

This item was submitted to [Loughborough's Research Repository](#) by the author.
Items in Figshare are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise indicated.

A response to Anders Todal Jenssen's, Sandra B. Hrvatin's and Brankica Petković's comments on central and eastern European media in a comparative perspective. Politics, economy and culture: Complex causality and the value of quantitative indicators in comparative media research

PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/18763332-03901007>

PUBLISHER

© Brill Academic Publishers

VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

This work is made available according to the conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) licence. Full details of this licence are available at: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

LICENCE

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

REPOSITORY RECORD

Mihelj, Sabina, and John Downey. 2019. "A Response to Anders Todal Jenssen's, Sandra B. Hrvatin's and Brankica Petković's Comments on Central and Eastern European Media in a Comparative Perspective. Politics, Economy and Culture: Complex Causality and the Value of Quantitative Indicators in Comparative Media Research". figshare. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/17869>.

Response to comments: Complex causality and the value of quantitative indicators in comparative media research

Sabina Mihelj and John Downey, Loughborough University

We are pleased to see that our edited collection has generated such interest in the wider scholarly community, and are grateful to all three reviewers for their comments. The decision of the editors of *Southeastern Europe* journal to host a forum on the topic confirms the timeliness of our intervention and the need for further work in this area.

Let us note that the idea for this book was developed in the context of a EU-funded scholarly network¹ that was aimed at increasing the understanding of media landscapes in Central and Eastern Europe, examining the applicability of Western European and North American concepts and theories, and developing novel conceptualisations. Our book was directly tied to these aims – we took an established and increasingly popular 'Western' theory of media systems developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) as our starting point, thought about whether and how it applied to Central and Eastern European media, how to develop it further to better account for the specificities of media systems in the region, and also how to think in a more sociologically informed way about how to explain media systems thereby broadening out the study of media systems beyond the relationship between media and political systems. From the very start it was clear that we would have to make do with existing resources and data sets, and work within the restraints of time available to our individual contributors. As a result, our main aim was to point out the key contours of a new, better framework for comparative media analysis, and asking our contributors to respond to this framework within the limits of time and data they had available at the time. Systematic new research was, unfortunately, out of question. Likewise, given the geographic focus of the network and expertise, the volume had to be focused on Central and Eastern European media, even though the broader arguments we are developing apply to comparative media research everywhere.

With this in mind, let us now turn to the two reviews. We shall start with Anders Todal Jenssen's comments, and then proceed to those provided by Sandra B. Hrvatin and Brankica Petković. In both cases, we shall focus on observations regarding the book in general rather than those related to other individual contributions as the latter are often too specific to be addressed by the editors. Two themes in particular seemed recurrent in the comments – the relationships between different causal factors that affect media systems, and the usefulness of quantitative indicators in comparative media research. The arguments put forward in the comments indicate that we need to re-state and clarify our position on each of these.

Starting with Jenssen's review, we were of course very pleased to see all the complimentary comments, especially with regard to our argument about the necessity of involving not only political, but also economic, cultural, and more broadly historical and sociological factors

¹ The EU-funded COST Action A30 'East of West: Setting a New Central and Eastern European Media' (2004-2009) was chaired by Miklós Sükösd and hosted by the Central European University in Budapest, Hungary. Thanks to the dedication of Miklós Sükösd and his team, the action established a lively network of scholars spanning virtually all EU member states and beyond, and allowed us to exchange ideas with scholars working on Central and Eastern Europe from a wide variety of disciplinary perspectives. We are particularly grateful also to the late Karol Jakubowicz, who was responsible for leading the working group that developed the basis for this project, as well as personally contributing to formulating the initial conceptual framework. The book would not have been possible without the support of both Sükösd and Jakubowicz, and together with all the contributors we are grateful for the work they invested in helping us bring this book idea to fruition.

when examining and explaining the nature of media systems. We are grateful for his insightful comments and close engagement with arguments developed in our book, as well as for his criticisms. In fact, we found ourselves agreeing with his key misgivings with regard to the book, in particular the lack of synthesis in the final chapter. We started working on this book with high hopes, but eventually had to realize that there is only so much one can do within the empirical and practical constraints set by this particular project, briefly outlined earlier. It is also important to note that at the point when we were developing the book, the amount of primary research on Central and Eastern European media was rather limited, and we did not have access to funds for new, systematic comparative data collection. In contrast, for instance, Hallin and Mancini's synthetic overview of Western media took two decades to develop, and could draw on a wealth of data accumulated by researchers over several decades. Clearly, we did not have the means to offer such a synthesis in our edited volume. Still, a synthesis of this kind remains our hope for future work. Sabina Mihelj is currently involved in a major comparative study of state socialist television cultures in Central and Eastern Europe, which involves extensive data collection and will help lay the groundwork for a future synthesis.² Likewise John Downey has been engaged in developing methodological alternatives to existing analytical frameworks used in comparative media research (on which more below).

