

Paolo Mancini

The Process of De-institutionalization is the Major Consequence of Digital Revolution*

1. Your book *Comparison of Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*, which you co-authored with Dan Hallin in 2004, is the foundation of communication theory in comparative media systems research. In comparing the media systems of different countries, you concluded that media systems can be viewed within three basic models, namely the liberal model, the democratic-corporatist model, and the polarized-pluralist model. The models are created according to different criteria. They have taken into account the attitude of politicians toward the media, the state of the media industry, the degree of professionalization of journalism, the role of countries in the architecture of the media space, and the creation of conditions for media freedom through laws and institutions. Your book is important because it offers usable and practical theory. If I may, I would like to take this opportunity to ask you to comment on your book, since it was published almost 20 years ago and communications technology has significantly changed both the media environment and politics and society as a whole.

I do not think that today we would write the same book. The most general media environment has dramatically changed because of the digital revolution. When we started to write the book (it was in 1997 and then the book was published in 2004) the Internet was just at its very beginning and its consequences were not important at all. As everybody knows, the situation today is quite different. Some of the analytical dimensions that we stressed in the book are still valid, but there are also new dimensions that have to be taken into consideration. Moreover there have been important political changes (a general tendency towards political volatility, the weakening of the traditional mass parties and many others) that may affect the nature of our three models as well. To sum up, I think that the general approach (the importance of the historical development, the mutual relationship between media and politics, many of our analytical dimensions etc.) that we stressed in the book is

still valid but it needs to be adapted to the new media ecology.

2. You were the keynote speaker at our scientific conference held in Zagreb on 16-17 September 2021. *Comments, Hate Speech, Disinformation and Public Communication Regulation*. Your theses attracted a lot of attention in the academic community. You pointed out deinstitutionalization as one of the main problems of the rise of hate speech and fake news in the public space. Please tell us more about how you see this troubling public communication problem. How do you see the unstoppable spread of Fake News in today's media age? How do you see democracy and civil liberties in this era, which is theorized to be "post-truth."

In my view the process of de-institutionalization is the major consequence of digital revolution. By de-institutionalization I mean the transfer of social functions from established institutions (the news organizations, the political parties, the State itself) to single, dispersed citizens. Here I refer to social media, blogs, citizens journalism, etc. These act outside of any hierarchical organized institutions, they do not have to undergo any form of control and also legal rules risk to be less powerful. National borders may be easily passed. The Fake news phenomenon is seated within this more general change. The same process of de-institutionalization takes place in the field of politics with what some authors have defined „non elite and unconventional politics“ (the end of the traditional mass parties, political volatility, personalization of politics, social movements, etc.)

3. How do you see the possibility of regulating public communication? Do you think that the growing chaos of communication contributes to freedom of expression and democracy building? How complex is the issue of regulation when we look at it in extremes from freedom of speech to hate speech in the media sphere?

Regulation becomes more and more difficult. Think of what happened in the USA with Twitter/Facebook vs Donald Trump. They were „private“ organizations (Facebook, Twitter) and not the government that shut down the sites of Trump. This (together with a number of different cases) demonstrates the difficulties of regulation in the field of public (but private too) communication. We face a dramatic change in the media ecology: there are positive consequences (a major circulation of information and knowledge, more opportunities to control power holders, etc.) but there are negative consequences as well. We are supposed to get together with this new, contradictory situation.

4. European Media Freedom Act: in January this year (2022), the EU launched a consultation on media freedom and the protection of media freedom in the new digital market environment. It is based on the observation that media freedom is

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under threat in all countries, that there is increasing pressure from national governments and other privileged groups on the work of the media, and that there is a general perception that they are not doing enough to protect media freedom or the rights of journalists. It invites academic community to participate. I wonder what you think about this particular initiative. How could the academic community contribute to the success of this initiative? Can science deal with the power of capital in the digital media industry? How much impact does the academic community in general have, do you think that the research, books, critiques, and warnings from media experts and scholars have been successful so far? What do you think about traditional media in the digital journalism environment?

The academic community may contribute to build, over a long span of time, a major awareness about public problems. The fact is that we face an incredibly larger circulation of information and knowledge and this is undoubtedly a challenge for governments, mostly for autocratic governments. Again, this is a contradictory new situation: more opportunities for circulating information but also more attempts, on the side of power holders, to control this new circulation. As said, I don't believe that today, the control by power holders would be possible because of media fragmentation and plurality. I am optimistic about this. At the same time we do not have to forget that the attempt to control the circulation of news existed since the beginning of the communication era: I am not sure that a better period for the freedom of speech, such as the today situation, has ever existed.

5. Comparing media and media systems is always interesting and opens up different perspectives on media in your own country. In this context of our conversation, could you give us an overview of the media in Italy? What are the problems facing the traditional media in your country, your public broadcaster and the commercial media? What is the biggest problem for democratic processes? Is the arrival of new generations noticeable and in what way?

Italian news media are still within the „polarized pluralist country“: Italy is a very divided country in terms of political attitudes and the media reflect this situation. Clientelism still prevails over universalism and the level of political parallelism is high. Obviously many things have changed since we wrote our book and the level of media commercialization has increased, but, for instance, the new media environment still reflects the division of the country and the level of political polarization has increased. There is no doubt that the weakening (if not the death) of traditional mass parties is a big and important novelty for the news media and nevertheless many of the old features are still alive.

6. What do you think of the EU Cohesion Plan, which encourages greater cooperation between journalism programs at different universities? Is this just an incentive to link national programs and ideas, or can it also contribute to a better understanding of global media dynamics? Is this a good way to develop media literacy?

I believe that journalists have to be „citizens of the world“. Experience and knowledge of different national identities is necessity for good journalists and therefore cooperation among different education structures is a necessity too.

Would you like to talk about another topic we have not highlighted here?

Thanks for the opportunity to talk to you.

Professor Mancini, thank you very much for the interview.

**Razgovor s profesorom Paolom Mancinijem s Odsjeka za političke znanosti Sveučilišta u Perugi i članom uredništva Medijskih istraživanja te uvodnim govornikom na međunarodnoj konferenciji Komentari, govor mržnje, dezinformacije i regulacija javne komunikacije koja je u organizaciji časopisa Medijska istraživanja i Agencije za elektroničke medije održana u Zagrebu 16. i 17. rujna 2021. godine vodila prof.dr.sc. Nada Zgrabljic Rotar.*

** Interview with Professor Paolo Mancini of the Faculty of Political Sciences of the University of Perugia and member of the editorial board of journal Medijska istraživanja/Media Research and key speaker of the international conference Comments, Hate speech, Disinformation and Regulation of Public Communication, organized by the journal Media Research and the Agency for Electronic Media and held in Zagreb on September 16-17, 2021 was conducted by prof. dr. sc. Nada Zgrabljic Rotar.*