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Media and Society: In search of models

[in Russian "SMI i obshchestvo: Modeli vzaimodeistvii"].

In Y.N. Zassoursky & O.M. Zdravomyslova (eds.), *Glasnost i zhurnalistika 1985-2005*

[Glasnost and Journalism 1985-2005]

Moscow: Gorbachev Foundation & Faculty of Journalism, Moscow State University, 2006, 168-177.

Gorbachev's Challenge

Mikhail Gorbachev spoke at the MSU Faculty of Journalism on 1 September 2000, delivering a landmark lecture in which he reflected upon perestroika and glasnost policy since 1985 (the lecture is published as the Prologue in *Russian Media Challenge*, see Nordenstreng, Vartanova & Zassoursky 2001, 11-19). He defended the revolution from the top in conditions when the country was “pregnant” for change, pointing out that reform was impossible without a debate with the public and a dialogue with the intelligentsia. Responding to those who claim that it was Gorbachev’s glasnost that ruined the country, he reaffirmed his choice in favour of democracy, openness and respect for the people.

The glasnost legacy represents a cultivated version of the role of media in a democracy known as the **social responsibility media model**.¹ In Gorbachev’s own words there is “no country or society where freedom of the press would be too much”, but on the other hand this “freedom must be linked to democracy, democratic institutions, and rules” (Ibid., 19). Furthermore he said: “It is impossible for the press to be free when society is closed or totalitarian and vice versa. This comprises an indivisible unity. But I am confident that the only restraints for the journalists, for the mass media might be their internal conscience, their convictions, honesty, and responsibility.” (Ibid., 18)

Such a view is libertarian, but not without conditions. In the traditional classification of *Four Theories of the Press* (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm 1956), Gorbachev’s glasnost falls in the category of social responsibility, refraining both from the classic authoritarian restrictions and from those exercised in the communist system, while at the same time prescribing that media undertake self-regulation in the interest of society at large. This is not what is advocated by a pure libertarian model, namely total absence of intervention in the media by the state or any other instrument of society – except the private media owner.

Gorbachev’s model stands for a kind of third way between unconditional freedom or autonomy of the media, on the one hand, and institutional conditions or dependency of the media, on the other. Actually such a balanced third way between two extremes is nothing new; it was present already in the thinking of many classics of liberalism. For example, John Stuart Mill’s famous *On Liberty* from the mid-19th

¹ The social responsibility model was developed in the United States by the Hutchins Commission in the 1940s as a consequence of the commercialization and concentration of the press. The United Kingdom followed the same line with its Royal Commission of the Press in the 1940s, and similar media commissions have operated in most Western countries since the 1960s. UNESCO also advocated the social responsibility model through the MacBride Commission in 1980, and the European Union has issued several reports and resolutions along the same lines. See e.g. Christians & Nordenstreng 2004.

century did not advocate freedom as an ultimate end and a “free marketplace of ideas” as a mechanism for “self-righting truth”; for Mill liberty was rather a means for the pursuit of truth and the common good of humankind. In this respect Mill can be seen as an early proponent of global environmentalism – a green of his time. What a connection between Mill and Gorbachev!

Accordingly, glasnost inspires us to reflect upon various models of the place and role of media in society. It served naturally as a fresh paradigm for outsiders to look at the media landscape in the Soviet Union turning into post-Soviet Russia, as is done in the Epilogue of *Russian Media Challenge* (by Nordenstreng and Paasilinna). But the impact of glasnost and perestroika goes much beyond looking at the (post-)Soviet/Russian media system: it opened a new chapter in analyzing social change everywhere – not only in other countries in transition from socialism to a market economy, and in so-called developing countries, but also in developed Western countries themselves.

Several concepts and theories in the Western tradition were indirectly shaken by the development initiated by Gorbachev’s reforms. The most visible of those shaken is the idea of freedom, which in the Cold War world served typically as an ideological instrument against communism, but which in the post-Soviet world has become rather an instrument to criticize Western market liberalism and globalization. In today’s world we are all invited to revisit the classics of liberalism such as J.S. Mill and to rectify the myths about freedom which were nurtured by the ideological East-West divide. At the same time we should be clever enough not to replace this ideological divide by a new one, between what is often seen as Islamic terrorism and Christian freedom.

