

Critical books review

Understanding where we come from to know where we're going

HALLIN, D. C.; MANCINI, P. *Sistemas mediáticos comparados. Tres modelos de relación entre los medios de comunicación y la política*. Barcelona: Editorial Hacer, 2008.

ISBN: 978-84-96913-12-7

Original title: *Comparing Media Systems. Three Models of Media and Politics*

Translation: Sheila Waldeck

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When the publisher Hacer decided to take on the translation of this book, without doubt it made the right decision. *Comparing Media Systems. Three models of media and politics*, published in 2004, has been one of the most highly renowned academic works in the area of media studies in recent years. This can be seen from the different awards and academic recognition received by the book. Lecturers Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini, authors of the text, are continuously asked by universities, research centres and international conferences to present or discuss the content of the work. Plus several international seminars have been held to discuss the proposals of media models and their application in countries or regions not included in the book. So being able to have a Spanish version of this work (and we hope it will soon be available in Catalan) was certainly useful in order to introduce this book completely into our context of media research.

As its point of departure, *Sistemas mediáticos comparados* takes another leading work of media studies: *Four Theories of the Press* (1956). At that time, Siebert, Peterson and Schramm attempted to identify the different media

models existing in the world in order to understand the differences between the media in each country and the reasons behind this diversity. *Four Theories of the Press* has been a reference work for nearly four decades but the changes undergone both by media systems and political systems made it advisable to review their proposals. So Hallin and Mancini took on this task in 1998 and started research based on the same premise as the one on which Siebert [et al.] founded their study: a media system cannot be understood without considering the nature of the state, of the political and party system and of the development of civil society and its structure. But the novelty is that *Sistemas mediáticos comparados* considers that the media are not a variable that is dependent on the political system. As a result of evolution, they have acquired the capacity to influence the political system to quite an extent, and have been repositioned in the social system and have occupied an increasingly more central and basic place with regard to their functioning. Consequently, when tackling the definition of media models, Hallin and Mancini prefer to do so by studying the links and interdependencies established between media systems and political systems. The models suggested are therefore systemisations of the relations between media agents and political agents, which allow us to understand the current configuration of the media.

As can be seen in various chapters of the book, the research carried out by Hallin and Mancini has taken very much into account the historical development of the social and political contexts of the geopolitical areas analysed. For methodological reasons, the analysis has been limited to the countries of Western Europe and North America. In spite of this, they realise that other media contexts should be analysed to verify whether the models suggested can be applied or whether they need to be adapted or, certainly, redefined. Moreover, the authors emphasise that their pro-

posal does not aim to be a normative definition of “boxes” where each country can be placed according to the values taken by a series of variables. The models must be understood as systems of relations that each particular case resembles more or less accurately, but the ultimate objective is to provide the elements of analysis required to understand why the media in a particular state or geopolitical region are configured the way they are. This book’s proposal arises from an empirical study, which assumes that the models obtained are dynamic. In fact, one of the main conclusions is that there is an evident trend towards convergence among the models proposed.

The book has nine chapters and is divided into three parts. The first part defines the theoretical framework underlying the models defined (chapters 2, 3 and 4). So chapter 2 presents and analyses in detail the dimensions used to compare the media systems. Firstly, the book talks about the development of media markets, paying attention to issues such as the configuration of the press: the circulation, readership, type of newspapers, etc. It then goes deeper into the concept of political parallelism and analyses its presence and effect both on the press and on broadcasting. It also assesses the development of journalistic professionalism, based on the concepts of independence, the normative institutionalisation of the profession, orientation towards public service and the instrumentalisation of journalists. Finally, it deals with the intervention of the state in the media and observes the nature and intensity of this. Chapter 3 focuses on an analysis of the variables that define the political system. It therefore deals with issues such as relations between politics and the economy, the role of the state in society, the type of democracy and the party system, the types of civil organisation and the development of rational legal authorities or the predominance of patronage. Depending on the different values that might be acquired by the variables presented in these two chapters and the different combinations possible, in the fourth chapter Hallin and Mancini introduce the three models that go to make up their proposal: the Mediterranean or polarised pluralist model, the North European or democratic corporatist model and the North Atlantic or liberal model.

The second part of the book (chapters 5, 6 and 7) analyses each of these models in depth. With regard to the Mediterranean or polarised pluralist model, they point out that it

is characteristic of countries or areas with high polarisation. The state and political parties play a relevant role in many areas of social life. For their part, citizens show a deeply rooted and diversified political loyalty. Consequently, it is difficult to define clearly what is in the general interest and how to achieve this. In this context, the consumption of media and information is unequal both in volume and in product type among those who are politically active and those who are not. The media structure is characterised by external pluralism accompanied by strong political parallelism. With regard to professionalism in the sector, and in spite of official training, patronage is habitual and the rational legal authorities do not usually have sufficient capacity to act to make them relevant or effective.

In the North European or democratic corporatist model, the organisation of civil society is solid and complex. The result is the definition of the public good and a strong commitment to achieving it. Great value is placed on the free circulation of information and the state plays a key role in guaranteeing and promoting the necessary circumstances to make this possible. There is a culture of the consumption of information on issues of public interest that is more deeply rooted than in the Mediterranean model. Moreover, the media are considered to be an important means of expression for different social groups and different ideologies. Professional colleges and codes or rules of conduct play a very important role in this. The state exercises great intervention in the media system but at the same time ensures the media are independent.

With regard to the North Atlantic or liberal model, we can say this is characteristic of countries where society is organised along more individualist lines. Consequently, state intervention is less valued and is considered to be negative for the free circulation of information. The media fulfil functions closer to entertainment and address themselves to citizens as consumers. On the other hand, they exercise the role of controllers of activities in the political sphere. The culture of professionalism is quite developed although, unlike the North European model, it is not usually so institutionalised.

In the third part of the book (chapter 8 and conclusions), Hallin and Mancini reflect on the predicted convergence of the models proposed and their future. The question is handled with a certain precaution and the authors debate

their limits. The endogenous and exogenous causes are identified for the homogenisation towards the liberal model. In the first case, the influence and effects are analysed both of the so-called Americanisation of media products and structures as well as of the appearance of an international media culture and of the repercussions of technological development. With regard to endogenous causes, the authors look deeper at the concepts of modernisation, secularisation and commercialisation of the media and society.

This is a book that is highly recommended and perhaps obligatory for all those researchers and educators in the areas of media structure and media policy. On the one hand, it is a solid and fundamental theoretical reference for research, especially in the case of comparative media analysis. On the other hand, it needs to be included on the curriculum to provide students with knowledge that will help them both understand the reality of the media system and also tackle the study of the media in other countries. Although it is academic, the text is easy to read. This also means that both media professionals and students can take advantage of it, as well as others interested in the industry. As mentioned at the start of this review, this book will soon be, if it isn't already, a work of reference for media research and studies.