

# Empowering women and men through participatory media structures

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At the start of the twenty-first century a far greater proportion of the world's population live in democratic societies than was the case at the start of the twentieth century, or in 1950, or even in 1975. One key experience of the last century has been the transformation of societies in which the majority of people had no control over their government to the present reality in which they have some measure of control. Of course, that control is very limited and often more or less entirely formal, but it nevertheless exists. The relationship between these processes of democratisation and the mass media is therefore an issue that is, or should be, of very general interest to all those who study communication.

The papers published in this edition of *Media Development* are all responses to that issue. They are developed from a selection of the material produced for a conference on 'Democratisation and the Mass Media: Comparative Perspectives from Europe and Asia?', held 9-13 April 2001. The conference was supported by the WACC, which paid the travel costs for participants from developing countries, and the Rockefeller Foundation. The latter not only assisted with travel but also provided the use of its Conference Centre at Bellagio on Lake Como in northern Italy as the venue for the meeting. Because of the generous support of these two organisations, it was possible to invite a wide range of scholars from around the world, and the ensuing discussion was very rich indeed.

The original idea for the conference arose out of the reflections that Professor Slavko Splichal and I were making on our studies of the development of the media in the post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. While we reached rather different conclusions, there was a considerable agreement on some of the evidence. For example, the new media did not fit comfortably into the standard idealised models of democratic media in Western Europe or the USA. In many countries, there were close links between media owners and dominant political forces. In some countries more or less direct corruption of journalists was rampant, and so on. We were led to wonder how far these prevailing conditions were general features of societies emerging from dictatorships and how far they were the specific results of half a century of communist government. A comparison with other emerging democracies seemed an obvious way to explore these issues.

There was a wide range of possibilities to choose from. Recent notable examples include the legacy of the military dictatorships in Latin America, and the post-Apartheid experience in South Africa. All of these would provide important points of comparison and were likely to yield interesting insights. We decided, however, that we would make a start by comparing Central and Eastern Europe with East and South-East Asia.

Our reason for this choice was that, while Central and Eastern Europe provides a recent experience of the dissolution of communist regimes, the range of dictatorships in Asia has in the recent past been much broader. East Asia provides the most populous example of communist regime, in China, and one which is undergoing an evolution that is radically different from that experienced in Europe. There were also numerous other dictatorial regimes, each with special characteristics, many of which have been replaced by at least nascent democratic orders in the last twenty years or so. South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia have all seen the end of dictatorial regimes and the development of more democratic polities.

Comparing Central and Eastern Europe with East and South East Asia thus enabled us to ask whether the trajectory followed by the post-communist regimes in the former was a determinant pattern for such processes and what the differences and similarities are between societies emerging from communist and capitalist dictatorships.

When we came to prepare the groundwork for the conference, however, a second factor struck us quite forcefully. In examining processes of democratisation in Asia, we quickly encountered voices from both East and West who argued for the fundamental incompatibility of the two spheres of human experience. The harsh version of this debate concerns the 'clash of civilisations' and the defence of 'Asian Values', but there are more positive accounts as well, for example the critique of Eurocentric theories of development and the stress upon indigenous cultures that find expression in this journal. We were thus obliged to confront the issue of whether, for example, the strongly authoritarian control exercised over the media in contemporary mainland China is an expression of a dictatorial communist regime, or whether its real roots lie in a much older Confucian tradition that pervades Chinese culture.

Different participants in the conference came up with different answers to these general questions, and I can only give here my own observations on the papers published in this volume and on the others that have been published elsewhere .

My first observation would be that subsequent tragic historical events have made the issue of intra-cultural differences much more central, at least to popular discussion, than was the case when we held the conference. Western discourses proclaiming a fundamental divide between occident and orient have, of course, a long history, as Edward Said and his co-thinkers have frequently demonstrated. Contemporary discussion, however, may be traced back to the publication of Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations' article in 1993 . This work has produced a storm of controversy, which was re-activated in the aftermath of September 11. I think it would be fair to say that none of the 'Westerners' at the conference took the viewpoint that: 'individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state' are fundamentally Western values that 'often have little resonance in Islamic, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, Buddhist or Orthodox cultures' (Huntington 1983, 25). It was recognised that those struggling against the communist dictatorships had often professed such values, but that the regimes themselves could also lay strong claims to represent one outcome of Enlightenment thinking. Even within those states that fall within the border of 'Western Christendom' in about 1500, and thus qualify for full membership of Huntington's Western Civilisation, there are so many conflicting political and cultural currents as to make the kind of positive claims involved in this line of thinking quite untenable.

The participants from an Asian background, however, were much more divided. On the one hand, Soek-Fang Sim's contribution was an explicit critique of one of the most influential versions of Asian Values, namely that espoused by Lee Kuan Yew and his associates in Singapore (Sim, 2001). On the other hand, Dong and others argued for the influence of Confucian thought in determining the outcome of media development in China and Korea. Other Asian voices, for example Sheila Coronel, pointed out that 'defects' of Chinese and Korean journalism (for example, the taking of bribes by journalists) could be found in other countries like the Philippines, which has a Christian and Muslim tradition, and thus cannot easily be explained by reference to the heritage of Confucianism (Coronel, 2001). In my own view, Chin-Chuan Lee was nearer to the truth when he wrote with reference to these exchanges that:

'It should be immediately emphasised that any body of thought and ethos like Confucianism that has been practised by peoples of East Asia for thousands of years is bound to be multifaceted, complex, flexible, localised, and irreducible to a litany of isolated or static attributes. Confucianism cannot be fruitfully spoken of as an unvarying historical and cultural totality' (Lee 2001, 13-14).