Many Models

The literature of journalism and mass communication has produced innumerable media models other than the conventional extremes of libertarianism and authoritarianism plus the third way of social responsibility. These models are presented as typologies: lists of alternative media approaches to be found in a certain country or geopolitical region. The following is not a comprehensive inventory but a brief review of examples with short labels for each typology.

For post-perestroika **Russia**, Yassen Zassoursky (2001, 160-166) proposes as many as seven models:

- Glasnost
- Fourth power
- Corporate authoritarian
- Combined free press – corporate moguls
- Federal state-controlled
- Regional government-controlled
- Money-making commercial

A slightly different typology for Russia, based on the relationship between media and centers of power, is presented by Ivan Zassoursky (2001, 90-91):

- Propaganda machine
- Independent media
- Media-political system
- Instrumental

A synthesis of contemporary media models in the **United States** is presented in a new anthology *The Press* (Overholser & Hall Jamieson 2005):

- Marketplace of ideas
- Agenda setter
- Watchdog
- Informing the public
- Mobilizing citizen participation

Another American typology corresponds to the historical stages through which the press has developed, as presented by Michael Schudson (1995):

- Advocacy
- Market
- Trustee

A classic typology from the **United Kingdom** can be found in the works of Raymond Williams (1966):

- Authoritarian
- Paternal
- Commercial
- Democratic

A contemporary British list of media models is presented in *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory* (2005):

- Liberal-pluralist, Market
- Social responsibility, Public interest
- Professional
- Alternative

Another basic typology is typically found in **Scandinavia** – in Sweden even adopted as an official policy (Nordenstreng 1997):

- Information, Surveillance
- Criticism, Participation
- Forum, Open access

Finally, a recent classification of **Euro-American** media systems by Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004) suggests three overall models:

- Liberal
- Democratic corporatist
- Polarized pluralist

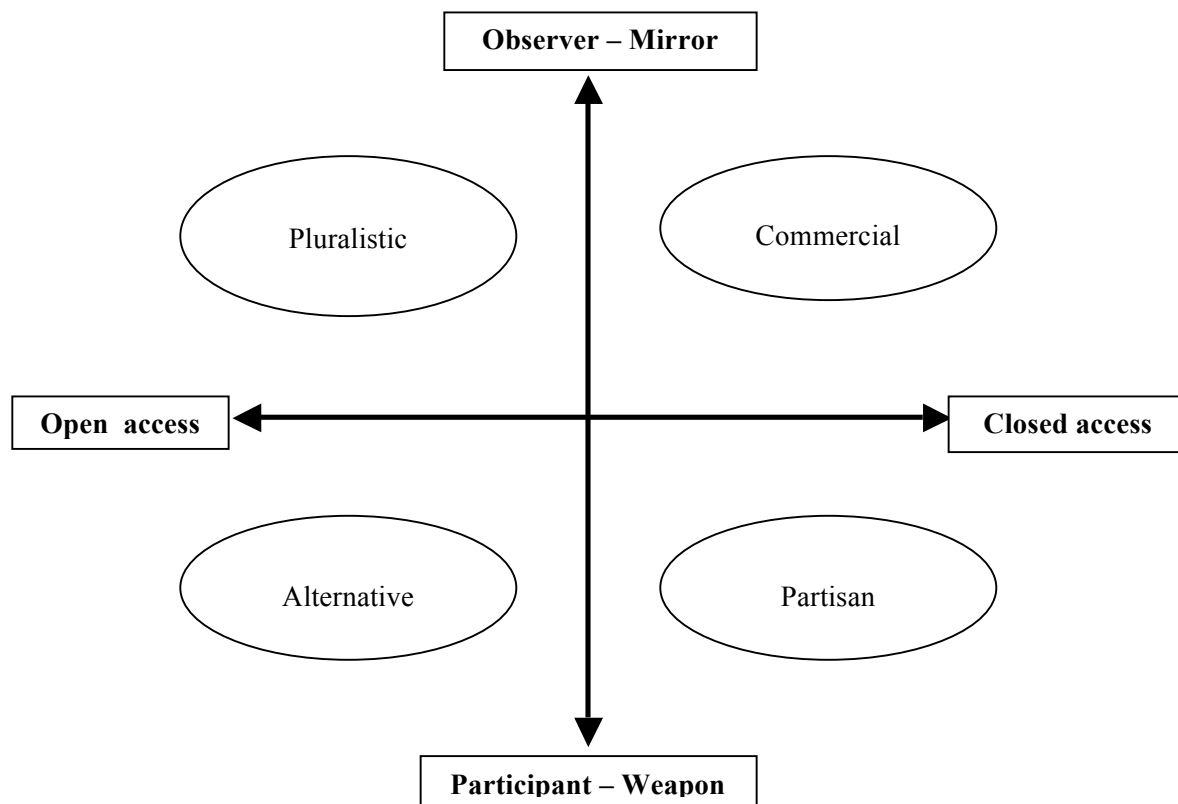
Normative Theories

Each of these typologies has its own logic of classification – sometimes clearly stated but often implicit. It is vital to explicate the concepts and theories on which such media models are based. This leads us to examine the media-society relationships and to the paradigms which determine the understanding of media and society in each case.

Media models can be approached at different levels: (1) by *describing what is* the phenomenon in question, (2) by *explaining the nature* of the phenomenon in question, and (3) by *determining* what the phenomenon in question *should do*. The first two levels represent descriptive and analytical approaches – a *sociological perspective* which maps out the functions, aims and objectives of the media in a social system. The third level for its part represents a *normative perspective* which defines the tasks, duties and responsibilities of the media in a socio-political and professional context. A normative approach is pursued by asking what the *task of media in society* is, and typical answers to this question are, for example: making money and supporting democracy.

One way to characterize different types of media is to construct maps based on two dimensions. In Figure 1 we single out the central dimensions of **Observer vs. Participant** in society and **Open vs. Closed access** to the media.

