

Democracy and new media in Central and Eastern Europe



Interview with Dr. Karol Jakubowicz

**on new notions of media, changing users behavior and impact of new technologies
on Central and Eastern European democracies**

The development of new media platforms and players along with significant changes in the users' behavior have changed the process of communication, making it more personalized, individual, creative and interactive. The emergence of online innovations has just become the subject of several different debates emphasizing the role of technology in strengthening the quality of the public sphere and thus democracy. The subject is relevant for both mature and young democracies, where new media platforms, such as blogs or social networks, continue to increase in popularity among young users of the Internet. How do we define the new media platforms that have just become important players in a large number of media systems today? To what extent have new media technologies been adopted in Central and Eastern Europe? Do the new notions of media support the development of democracy in this part of the world? What are the perspectives for the future? (Ed.)

**To what extent have new technologies changed the nature of communication?
How can one define the mass media today?**

A lot of colorful language is being used to describe what is happening in the media field today. Napoli does not venture beyond "an evolving media environment," but Bowman and Willis and Hitchens speak of a new "media ecosystem;" the European Parliament notes the existence of a "multi-player environment" within a new "media ecology;" Latzer sees "disorder in communications policy;" and McNair views changes in the contemporary communication environment as a shift from a "control paradigm" to a "chaos paradigm."

If some people see "chaos," it is because technological change and convergence are blurring all old distinctions and enabling new forms of mediated communication, unlike anything possible before. It used to be that we had point-to-point communication (one-to-one) in telecommunications and point-to-multipoint (one-to-many) synchronous (linear) communication in broadcasting. Now, mediated communication can be asynchronous (non-linear), thanks to time-shifting, complemented by place-shifting, due to mobile media. We have on the Internet and other platforms what is known as networked communication, combining all the

modes of communication. This includes one-to-one communication; “private” communication (one-to-few); group communication (few-to-few); “masspersonal communication” (mass interpersonal communication, e.g. as in the case of blogs, a form of one-to-many communication), or mass self-communication (personal self-expression or creativity for general consumption); finally general communication (many-to-many). “Allocution,” as defined by Bordewijk and van Kaam is being complemented more and more (but not replaced) by interactive “conversation.”

Thanks to deinstitutionalization and disintermediation in mediated communication, “the media” (as traditionally defined) are no longer the only source of content reaching the mass public. The phenomenon has also been officially recognized by the Council of Europe in Recommendation CM/Rec(2011)7 on a new notion of media, stating in part that: “the functioning and existence of traditional media actors, as well as their economic models and professional standards, are being complemented or replaced by other actors. New actors have assumed functions in the production and distribution process of media services which, until recently, had been performed only (or mostly) by traditional media organisations; these include content aggregators, application designers and users who are also producers of content.”

There are those who see the coming of a “paradigm shift” whereby traditional mass media organizations would be wholly replaced by thousands and millions of small professional or unprofessional content providers. These visions are far-fetched and unrealistic. Traditional media are very robust and, in one form or another, will continue to provide the widest range and highest quality of content, available also on the Internet and even on Twitter.

Because of the “dematerialization” of media content (which with digitization can be separated both from its traditional physical form (paper, roll of film, book, tape, etc.) and from the technology so far used to deliver it to the public, there is a tendency to say that the traditional mass media are “finished.” This is not the case. Because of the nature of its contents and the purposes it serves, a newspaper is still a newspaper, whether it is indeed delivered on paper, or electronically. The same is true of photographs, films, books, etc. Technologies of delivery are changing fast, but the media themselves and user habits and expectations are changing much more slowly. The mass media are changing, of course, but they are far from being finished.

How may current media developments be introduced into a regulatory framework?

The legal and policy response to any new phenomenon is, to begin with, usually confused, erratic and unpredictable. For a long time, new developments are in legal limbo. We can see this in many examples. The European Parliament has noted that the so called “prosumers,” i.e. consumers who not only access, but also create or sell

content, products and services through, for example, YouTube, eBay or other intermediaries, are a phenomenon that is not addressed in the current legal framework for the digital environment. On another occasion the European Parliament voiced its concerns regarding blogs, noting that “the status of their authors and publishers, including their legal status, is neither determined nor made clear to the readers of the weblogs, causing uncertainties regarding impartiality, reliability, source protection, applicability of ethical codes and the assignment of liability in the event of lawsuits.” The deputies believed that the growth of commercial media outlets for user-generated content (UGC), such as photos and videos, used without paying a fee, raised problems of ethics, right of reply and privacy, and put journalists and other media professionals under pressure.

