

Communication as a Discipline**Views from Europe***Globalization and Communication Research***What Scholars Can Learn from the Crisis of Journalism**PAOLO MANCINI
University of Perugia**Crisis**

Statements such as “journalism is changing” and “journalism is in crisis” represent common wisdom and almost universally accepted evaluations of the present situation of professional journalism. Many articles, several collections, and books have already dealt with this argument and have stressed the situation of uncertainty and confusion confronting professional journalism today (Fenton, 2010; Franklin, 2010; Levy & Nielsen, 2010). In October 2009, the publication of a *Columbia Journalism Review* report, significantly titled “The Reconstruction of American Journalism,” triggered worldwide debate on the assumed conditions of crisis in Western journalism (Downie & Schudson, 2009). This report clearly pointed out that the crisis was structural (decrease in circulation, dismissals of reporters, closing of many newspapers, etc.) and that was also mining some of the basic principles of the most traditional view of what journalism ought to be (objectivity, separation between news and commentary, etc.). In this article, I want to argue that the so-called crisis of journalism has a double face. On one side we are discovering that what we assumed to be the universal model of journalism has a very restricted geographical diffusion and corresponds to a very precise historical moment. At the same time, the most recent evolutions in technology are pushing for a circulation of information that has little to do with traditional journalism. Is it still possible today (and mostly will it be possible in the future) to talk of journalism as a profession? I’m perfectly aware that this is an old debate. For decades, scholars and others have discussed whether or not journalism should be considered a profession or a trade (Ornebring, 2009): Does journalism have a fixed corpus of rules and procedures such as other liberal professions have? Or is it driven by improvisation, instinct, and contingencies as trades usually are? The debate is an old one, but new conditions today raise fresh questions—questions that will grow only more momentous in the near future.

Twenty years ago, my colleague Dan Hallin (1992) advanced a description of the mass media system that seems completely applicable to the present situation of media fragmentation. Hallin’s article,

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which inspired lively debate,¹ suggested that the universalism typical of the golden age of American journalism was nearing an end. Figures such as Walter Cronkite and Ed Murrow embodied a journalism rooted in ideas of professional autonomy, objectivity, and distance from power. During this golden age, readerships of most newspapers “knew no bounds of class, politics, or any other social distinction” (Hallin, p. 16). This universalism—and the credibility with which it imbued journalists—flourished amid the atmosphere of diffused political consensus that characterized the era of the New Deal. Public trust in institutions was high, thanks in part to the spirit of American unity fostered by the Cold War. Newspapers, operating in a highly regulated market, faced relatively little competition and prospered. As Hallin writes, “The prosperity of these organizations was closely connected with their universality” (p. 16). The almost monopolistic situation of print media in local markets favored universalism even further. It is easy to recognize that this depiction describes many media markets in the Western world, not just the American case.

As the conditions that Dan Hallin described gradually come to an end, perhaps so does what he defined as the high modernism of American journalism.

The Risks of Generalization from a “Tiny Handful of Countries”

Indeed, this can be the starting point of my discussion: I do not think it is inaccurate to suggest that what we assume journalism ought to be (neutral, detached from power, informing, performing a watch dog function, etc.) is just an accident in mass media history. In other words, what is usually defined as the traditional liberal model of journalism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) represents an exception rather than the rule—an exception in terms of both its geographical diffusion and its longevity.

It is undoubtedly true that, as Jean Chalaby writes in his 1996 article titled (not by chance) “Journalism as an Anglo-American Invention,” journalism as we understand it today was born and developed mainly in the United States and Great Britain and later exported from there to other countries. In media scholarship, the thesis of cultural imperialism is well known, and it undoubtedly stresses an important trend in social and cultural change (Schiller, 1969; Tunstall, 1977). The United States and Great Britain have exercised economic, political, and cultural influence over many parts of the world, and this influence has been strengthened by the global diffusion of the liberal model of professional journalism. As Margaret Blanchard wrote in 1986, the American model of professional journalism played a role both in the ideological battles of the Cold War and in the deepening of Western economic penetration. This political-economic role resembles the way in which the concept of *Westernization* operates in political-scientific interpretations of modernization (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005): Countries become modernized if they follow the path of the Western world, a path on which economic development and democracy travel together toward modernization.

