member States—Towards a Risk-Based Approach (Leuven et al., 2009).

For analyzing structural pluralism, authors invited to this common issue have chosen a national perspective. Although the papers in this special section devote more attention to the question of ownership and control than to other possible elements of structural pluralism, they retain a broader, systemic approach, one combining description of media system structural arrangements with normative

considerations and analysis of regulatory models. Relevant dimensions of differentiation covering structural media pluralism might be summarized as follows:

1. **Resonance with politics and industry.** Media system structures might resonate to a greater or lesser extent with political and industrial system structures. This does not necessarily mean that the structure of the political system is mirrored entirely in the structure of the media, but that both systems interact with their partner's environment in a number of ways. For example, media owners securing their business interests against political instabilities lobby for certain media policy solutions that affect the whole shape of the media system. This synchronization might not always be a continuous endeavor, and different coalitions may be formed for different purposes. Thus, structural diversity of the media system is not simply the result of system operations and interactions, nor is it determined by sheer policy choices of the political system or market forces. Numerous or highly concentrated synchronous relationships between media owners and politicians might lead to fundamental structural changes, cementing, for instance, the positions of principal media players in the media system.

Nikos Leandros, describing the Greek case for this issue, argues that the contradictory and ineffective nature of regulatory policies (aimed, in fact, at promoting structural pluralism) has been a symptom of the interdependence between political and media élites. As such, these policy mechanisms, not fully used in practice, led to an oligopoly structure of the Greek media system and a high concentration of media power. Václav Štetka, portraying a current development of local media empires, highlights the fact that Czech media moguls, unlike their transnational counterparts, use direct political support to acquire new media services and outlets.

2. **The nature of hierarchies.** Although media systems are usually studied from a national perspective (a trend which is reflected within this very issue), the nature of internal hierarchies transgressing these political boundaries decisively shapes structural diversity. A high level of geographic, administrative, and cultural centralization, or on the other hand, of strong regionalism/localism, projects into media system structures.

Carles Llorens notices that a greater tolerance toward cross-ownership in Spain has resulted from a strong affirmative approach toward regional autonomy and independent regional media structures. Thus, paradoxically, cross-ownership initiatives led to a formation of a relatively large number of bigger and independent media groups, having prevented both media monopoly and excessive fragmentation of the system. Such a regulatory tolerance toward cross-media ownership did not work in a similar vein in Greece, where it led, according to Nikos Leandros, to the oligopolization of a media system. Moreover, the oligopoly situation cemented the "mediatic power" of leading moguls eager to exert a high impact on the political system.

3. **Dependence on external forces versus self-sustainability.** This dimension demonstrates how self-sustainable a media system is in its particular environment, defined usually by jurisdiction (in most cases, coinciding with national borders) and how much it depends on external resources (financing, know-how, human capital), but also by policy schemes (imposed

directly or indirectly) and rules of action (generated through spreading globalization and internationalization). Manuel Puppis rightly observes that a high penetration with foreign media has implications for media landscapes (2009, p. 11). Greater dependence on external forces might negatively influence the system's own ability to generate the necessary diversity, but one has to be sensitive to historical nuance in this process. In cases of important turning points, some media systems have a capacity to reorganize their structure according to available resources, while others absorb solutions from outside, possibly leading to very similar results.

As Andrea Czeppek and Ulrike Klinger, as well as Václav Štetka, observe, press privatization initiatives after the fall of communism led to concentrations of regional media ownership in the cases of both the Czech Republic and the former Eastern Germany: The regional press landscape in the Eastern part of Germany has been dominated by strong national groups, while in the case of the Czech Republic, foreign (German) companies shaped the market structurally. Although this change generated a new scheme of organization at the beginning (thereby also contributing to greater internal diversity of the system), in the long run, it caused growing unification and consolidation of newspapers and their operations.

It is also not without relevance that transnational media networks and entities have tended—more often than domestic companies—to replicate the same business models and products across national boundaries, thus reducing the type of structural diversity being rooted in a specific national, cultural, and geographical space (Klimkiewicz, 2009).

External influences are also manifested in "Europeanization" (or "European integration") and globalization. While the former refers basically to continuous European integration of media systems (through ownership links, distribution services, etc.) and adaptation and incorporation of EU regulatory tools and mechanisms into the domestic level, the latter pertains to the growing significance of global media governance, transnational media corporations, and global media content flows. Europeanization and globalization have the potential of both diminishing and enhancing structural media diversity. Nikos Leandros, analyzing the Greek case for this issue, observes that legislation aiming to curb the economic power of media barons was blocked by the European Commission.

4. **The nature of links, alliances, forms of co-operations.** Connections between media entities differ not only in terms of ownership and control, but also in operations. It is widely assumed that ownership/control translates into operations, but the analytically problematic link between ownership and content has never been unanimously proven by scholars. Structural diversity of media systems relies heavily on stimulating independence of constituent entities. Some forms of cooperation might subsequently undermine institutional or editorial autonomy.

