

Culture and media systems: Interview with Peter Gross



Societal and technological changes together with the rise of network practices and digital ecosystems of media have changed our understanding of traditional models of media and their systems. Precious few attempts have been made to apply the role of culture to contemporary media systems conceptualizations. We ask Prof. Peter Gross about limitations of existing studies and the role of culture in digital ecosystems.

To what extent do existing contributions to media systems theory and practice might still be used as a reference point for comparative analyses?

Traditional media systems theories, developed through the lenses of extant economic and political systems, are still useful, but only for establishing the relationship between such systems and outlining the operative reality that is created by the media systems' observed natures, functions and manner of functioning, and relationships to other institutions. These theories do not, however, explain the reasons why a media system exhibits a certain nature, manner of functioning, reasons for their functioning, and relationships with other societal institutions, no more than they do so for the economic and political system.

What are the main limitations? What are the biggest challenges?

The limitations of existing media systems theories appear to me to be quite clear: the lack of the human element. They lack, in the Habermasian sense, the “anchoring” of their mechanisms in the cultural life-worlds of those who make a system function, whether political, economic, or media. Systems and institutions, no matter their architecture and officially announced purpose and functions, are all about people and groups of people. The elites, in particular, greatly affect the way systems and institutions function, thus also affecting their nature, purpose and the kind of relationships that are developed between systems and institutions. That is, culture (values, beliefs, attitudes) translates into behaviors and practices that shape whatever a system or institution is officially meant to be, represent, and do. In this regard, the biggest challenge is to identify an elites' cultural traits that are to be measured and, an even bigger challenge, is finding ways of measuring them in regard to how they affect systems and institutions.

You have recently made several attempts to look at media systems models from the cultural perspective. How useful has this approach been?

My work has focused on identifying those cultural values, beliefs and attitudes that the elites bring to shaping the nature of the media's nature and manner of functioning, as well as that of the political and economic system, and their mutually affecting relationships. I've had to dip into the work of political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists to find guidance and the result is, by necessity, a hybrid approach. What I call the cultural kaleidoscopic prism through which one can examine media systems is yet to be tested; the jury is still out on its utility. It is a start and I hope to have my book published next year.

How do you define media/journalism culture?

These are two separate if related issues. Journalism culture is well defined in the literature that we have from James Carry's work to more recent works on both sides of the Atlantic. Defining media culture is to define the culture of a system or institution, which by extension is the product of a societal-national culture. I would define it as a confluence of values, beliefs and attitudes held by the political, economic and media elites that crystalize the way media systems function, their nature and relationships.

When conducting your analysis have you also looked at media from the perspective of their internal structures and organizational cultures?

The structures of media systems are similar across Eastern Europe, at least among those countries that are still democratizing to one degree or another. The organizational cultures differ, of course, and this is part of the overall consideration when looking at media systems. Organizational culture reveals the coloring of the overall societal culture, the professional culture that it spawns, the degree of internal democratization and tied to it the degree to which the elites' culture affects it.

What are the most characteristic cultural features that might be used to describe media systems in Central and Eastern Europe?

This is not a question that can be answered here. We can follow up on Karol Jakubowicz's notion of Type A and Type B countries, but commonalities are difficult to identify for each of the countries in the two typologies. There also seems to be a shift whereby some countries from one rubric end up in the other. Specific cultural characteristic that are shared are very difficult to pinpoint. We need to look at how merit, community, fairness and justice, authority, the rule of ethics, and time are defined and operationalized. These cultural values speak to notions of the rule of

law, democratic accountability, and notions such as power distance and uncertainty avoidance. It is these fundamental values, and not a political or economic system (i.e. as long as it is not an authoritarian or totalitarian system), that define the way a system or institution functions, why and for whom it functions, its very nature.

What are the main differences between the countries in the region and how might they be explained?

All the countries in the region — to repeat, not including Russia, Belarus, and the Central Asian countries — have democratic political systems and open market economies, at least to one degree or another. Each country's political, economic and media systems function in a different manner. The differences are cultural and these differences are a function of history, religion, the nation building processes, national identity, and if, when and how deep Enlightenment ideas have penetrated the individual and national consciousness. This should be the focus of scholarly attention if we are to go beyond the standard examination of media systems.

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Prof. Dr. Peter Gross is a journalism professor at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, which specializes in international communication. He is a member of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication and served as Chair of Teaching Standards, Chair of the Markham International Student Paper Competition and Chair of Professional Freedom and Responsibility for the association's International Communication Division. He is a member of the European Network for Trans-Integration Research, the South East European Studies Association, the Society for Romanian Studies, the Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, COST A30, a research group sponsored by the European Union and the International Communication Association.



Peter Gross was interviewed by Michał Głowacki in April 2014.