There are a couple of points in Jenssen's review, however, where we feel our arguments were misinterpreted. This may well have been because we were not clear enough in the first instance, so let us take this opportunity to rephrase some of the arguments and clarify what we meant (and what we did not). To start with, Jenssen thinks that our text 'expresses a rather negative attitude towards formal models and statistics' and even that we 'lash out against quantitative social science in general and in comparative research more specifically'. This is inaccurate. What we are critical of in the book is not the application of quantitative methods and statistics in comparative media research in general, but specifically in the context of comparing media systems, and with regard to using statistical testing of competing theories about media systems. If, for instance, one is comparing individual media outlets (newspapers, TV stations etc.), media texts or media actors (producers, audiences) then quantitative approaches and specifically statistical testing can actually be entirely appropriate. In the context of such comparative research, the basic conditions for effective statistical testing – such as the availability of a large number of cases, reliable numerical indicators, comparable units of analysis, and clear-cut patterns of causality – can be satisfied more easily than in comparative research of media systems.

Let us offer two contrasting examples of comparative media research to demonstrate this. The first example involves a study that seeks to analyse the extent to which different ownership structures of individual media outlets in a single country influence the choice of topics covered and sources used. In the context, it is possible to find a suitably large pool of media outlets (cases), which can be regarded as sufficiently similar to constitute comparable units of analysis. Developing reliable indicators for topics and sources as well as different types of ownership structures should also be a reasonably straight-forward process. Establishing relatively clear-cut patterns of causality may be a bit trickier, but even if this fails, we have at the very least satisfied all the other basic conditions for effective statistical testing.

² The study, entitled 'Screening Socialism: Popular television and Everyday Life in Socialist Eastern Europe' is funded by the Leverhulme Trust (2013-16). For further information see: <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/socialsciences/screening-socialism/>.

The second example, in contrast, involves a study that is aimed at explaining the different levels of personalised political communication (i.e. the extent to which the media coverage of political issues focuses on politicians rather than institutions, organizations, or policies) across different countries and different types of media systems. In this case, we are dealing with media system as the main unit of analysis, and the first problem we run into is gathering data for a sufficiently large number of cases. Even Hallin and Mancini's ambitious study covers only eighteen cases, and the vast majority of studies comparing media systems deal with significantly lower numbers. That alone rules out the possibility of effective statistical testing, and thereby the development of universally applicable explanations. Furthermore, developing reliable, directly comparable numerical indicators across different countries will be very difficult, if not impossible, partly because different countries use different methods of data collection, and partly because of fundamental differences between units of comparison (i.e. the different media systems) themselves.

Let us also clarify that this does not mean that quantitative indicators as such are of no use in comparative media systems research. For instance, if we are seeking to describe and explain particular patterns in the selected media systems themselves – without the expectation of these explanations being universally applicable – then the use of quantitative indicators may be entirely appropriate. Likewise, quantitative indicators can be used in the context of the 'fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis' – a type of analytical framework that we think is better suited for comparative media systems research than statistical testing of competing hypotheses (for a full explanation of the approach with an example see Downey and Stanyer 2010). However, if they are to be used in the context of such a framework, they would need to be *calibrated* and hence treated in a manner consistent with the requirements of fuzzy set analysis.

Qualitative comparative analysis offers an alternative to both statistical approaches and extant qualitative approaches, however, not only because it is a systematic and rigorous way of conducting small and medium n case analysis (which forms the vast majority of comparative media research) but also because it allows researchers to capture causal complexity better than approaches based on discovering the net effects of independent variables or through less systematic case study approaches. It is a method, in other words, that can build on the intuition that the shape of media systems is not the result of causes acting independently but rather interacting with each other in a complex way to produce certain outcomes (see Ragin, 2008). We remain convinced that methodologically speaking comparative media analysis has much to learn through engagement with comparative approaches in other disciplines and fields and would encourage colleagues to engage with comparative methodologies more generally in their work on media systems and institutions.