The diffusion of English as the quasi-official language of academics and professionals has also played a role in the spread of Western culture: The same textbooks that promoted the liberal model of journalism to students in the United States and Great Britain have influenced the education of

¹ See the Round Table organized by the Political Communication Report, vol. 16, n. 1, 2006 Winter (http://frank.mtsu.edu/~pcr/1601_2005_winter/roundtable_intro.htm).

professionals and teachers worldwide. Likewise, education initiatives have further promoted the so-called liberal model so that it has become the dominant throughout the world. Paraphrasing Chalaby, it could be said that journalists around the world believe that journalism is neutral and detached from power, that it both informs and performs a watchdog function, etc. (Chalaby, 1996; Josephi, 2010). The problem, as Curran and Park wrote, is that rules and procedures developed by "a tiny handful of countries" have been applied wholesale to the rest of the world (2000, p. 3). In 1995, Blumler and Gurevitch described the similar tendency of scholars to derive universal rules from their own limited national experience, a practice they called "naive universalism" (p. 75).

The fact is that the model of journalism taught in most schools and described in most textbooks represents an ideal model that has very limited application. Even if journalists perceive that there exists a dominant model of journalism whose practices and principles are spreading around the world, and even if they claim to follow and to apply this normative framework, nevertheless in their everyday practice they likely perform in a completely different way. This is the gap between the theory of journalism and its implementation. A very vivid picture of this contradiction has been given by Silvio Waisbord in his contribution to *De-Westernizing Media Studies* (2000):

Even if we consider the liberal model in its own terms, without addressing the adequacy of its theoretical bases and prescriptions for the existence of a democratic press, it is obvious that its chances of becoming effective were at odds with South American politics. Its visibility in public discourse contrasted with the realities of press systems. Its prospects ran against conditions that differed glaringly from original contexts coupled with questionable commitment of press barons. It was improbable that a liberal press would develop in antiliberal capitalist societies, considering that owners rhetorically exalted liberalism but ceaselessly courted states, supported military interventions and only (and vociferously) criticized government intrusion that affected their own political and economic interests. (p. 51)

In *Comparing Media Systems* (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), we demonstrated that even in Western Europe, the part of the world that for many decades has been culturally and politically very close to the United States and Great Britain, the so-called liberal journalism has found different applications that in many cases highly contrast with its main founding principles, such as objectivity, watch dog function, etc. Indeed we proposed two other professional models—democratic corporatist and polarized pluralist—to describe the journalistic ethos under different political and social conditions. In these two other models, which describe the conduct of journalism throughout large parts of Europe, some basic principles of the so-called liberal model appear to be missing. Nevertheless we also noticed a process of homogenization: The observed models were becoming more and more similar, adopting many of the liberal model's practices and principles.

But if we look beyond the Western world, we must admit that the application of liberal journalism appears much more difficult. In a recent research on "Media and Democracy in Central Eastern Europe,"² we found that, in almost all of the countries that emerged from the dissolution of the Soviet Union, journalism is deeply rooted in a savage overlapping between media, politics, and business; that the level

² See <http://mde.politics.ox.ac.uk>

of partisanship is very high; that the distance from power is almost completely absent, and that media frequently are instruments in the hands of political and business elites (Ornebring, 2012). We observed a very blurred professional identity among journalists.³

Many other scholars have noticed a very similar situation: Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, who for many years has focused her interests on corruption studies, says of the situation in Central Eastern Europe that "in societies based on particularism rather than free competition media outlets are not ordinary business ventures. Rather, investors use their channels for blackmail or for trading influence" (2010, p. 126). Looking at the Russian situation, Ledeneva confirms: "the black PR discourse is symptomatic of a situation where certain defects of formal institutions, weakness of political parties, lack of independent media, disrespect for the law create incentives for informal practices to spread" (2004, p. 36). Referring to the same countries, Peter Gross writes: "the profit making incentive of some media owners was simply married to the political use of the media, which is to say, some media owners are also politicians" (2003, p. 87).