Search engines, a service of vast importance to the media, also operate in a legal vacuum and have no place in media law. The reason for this is the dual, telecom and information-related nature of such services, meaning that they are primarily regarded as regulated by telecommunications law.

Policy- and law-makers face two major problems as concerns creating a regulatory framework for the new services. The first one is to distinguish media services from information society services. The latter are telecommunication services, which cannot be regulated in the same way as the media. It has taken the European Union many years to develop the Audiovisual Media Service Directive, defining criteria for doing this with regard to non-linear (on demand) audiovisual media services, but the matter is still far from clear. This problem will be with us for a long time to come. The second problem is to know a mass medium when you see one. For example, to use the example given by the European Parliament, should we classify all blogs as mass media, or not? And if not all, then maybe some of them, but according to what criteria? This issue has been addressed for some time by the Council of Europe. The result so far is the already mentioned Recommendation CM/Rec(2011)7 on a new notion of media which calls on member states to adopt “a broad notion of media” and specifies “media criteria” (intent to act as media, purpose and underlying objectives of media, editorial control, professional standards, outreach and dissemination, public expectation) and more detailed indicators for applying these criteria to establish whether we have to do with a mass medium in a given instance or not. It is not clear how they will be applied from an administrative point of view, but most probably citizen journalism, blogs, podcasts and videocasts, as well as any other “media-like” form will have to be assessed on a case-by-case basis to see whether they should be covered by the regulatory framework of the media.

Do the new media serve democracy?

There are four schools of thought in this regard. New technology enthusiasts believe that these technologies and the new media will put us on the road to grassroots, direct participatory democracy. Others claim that the new media and technologies

will destroy democracy. They will fragment society and undermine civil society and the public sphere. As a result, they will prevent the usual mechanisms and procedures of democracy from operating, making it impossible for the citizens to develop a shared political will as a foundation for democratic decision-making and development of public policy.

Then, there are the realists or pragmatists, like Larry Diamond, who say that in the end, technology — the computer, the Internet, the mobile phone, and countless innovative applications for them, including “new social media” such as Facebook and Twitter — is merely a tool, open to both noble and nefarious purposes. It can serve as “liberation technology” and expand political, social, and economic freedom. The Internet’s decentralized character and ability (along with mobile-phone networks) to reach large numbers of people very quickly, are well suited to grass-roots organizing. But are they going to be the decisive factor in the struggle? Not if we examine the “Internet,” “Facebook,” “Twitter” and other revolutions in recent years, including in Arab countries. Arab activists themselves say that the new technologies helped, but the revolutions were carried out by the populations of those countries. They advise Western observers to “take off their Internet glasses” and see the situation as it is.

The fourth school of thought says that the new media and technologies will strengthen democracy, but it is too early to tell what impact they will ultimately have, especially whether they will usher in direct democracy. Beth Noveck doubts this: “We have arrived at a point in history when technology is making it possible for governments to get better scientific information and innovative ideas for how to solve problems faster and, at the same time, to democratize governance. We can’t replace government with Google or Wikipedia and arrive at the right answers. There are no right answers. In other words, direct or ‘crowdsourced’ democracy is too simplistic for the complexities of modern life.” This is a popular view, namely that the democracy of tomorrow will still be a representative democracy, taking advantage of what the new technologies have to offer. Another view is that Robert Dahl is right: “Whatever form it takes, the democracy of our successors will not and cannot be the democracy of our predecessors.” A new form of democracy will have to emerge and it will have to be adjusted to the opportunities and limitations of the new technologies, relying on them heavily for its operation.

How would you evaluate the situation in Central and Eastern Europe?

The democratic countries of the region do not differ fundamentally from others, except that because of lower levels of economic development and a late start, they are behind the more developed countries in terms of new media and technologies penetration and use, and the development of new types of services. If you take the EU publication “Europe’s Digital Competitiveness Report 2010” it says clearly that in terms of regular Internet use the “lagging regions” are in Central, Eastern and

Southern Europe, “although recent growth rates show that they are catching up.” Most EU-wide comparisons lead to similar conclusions, for example as concerns the broadband penetration rate, DSL national and rural coverage, use of the Internet for e-commerce, disparities in digital literacy across European regions, etc. This is unavoidable: lower income levels and smaller markets mean that business opportunities are smaller and that affects new technology take-up and distribution.