Andrea Czeppek and Ulrike Klinger paint a relatively diverse picture of the regional press sector in Germany, but they also notice increased links and dependencies between different local and regional newspapers. Such forms include the distribution of several local editions by a single newspaper (which means that the final products differ only in their local news content) or the

consolidation of several regional newspapers by one publishing company, which then reproduces the same national and international news section in all the formally independent titles. Thus, the result in terms of the news being offered is very similar in each case, consequently leading to "safe" divisions of the newspaper landscape between main players, in addition to commercial closure of the system to new entrants.

5. **The logic and climate of media regulation.** Any structural dimensions of media systems cannot be considered in isolation from media policy and regulation. The state plays a crucial role in the dynamic process of determining media system architecture, which seems particularly centered around a dominant "logic" or "climate" of regulation. For example, applying market logic to media regulation results in prioritizing economic qualities, such as economic efficiencies or healthy competition, over other normative goals, including qualities of democracy, cultural values, social inclusion, etc. Thus, structural pluralism is merely seen as an outcome of market forces, where an "adequate" level of diversity exists to generate a sufficient response from media consumers. Lesley Hitchens argues that structural policies in the UK, Australia, and the United States, especially as they regard ownership rules, have been marked by just such a tendency to see the norm as the market (2006, p. 302). A particular climate of regulation may lead to weighing the importance of other policy rationales over structural pluralism. Manuel Puppis notices that protection of local media culture against foreign media companies could become a more important policy goal than media diversity, especially in small states (2009, p. 15).

Authors of this issue follow the logics and climates of regulation to see how formation and development of structural policies affect media arrangements at the systemic level. Carles Llorens notices that, in the Spanish case, such a logic has been directed particularly by decentralization. It is interesting to observe that policies supported such systemic arrangements that coincided with geographic, ethnic, linguistic, and administrative differences. Andrea Czepek and Ulrike Klinger, analysing structural pluralism in Germany, point out that the dominant logic of broadcasting regulation has mostly been shaped by a normative conception of the public sphere, while at the same time, it has also been affected by varying industry interests.

6. **Financial modes, forms of control, and functions.** Structural diversity generated by different funding sources is often referred to as sectoral pluralism (Hitchens, 2006, p. 66). A classical European-born media regulatory design and media system arrangement implies the coexistence of public service media (PSM) and privately owned entities financed by advertising or subscription. Besides, support policies might encourage the development of alternative media (Baker, 2002, p. 109), including non-profit community or minority media, usually sustained with government or local administration grants, member subscriptions, audience support, sponsorship, and donations. Media access schemes could additionally enhance these structures through must-carry rules, public-access services, or right-of-reply laws.

There is a great affinity between the modes of financing and functions performed by media outlets within a system. Czepek and Klinger point out that, in the case of Germany, external pluralism regulation (audience-based thresholds) apply only to privately owned broadcasters,

while public service media are expected to ensure internal (content and service-based) pluralism. This sectoral division has been paralleled by a design of regulatory institutions. However, sectoral pluralism mechanisms may also lead to oligopolistic structures—as became the case in Greece—where the positions of the dominant players (present in the media scene thanks to “savage deregulation”) were fixed after the abolition of a state TV monopoly.

7. **Media use culture.** A particular structure of media pluralism is determined also by historical conditions, cultural traditions, and the responses of society to these through everyday media use. The ways that the media are used in a given national setting manifest themselves in media system structures. For example, the popularity of regional press in Germany translates into a relatively decentralized press system, where viable regional newspapers compensate their national counterparts a modest amount. On the other hand, in the case of Spain, a strong TV-viewing culture, combined with a regional identity focus, forms a well-developed level of the meso or autonomous TV sector, a sector better equipped to answer identity-related user demands than would be the case with a national TV sector.
8. **Size and scale.** It seems quite obvious that, in an analysis of structural diversity of media systems, the size (in terms of state population) does matter. Larger systems are likely to generate more varied media structures, while in smaller systems, internal differentiation might be stalled by consolidation processes or other market determinants. Hallin, however, warns of oversimplifications and points out that a state’s size interacts with other variables (such as linguistic boundaries, the level of GDP, etc.), and therefore, its effects are not consistent (2009, p. 101). Relatively smaller media markets, such as Greece or the Czech Republic, certainly rely more on regulatory incentives supporting structural diversity than do large media landscapes such as Germany. Paradoxically, structural solutions are often stifled or not fully implemented, as Štetka and Leandros demonstrate. For example, despite a large number of media outlets in Greece, few players dominate the scene, accounting for about 70% of the TV and newspaper market, a development which has been mainly the result of ineffective media policies.

Structural media pluralism, studied at the system level, raises some basic questions in the light of growing media abundance. How much diversity is bearable for media structures to hold together as a coherent system? How should pluralism be organized at the structural level for users to best enjoy its potential? Answers to these questions certainly lie beyond the scope of this journal issue, but such an assertion does not justify a desistance from asking and further scrutiny.

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