The second possible misunderstanding we spotted in Jenssen's review relates to the interpretation of relationships between political and economic factors influencing media systems. This comes most clearly to the fore in his discussion of links between, on the one hand, Jakubowicz's chapter on the relationship between political systems and media freedom and independence, and, on the other hand, Downey's chapter on the impact of international media corporations and Harcourt's chapter on transnational media regulation. Here Jenssen suggests there is 'a certain tension' between arguments presented by Jakubowicz on the one hand, and Downey and Harcourt on the other, in the sense that Jakubowicz's analysis suggest that Central and Eastern European media are tightly controlled by political elites, and hence come close to the so-called 'polarised pluralist' model as described by Hallin and Mancini,

while Downey's and Harcourt's analyses indicate that the media in the region are closer to the what is described by Hallin and Mancini as the 'liberal' model.

While Jenssen is right in noting that this tension is to an extent a result of the choice of focus in each of the chapters, the larger argument we were trying to make by contrasting these studies should not be read through the lens of Hallin and Mancini's models. As Hallin and Mancini themselves note in the introduction to their edited collection that was published in the same year as our own book, the three media models developed in their 2004 book – the liberal model, the democratic corporatist model, and the polarised pluralist model – were *not* developed with the intention for them to be used as 'a set of categories classifying any and all media systems' (2012: 4). In contrast, they argue, the different media system variables and political system variables developed to compare the media-politics relationship in the West – including the role of the state and the degree of journalistic professionalism – do seem to translate better to cases outside the West.

These arguments resonate with those advanced in our book, where our focus was not on using existing media models, but on rethinking, extending and re-conceptualizing the roster of variables used by Hallin and Mancini to capture the different factors that influence the media. In line with this, we were trying to show that Central and Eastern European media systems cannot be adequately explained by relying on one sole category of factors – such as the various political factors examined by Hallin and Mancini – but that we need to consider these in the context of other, economic, cultural, social and historical factors, at both national and transnational levels. This does not mean that we wanted to discount the importance of political factors as such, or argue that they are subordinated to, for instance, economic factors. Rather, what we argue is that any effective explanation of why the media are as they are will need to map out complex causal patterns of factors that are themselves influencing each-other, rather than constituting neat mono-causal chains. This is why several chapters in the book remain unclear on the direction of causality – as Jenssen right notes, for instance, the direction of causality between political systems and ethno-cultural diversity in the media, discussed in Mihelj's chapter, can differ from case to case. In light of the methodological issues discussed earlier, this lack of clarity and consistency in the direction of causation should not be seen as an example of 'bad' analysis, but rather as an accurate description of the nature of media systems and their embeddedness in political, economic and cultural contexts, which cannot be fitted into simple, uni-directional and mono-causal patterns of explanation.

Let us now turn to Hrvatin and Petković's comments. The first thing to note is that the review, while interesting and written in an engaging manner, left us rather puzzled. Not because we disagreed with the arguments put forward by the authors, but because we could not see how they apply to our work. At many points, we felt as if the authors were trying to write a separate article, without really engaging closely with what we have to say in the book. Nonetheless, we shall try to do our best in trying to relate some of the key points they make to our own work.

First, the authors take issue with our decision to adopt 'Central and Eastern Europe' in the title, suggest that it may be more useful to ask where and what is 'the West', or where and what is 'Europe', and argue that these ideologically determined notions have no explanatory value at all: 'They were useless for explanatory purposes in 1990, and are even more so in 2013.' We could not agree more. Many good books have been written examining the historical formation of ideologically charged notions such as Eastern Europe and Balkans

(e.g. Bakić-Hayden and Hayden 1992, Wolff 1994, Todorova 1997), and we have ourselves contributed to this debate in other work (see, for instance, Mihelj 2012). In line with this, we have not used place (in this case the country's location in Central and Eastern Europe, however defined) as an explanatory variable. Quite to the contrary: the chapters in the book focus on internal variation within the region, and hence suggest that conditions other than geographical location can offer better clues for explaining the nature of media systems in the region countries, as well as highlight similarities with media systems beyond the region. While we argue for the importance of considering complex causal patterns, we never argue for the inclusion of geographical location as a factor in such causal patterns. The mention of Central and Eastern Europe in the title is meant to convey what our main empirical object of analysis is, and does not suggest that geographic location itself offers any explanation; the key explanatory factors we are interested in are listed in the second part of the title (politics, economy, culture).