The reality seems to me to be that, in Asia as in the West, categories like 'democracy' and 'media freedom' are bitterly contested, and that appeals to continent-wide traditions and values are in substance little more than rhetorical attempts to win consent for arguments that might otherwise be rejected. Certainly, as Yuezhi Zhao demonstrated in the case of China, the term 'democracy' and its implications for the media have undergone substantial revisions in the last twenty-odd years, and that today opponents of the regime there mean substantially different

things when they invoke this term (Zhao, 2001).

There was rather more agreement on the second major issue that emerged from the conference. It quickly became clear that the state of the mass media in both sets of cases displayed some substantial similarities. Thus, in addition to the examples of China, Korea and the Philippines cited above, both Gulyas and Vartanova, in the papers from which their contributions to this issue are drawn, showed how journalists in Hungary and Russia are sometimes obliged to seek income streams that can compromise their ability to act independently of news sources. A similar picture of striking similarities was noted with regard to the close relations between political parties and business interests. In both Europe and Asia, media owners are tied to political forces by a thousand links, and these lead both sides towards accommodations with each other at the expense of full public knowledge and discussion. In both cases, too, politicians are prepared to award media privileges, broadcasting franchises for example, to allied entrepreneurs.

The origins of these similarities seem to me to lie in structural factors held in common by the different systems and which are often neglected in discussion. There were important differences between the communist regimes and the various capitalist dictatorships under consideration, not to mention important differences between the particular instances of each type of political system. From an abstract standpoint, however, they can both be seen as variants of a phenomenon that was extremely widespread in the twentieth century. The model of national development through minimal state intervention has always been an exceptional one: Britain, because it was the first, and the USA, because it was so gigantic, managed to industrialise with state machines whose main functions were internal and external military slaughter rather than economic management.

In later cases, from Germany onwards, the minimum entry costs into the world market meant that some role of state economic co-ordination, even coercion, was essential even for modest success. There have been a many different versions of this state leadership, of which the Stalinist systems in Europe and Asia represent one extreme. Others include forms as diverse as Japan, apartheid South Africa, and some of the military regimes in Latin America . Most, if not all, of the dictatorial regimes in East and South East Asia that were considered in this conference also represent variants of the basic model. In many cases, the notorious charge of 'crony capitalism' amounts to the fact the state selected and worked with particular entrepreneurs in order to insulate them from the rigours of competition until they were ready to enter the world market.

This epoch of capitalism is clearly over: the collapse of the communist regimes was the most dramatic illustration, but the decline is visible in a large number of quite unrelated cases. To say that we now live in a different epoch, however, is not to say that the transition to the Washington Consensus is everywhere complete, simple, or uncontested. The various articulations of political and economic power that we examined in the cases of the mass media in this conference can best be understood as attempts to use political power to survive the economic transition, and economic power to optimise one's position in the political transition.

The third major issue that emerged out of the conference is the problematic nature of the term 'democracy' and the implications of that for the mass media. As we saw above in the case of China, the definitions of democracy employed by the contesting groups are often very different indeed. Coming to the comparative dimension from a research interest in post-communist transitions, many of the 'Europeans', including myself, brought with us an unexamined conception of what the issues at stake were. Irrespective of our personal preferences, the reality we have been studying has been one of social transformation in which mass involvement has been at best limited and controlled, and in which all of the decisive decisions had been taken by elite actors, whether from the reform wing of the nomenklatura or from the moderate wing of the opposition. We had therefore, perforce, focussed our attention on rather limited and formal questions about media structures in conditions of elite representative democracy.

The experience of democratisation in Asia was a major corrective to this extremely myopic vision . In a number of instances - the Philippines, South Korea, Thailand, and notably and recently Indonesia - democratisation in Asia has involved far larger and more independent popular

mobilisations than in Europe, and correspondingly more radical demands for substantive and participatory democratic systems have been articulated . This attention to the ways in which media structures can empower ordinary women and men, and can thus allow them for the first time not only a voice in public debates but also potentially an influence over the nature of their lives, should obviously have a central dimension in any theory of democratic media. Its absence from the landscape of post-communist media in Europe is one marker of the limits of those transitions.

The issues debated, if not resolved, by this conference are clearly ones that will continue to make urgent demands upon our attention. We were extremely fortunate that the Rockefeller Foundation and the WACC were prepared to facilitate such a productive exchange, of which this publication is one valuable outcome. Naturally, there remains much to be discovered and analysed about the processes in which we are interested. I certainly hope that it will be possible to continue these discussions in a variety of forums, and I think it is reasonable to say that all of the participants would welcome any further responses to the views we have outlined here and in the other publications coming out of the original event.

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