The previous statement from Silvio Waisbord tells us that the situation in South America is not very different from what it is possible to observe in Central Eastern Europe. Duncan McCargo (2012), commenting on the possible application to East Asia of the interpretive framework stressed in *Comparing Media Systems*, underlines that media clientelism and instrumentalization represent in East Asia the norm rather than the "peripheral deviation." In the same essay he suggests the idea of "partisan polyvalence" (McCargo, 2012, p. 201), to describe how in East Asia media organs may be in the service of multiple interests at the same time: supporting one political figure (or one political program) while simultaneously pursuing business goals. Media can also quickly shift from espousing one agenda to another without abandoning traditional formulas or losing readership.

Without a doubt, the informative and watchdog functions that exemplify the ideals of the liberal model of journalism are of little consequence to media in many parts of the world. It is not simply that different journalistic models place advocacy ahead of information. Once we look beyond the tiny handful of countries from which our interpretive categories derive, we observe that the conditions that made possible the birth of the so-called liberal model of journalism do not exist everywhere. Instead, journalism around the world can be something completely at odds with the expectations we derive from our own historical experience.

How should we understand these varietal journalisms? Are they degenerations of an ideal? Or do they indicate distinct developmental paths? In other words, does the overlapping between media, politics and business that we observe in many parts of the world; the blackmail habit that features a large part of journalism in Central Eastern Europe; the limited press freedom that it is possible to observe in other parts represent delays in the direction of a more complete democracy that includes all those features ascribed to the liberal model of professional journalism—or do they embody a tendency that not necessarily take that direction? These questions extend beyond journalism. They imply an inquiry into the possibility of the universal diffusion of democracy with all its appendixes, including liberal journalism.

³ See <http://mde.politics.ox.ac.uk/index.php/publications>

The idea of hybridization suggested by Katrin Voltmer (2012) seems to open other interpretive frameworks: It is possible to talk of hybridization between external influences and local conditions. For a variety of reasons (global circulation of knowledge, influence of foreign ownership, frequent occasions for meetings with colleagues, etc.) journalists encounter theories, procedures, rules, and standards that appear to be dominant in foreign contexts. Nevertheless journalists adapt these principles and practices to working conditions in the field. When journalistic practices native to one culture take root in another, hybrid models arise—in tension with the received liberal model. We are discovering that this hybridization represents the rule rather than the exception.

In this Special Section of the *International Journal of Communication*, Frank Esser outlines the idea of transnationalization and stresses the possibility that a “global communication system” undermines the necessity of comparative research. Again, my position on this point is ambivalent: There is no doubt that a process of homogenization is taking place. We devoted an entire chapter of *Comparing Media Systems* to this tendency (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). And, nevertheless, while there is no doubt that media commercialization is a tendency that most of the countries share, at the same time it can be observed that homogenization happens, so to speak, within “watertight compartments”—in relation to specific geographical areas. In our analysis of models of journalism in the Western world, we observed a process of homogenization toward the liberal model when links between news media and political parties weakened. In this sense, the Western world represents a compartment. There are no doubt that many similarities (differences, too) exist among the countries that emerged following the end of the Soviet regime. Duncan McCargo (2012) points out that many countries in East Asia share the same attitudes to the news media, while Silvio Waisbord (2000) speaks in general of a “South America journalism.” Homogenization may react with each distinct compartment in a different way.

Very recently Peter Humphreys (2012) underlined the necessity to include what I would call *proximity* among the variables for comparative observation. This author suggests that comparative research has to take into account also the issue of “path dependence,” that is, similarities among countries that have common historical roots and developments. I would enlarge Humphreys’ suggestion to include geographical proximity, too, and therefore common historical events, networks of cultural exchange, etc. Indeed, while there is no doubt that some features of professional journalism are becoming universal, nevertheless similarities become much more evident among countries that are close to each other or joined by networks of relations (the already discussed compartments) and therefore experience greater exchange and reciprocal influence. In large part these countries share also a very similar historical evolution. In other words, there are common transnational developments (which the diffusion of the Internet further increases, as we shall discuss in the following lines), but proximity may present a force that resists this hegemonic tendency. In this way, in many parts of the world we observe models of professional journalism deeply at odds with what we believe to be the ideal professional model.