Of course, it would have been desirable to offer a more wide-ranging examination of media systems beyond Central and Eastern Europe. And yes, our decision to focus on this particular region was conditioned by the institutional context in which the book emerged, but this is true of any academic endeavour. However, even if we were all of the sudden given the opportunity to write a volume comparing media systems globally, we do not feel such a volume would make much more headway in our understanding of media systems than the more regionally focussed volume we edited. This is because the amount of available primary research is still too limited, and it will take years for this to change. A few decades down the line we may well be in the position to start developing a more global mapping of media systems. At the moment, however, any mapping that purports to be 'global' tends to disintegrate into a set of country-by-country or region-by-region-descriptions with little common basis for comparison or overarching arguments that would seek to explain differences and similarities between cases in the way we attempted to do in our book.

Hrvatín and Petković also rightly argue that Central and Eastern European media are often examined within the rather narrow framework of 'democratization' and 'media transformation', which assumes a consensus on the preferred direction of transformation. What they seem to suggest as a remedy, however, is an analysis that focuses on the role of the economic system, suggesting that 'the reform of the media system can be implemented only as part of the reform of the economic system'. While we agree that economic reforms are an absolutely necessary prerequisite for successful media reform, we feel that Hrvatín and Petković are running the danger of substituting one type of mono-causal analysis (premised solely on political explanations, viewed within the narrow framework of democratization/transition) with another (premised solely on economic explanations). This is precisely the type of solution we have tried to argue against in our book. As we state in our conclusion: 'It is not the economic or the political or the cultural or the transnational or the national that by themselves determine the character of the media system but the interaction of a number of factors' (Downey and Mihelj 2012: 195). We also found it awkward that the authors, given the importance they ascribe to economic factors, did not engage with Sparks' contribution to our volume – but this again reinforces our impression that their comments were largely written from a general perspective and were not based on a serious engagement with our book.

Finally, we also agree with Hrvatín and Petković's point about the importance of 'field research' and the involvement of 'local experts' in comparative research. However, we do not think that either field research or local experts should be privileged in this context. As any

other method, field research – by which we assume a combination of ethnography, interviews with local actors etc. – has its own strengths and weaknesses, and is best combined with other methods. Likewise, local experts should not automatically be seen as having a privileged viewpoint; for the purpose of comparative work, it is the exchange between insiders and outsiders that can often help reveal features of media systems that would otherwise remain invisible to both sides. Indeed, our own collaboration as editors – one British, the other Slovenian – is an example of such fruitful exchange between an ‘insider’ and an ‘outsider’, and the book itself has profited from contributions of both ‘local experts’ and ‘outside observers’ whose exchanges during numerous meetings have helped us flesh out our main arguments. Working across the various disciplinary, cultural, language and other boundaries has not been always easy, but we feel that the end result speaks for itself and testifies to the value of such academic endeavour. What we need is more opportunities for such collaborations, rather than solely reliance on ‘local experts’, with due consideration of the inevitable power dynamics that shapes any social activity, including academic work.

Bibliography

Bakić-Hayden, M, and Hayden, R. M. 1992. ‘Orientalist Variations on the Theme ‘Balkans’: Symbolic Geography in Recent Yugoslav Cultural Politics’, *Slavic Review*, 51(1): 1–15.

Downey, J. and Mihelj, S. 2012. ‘Conclusion’, in Downey, J. and Mihelj, S. (eds.), *Central and Eastern European Media in Comparative Perspective: Politics, Economy and Culture* (Farnham: Ashgate), 189-196.

Downey, J and Stanyer, J. 2010. ‘Comparative Media Analysis: Why Some Fuzzy Thinking Might Help. Applying Fuzzy Set Qualitative Comparative Analysis to the Personalization of Mediates Political Communication’, *European Journal of Communication* 25(4): 331-347.

Hallin, D. C. and Mancini, P. 2004. *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Hallin, D. C. and Mancini, P., (eds.) *Comparing Media Systems beyond the Western World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Mihelj, S. (2012) ‘Drawing the East-West Border: Narratives of Modernity and Identity in the Julian Region, 1947-1954’, in Lindenberger, Thomas, Marcus M. Payk, Bernd Stoeber and Annette Vowinckel (eds.) *Cold War Cultures: Perspectives on Eastern and Western European Societies*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, pp. 276-96.

Ragin, C. 2008. *Redesigning Social Inquiry: Fuzzy Sets and Beyond* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

Todorova, M. 1997 *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Wolff, L. 1994. *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenmen.*(Stanford: Stanford University Press).