Figure 1. Four types of media

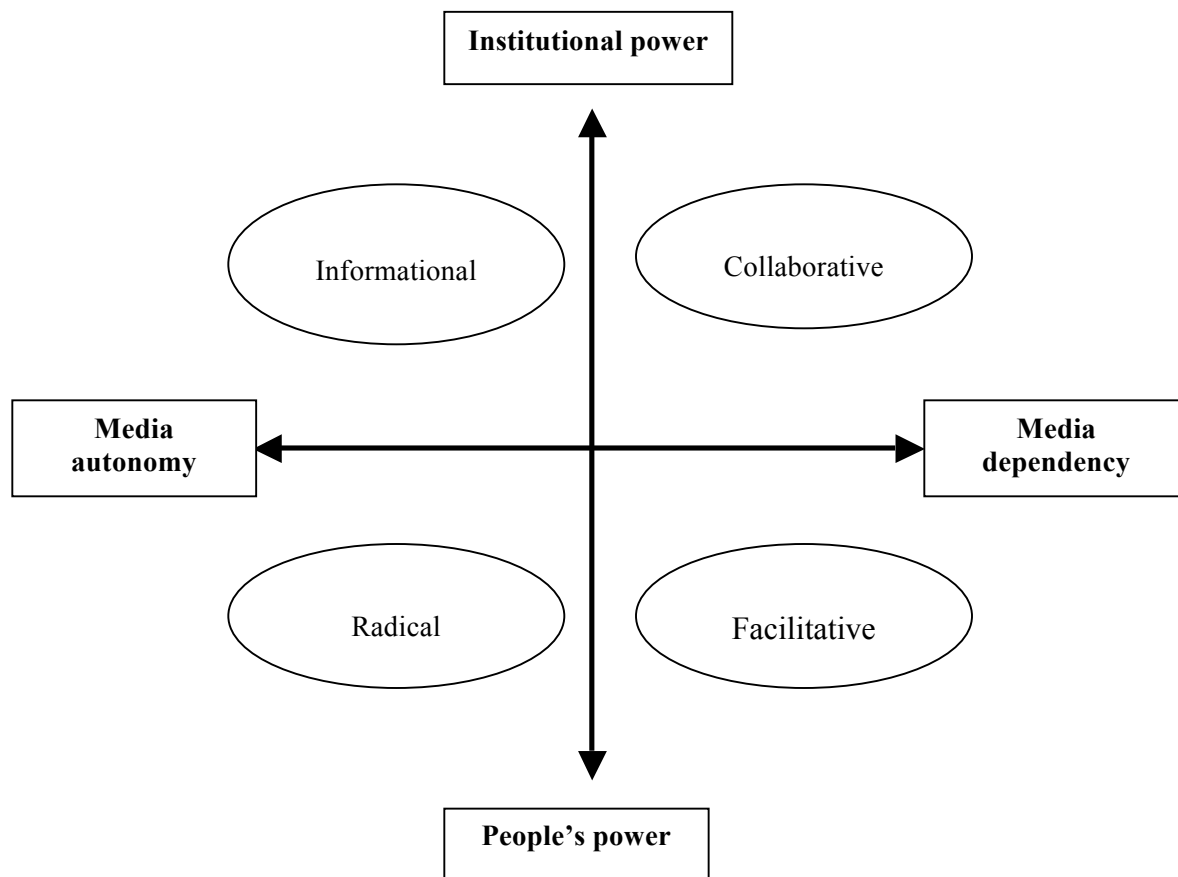


The basic (vertical) dimension runs between the extremes of an outside and neutral observer of events in society, or mirror for looking at the world, on the one hand, and an active participant in running and changing society, or weapon to fight in the world, on the other. Historically, among the first papers were both information gazettes of an observer nature (serving commercial and administrative elites) and participating papers of a fighting nature (serving political parties including liberation movements). The other (horizontal) dimension runs between two extreme types of gatekeeping for the media: open access

to the media without discrimination, and controlled access to the media with screening and selection of messages. Against these dimensions, four basic types of media roles can be distinguished. In each society at a time different media are located in different places in the figure.

Figure 2 presents a different logic for mapping out media models, with a focus on the normative roles of the media. While the horizontal dimension of media **Autonomy vs. Dependency** is more or less the same as the Open-Closed dimension above, the vertical dimension of **Institutional vs. People's power** is quite different from the Observer-Participant dimension.

Figure 2. Four normative roles of media



This map is based on the relation of the media to the power system in society, both political and economic power, leading to four different normative roles:

- 1) Collaborative role
- 2) Informational role
- 3) Facilitative role
- 4) Radical role

The listing is from Christians & al. (forthcoming). Collaborative role refers to cases where media directly serve governments and other centers of power like “lapdogs”. Informational role refers to typical cases of media seeing themselves as neutral observers reporting “objectively” about the world. However, since the sources of information are mostly in the centers of power, the agenda is largely set by the power system and thus the informational role is in fact quite dependent on institutional power and elites even if it may criticize them like a “watchdog”. Facilitative role has a greater distance from centers of power, since it seeks to provide citizens with a platform for expressing themselves and participating in the political process. This category also includes the movement of civic or “public journalism”. Radical role finally refers to a totally oppositional approach to the prevailing power, to the extent of questioning the foundations of socio-political order and inciting revolution. Liberation movements used to belong to this category; today it has only token representation among established political organizations and is mainly represented among free intellectuals and alternative social movements.

So What?

Why discuss and analyze media models, one may ask. After all, they are not reality but only idealizations of it. The answer is the same as in any area of public policy: since power in society is largely hidden in the prevailing ways of thinking, it is vital to liberate ourselves from the conventional ideologies – to achieve emancipation or “empowerment”. Changing reality is always done with conceptual models which need to be deconstructed. In the media world, glasnost is one of the greatest incentives for reform and Gorbachev has a place alongside Mill in the gallery of classics.

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