For How Long?

Today we know that the liberal model of journalism derives from a very tiny part of the world, and even in this tiny part of the world this model has operated for only a short period of time. Indeed, today we are becoming aware of this limitation. This is what Hallin observed in 1992 and Elihu Katz confirmed in 1996; this is what many observers today note in the most recent evolutions of journalism in

the United States. In particular, they refer to the partisan and aggressive journalism of Fox News, a model in conflict with most previous standards of journalism in the United States. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that, "Nearly half of Americans (47%) say they think of Fox News as 'mostly conservative.'"⁴ Many radio news and talk shows now reproduce the partisan aggressiveness of the most successful radio broadcast in the United States. Rush Limbaugh has become the best-known exponent of a violent journalism that strongly intervenes in the area of politics and decision-making. Many observers have linked this kind of partisan journalism to the increased polarization of American society (Baum & Groeling, 2008; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009) and the disappearance of that climate of universal consensus that Hallin observed in American society in the 1960s and 1970s—the climate that made possible the neutral and objective journalism of the liberal model. The Columbia report was complaining also about such consequences. Today, however, the universalism that featured a media marked crowded with a limited number of news outlets has been replaced by media fragmentation.

Audience segmentation replaces mass audience: To distinguish itself in today's crowded market, each news outlet chooses its own niche, usually defined on the basis of cultural and political affiliation. Neutral and objective journalism is replaced by storytelling addressed to a receiver who holds a specific point of view and who, most of the time, wants only to be confirmed in his point of view. Discussing the audience of Fox News, Natalie Jomini Stroud (2011) talks of "partisan selective exposure" (p. 169) as the emerging tendency of cultural consumption. If niche audiences replace the now-old mass audience, the reporter will be more and more inclined to address only his own audience, and to propose and reinforce its existing point of view. In such a model, many of the characterizing features of the liberal model of journalism come to an end. Niche markets fill up the space in which media once exhibited what Hallin called the high modernism of American journalism.

Web Consequences

The crisis is not just structural; it involves also the nature of professional journalism itself. Indeed fragmentation at the structural level implies a very deep transformation of the professional identity of journalists. News today is provided by a great number of Web organizations and individuals that very rarely can be called journalists. Bloggers, social networks, Web start-ups, etc., have become sources of information for many people, mostly young people. Frequently these sources have a very oriented nature: Indeed, virtual communities represent the most original form of social aggregation to develop out of Internet culture (Rheingold, 2000). People sharing the same interests, supporting the same causes, join virtual communities expecting to find further confirmation of their ideas and share knowledge derived from preexisting ideas and opinions. In his contribution to the recent *SAGE Handbook of Political Communication*, Bruce Bimber (2012), following Jomini Stroud, offers numerous evidences of "selective exposure" deriving from the diffusion of the new media.

While the previous observations derive from the increasing availability of comparative research and the international circulation of scholars, very recent studies tell us that journalism is changing in

⁴ See <http://people-press.org/report/559>

many parts of the Western world as well. Indeed, there is no doubt that the crisis of journalism is rooted also in the changing technological environment. The proliferation of the possible sources of information, due in large part but not exclusively to the Internet, is the reason for the dramatic decrease in circulation of traditional print media throughout most of the world (notable exceptions to this trend include Brazil and India). Before the advent of the Internet, the crisis in circulation and in professional procedures that have been described so far started with the development of the free press. The crisis increased dramatically with the explosion of blogs, social networks, online news, etc. Television's audience today is also spreading across a much larger number of outlets so that the audience of each of outlet is decreasing. The general result: the disappearing of many old and well-established news outlets, the dismissal of many reporters, fewer seats abroad, etc.