As for the democratic contribution of the new media and technologies in Central and Eastern Europe, it seems clear that, broadly, we have to do with two types of situations. In the more democratic countries, they perform the usual role of a complement to the public sphere, with the blogosphere, citizen journalism, social networks, etc. providing forums for the expression of new ideas, for mobilization and organizing. This is why new media play an increasingly powerful role in shaping the political process. For example, across much of the region political parties and civil society organizations have websites. As in the Arab revolutions I already mentioned, the new media perform two main roles: as “spheres of dissidence” (agoras for dissident or oppositional discourses) and as “tools” for instant communication, mobilization and organization.

When the situation erupts into conflict, these new technologies — especially the Internet and mobile telephony — acquire special importance. One example may be the protest in Moldova concerning government policies and the impending parliamentary elections in April of 2009. The crowd generated for this protest was almost entirely created via Facebook and Twitter.

Another case in point were the street protests, rioting and violence in Hungary in 2006, following the disclosure of the Socialist prime minister’s admission that he and his government had consciously misled the public through a series of lies in order to win re-election. A study conducted by Mónika Mátyay and Ildikó Kaposi shows that radical right-wing groups and sympathisers played an active part in the demonstrations. These radical political-cultural groups used the internet for exchanging information, mobilising supporters, and developing their narratives of the events. Yet, despite the sophisticated uses of communication technology to further political goals, no political transformation occurred as a result in 2006. However, the internet served — and continues to serve — as a medium for sustaining an alternative, anti-establishment political narrative for marginal political groups, enabling them to publish their own version of contemporary events and history. In the absence of a revolution, the internet-enabled presence of radical right-wing voices in the public domain continues to be their most significant, symbolic achievement, write the authors.

In the less democratic countries, the new media may be the only relatively free and less controlled area for the expression of dissident and oppositional ideas. The use of new technologies for such purposes and for distributing content that is unwelcome by the authorities has a long and noble tradition in those countries. For example, in the old Soviet Union, one of the technologies used was roentgenizdat,

e.g. copies of Western music made privately and then distributed from hand to hand. The name derives from a technology used until the 1960s, whereby young people made so-called X-ray plates or rib records using X-ray pictures to record music and then cut them into the form of a record.

Today such feats of ingenuity are no longer needed, but it still takes special determination to use the new technologies to exercise freedom of speech. Reporters Without Borders in their 2011 version of “Enemies of the Internet” list Belarus as one of the countries under surveillance. The publication says that until recently the Internet was Belarus’ sole space for freedom, but has now been put under a regulatory microscope by the government. The suspicious death of an online journalist has traumatized the profession. In the run-up to the elections, and during the demonstrations following the disputed re-election of Alexander Lukashenko, civil society has witnessed crackdowns both offline, against demonstrators and journalists, and online, via blockings, cyberattacks and tampering.

Another country that has been put “under surveillance” by Reporters Without Borders is Russia. There, leaders and their allies have effectively blended the old tactics of repression (physical violence, including intimidation, assault, and murder) with newer, subtler forms of censorship (imposing onerous registration requirements and severe content limits; intermittent but untraceable disabling of independent media websites; extension of defamation laws and an anti-extremism statute to the authors of Web content).

So, in those countries the new media and technologies have become a new battlefield of the same old struggle for freedom and democracy on the one hand, and for the maintenance of authoritarian regimes on the other. As Larry Diamond has put it, the struggle for electronic access is really just the timeless struggle for freedom by new means. It is not technology, but people, organizations, and governments that will determine who prevails.



Dr. Karol Jakubowicz is an expert on electronic media for the Council of Europe, the European Union, the European Broadcasting Union and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. He has been Chairman of the Intergovernmental Council of the UNESCO Information for All Programme and a member of the Council of the Independent Media Commission in Kosovo. He has long been active in the work of the Council of Europe, inter alia as Chairman of the Committee of Experts on Media Concentration and Pluralism, Chairman of the Standing Committee on Transfrontier Television and Chairman of the Steering Committee on the Media and New Communication Services. In addition to his scholarly pursuits, Dr. Karol Jakubowicz has worked as a journalist and executive in the Polish press, radio and television. He has taught at the Institute of Journalism at the University

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