The blogosphere, social networks, and citizen journalism represent powerful occasions for the circulation of information but, quite often, they also derive from and reinforce preexisting opinions. Those who provide the news are quite often committed supporters of a cause. Are they journalists? Can they be defined as journalists? The question already is an old one (Davis, 2012; Zelizer, 2005), and probably no satisfactory answer exists. The Internet has enormously increased the quantity of information that circulates, but very often this is advocacy-oriented information—information whose generation and circulation contradicts basic principles of the liberal model of journalism.

At issue is not only the professional identity of the new news providers but also their mission in providing the news—a mission guided not solely by the objective of informing the public. In a large part of the world, journalism is something completely different from what we, lodged within our Western-world experience, expect it to be. Today the Internet enlarges the possibility of circulating information, but it also differentiates the ways in which circulation takes place. News providers on the Web for the most part are not trained journalists and do not follow conventional journalistic practice. As many scholars have already noted, the fact that niche audiences are replacing the mass audience both in traditional and new media undermines many of the basic principles of universalism that for a short period in Western history informed the ideal model of journalism.

Between Exaggeration and Need for New Paradigms

Am I exaggerating? Today, change happens at very high speed. The implications of Manuel Castells' (2010) statement have become conventional wisdom: "In the United States, the radio took 30 years to reach 60 million people; TV reached this level of diffusion in 15 years; the Internet did it in just three after the development of the World Wide Web" (p. 382). It is possible that tendencies only beginning today will become more evident in the near future and change completely the media landscape that we know today. Of course the Internet has not yet replaced the traditional media; indeed many talk of the relationship between old and new media in terms of symbiosis and complementarity, not simply obsolescence and replacement (Davis, 2012, p. 58; Neuberger & Nuernbergk, 2010).

At the same time, the rise of China and other world economies (the famous BRICS) are demonstrating that the assumption that economic development is strictly linked with democracy might be wrong (Kampfner, 2009). The connection that for many years was assumed between free press and

economic development, between modernization and individual freedom (and therefore press freedom), today appears to be contradicted by emerging world economies that either completely deny freedom of the press or ignore basic principles of the liberal model of journalism. In this sense, it looks difficult to talk of degeneration or delay in democratic development. Instead of passing through the same phases that distinguished the development of liberal democracy in the Western world, these countries seem to follow completely different patterns. Observing today the emerging world economies, one has to assume that what Pye in his seminal work wrote about the inextricable link between the development of a professional and autonomous "class of communicators" and modernization (Pye, 1963, p. 78) was wrong. In many parts of the world, modernization (at least economic development) seems today tied less to media autonomy than to the restriction of press freedom and the overlap of power and journalism. Are these delays and degenerations in the development of democracy? Or are they different possible models of circulating information? This is a question for scholars in the globalized world.

The fragmentation produced by the rapid development of new technologies makes any attempt to impose shared professional standards nearly impossible. The professional identity of traditional journalists becomes blurred with a plurality of new figures that circulate news, comment on the Web, and mix mobilization with information. I don't want to say that this is the future of the field: No doubt fragmentation and plurality will increasingly characterize communication systems, rendering impossible the elevation one professional model as the universal ideal.

All of this will change the work of scholars. The certitudes we shared as to what to teach to our students could fall in the face of emerging real-world conditions. Interpretive paradigms derived from the experience of a tiny handful of countries—observed at specific historical junctures—may prove inapplicable to the study of countries following completely different patterns of development amid unprecedented technological change. More than ever, we need to place journalism (journalisms) within the specific conditions within which it (they) develop(s) and to avoid assuming the possibility of some universal model.

This is the lesson we learn from increases in comparative research and from the increasing circulation of knowledge and scholars in the globalized world. This is what we learn from observation of the application of new technologies to journalism. New questions arise that go beyond the experience of the Western world. And the ongoing evolution in technology means that the questions we ask will quickly change. The future of mass media scholarship is a future without certitudes.

In this sense I would say, responding to Frank Esser, that we still need comparative research: Yes, there is a process of globalization and homogenization, but very often it works at a superficial level, while everyday practice shows the emergence of very different relations between media, politics, and business.

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