

## **Media Systems**

Diego Ceccobelli, University of Milan, [diego.ceccobelli@unimi.it](mailto:diego.ceccobelli@unimi.it)

Marco Mazzoni, University of Perugia, [marco.mazzoni@unipg.it](mailto:marco.mazzoni@unipg.it)

The concept of mass media combined with that of system(s) has travelled a long way over the last decades. Within this scientific journey, it experienced a main critical juncture, namely the publication of a book by Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini in 2004 (*Comparing Media Systems*), which immediately created a “pre and post Hallin and Mancini” scenario, within the scientific debate, around the notion of media system. By pivoting around the theoretical framework delineated by Hallin and Mancini, this entry hence outlines all the main stages that have characterized the scientific journey of the concept of media system, with final particular attention to the most recent lines of research currently debating whether (and eventually how) the digital would have turned upside down, transformed or simply updated one of the pillar notions within the field of political communication.

System theory; Media ecosystem; Media life; Political system; Hallin and Mancini;  
Digitalization

Defining and exploring the concept of media system is far from a simple task, particularly when considering its relationship to political communication. Media system is a concept that arises from the intersection and encounter of two terms, both of which continue to challenge the research agendas of various social scientists. In fact, both "media" and "system" carry broad, diverse, and multifaceted histories, spanning across and permeating different disciplinary fields. While this versatile characteristic makes them fertile and valuable concepts, it also necessitates handling them with utmost care, as they lack a well-defined conceptual boundary for their complete and accurate scientific utilization. Therefore, when these two terms come together, the ongoing indeterminacy makes defining and understanding the concept of media system a scientific exercise that requires a great deal of attention and caution (Hallin 2015).

Acknowledging this specificity, the aim of this article is to present and examine the debate surrounding the concept of media system, drawing from some of the key studies in the field. These studies have played a significant role in guiding research and analysis in the realm of political communication (Waisbord 2020), with the objective of unraveling the relationship between media and politics. Additionally, in an effort to comprehend potential contemporary developments within media systems, this entry concludes with a brief discussion on whether the digitalization of our societies, as suggested by existing literature, is leading to a disruption or merely a (modest) transformation in how we define and approach this concept.

### **What is a media system?**

In order to grasp the concept of media system, it is essential to develop a clear understanding of the terms "media" and "system." Although both terms lack fixed semantic meanings in the literature, and defy easy definition, the concept of system enjoys a more established and shared scientific tradition. It is particularly with Parsons' theory (1937) that a system is defined as a collection of relationships that work together to maintain an internal balance within the system and perform a function that contributes to the survival of society as a whole. When we merge the concept of system with media, according to Parsons' perspective, the media system would serve the purpose of socialization. It achieves this by disseminating knowledge, values, and symbols among individuals, equipping them with the necessary tools to function effectively within society.

Conversely, the concept of media has experienced a more turbulent journey in terms of its conceptualization and definition, as it is highly influenced by technological advancements and societal changes. New technologies have the power to significantly reshape the characteristics and dynamics of media. These transformations can have far-reaching effects, not only within the realm of media but also in its interactions with other interconnected systems, such as politics, economy, and society as a whole. For instance, there are significant differences in how the term "media" was employed in the early 20th century, compared to its contemporary understanding. During most of the 20th century, it was almost unthinkable to use the word "media" without referring to it as "mass media". However, in the present day, the term "social" seems to have replaced it, regardless of the ongoing scientific debate about the meaning and implications of "social" in relation to media (Papacharissi 2015). This shift is less pronounced when considering the concept of system, irrespective of its practical application in various fields such as political science, economics, or sociology.

In such a rapidly and continuously changing sphere, it is easy to fall into what Emiliano Trerè (2019) has defined as the specters of communicative reductionism, along with some related fallacies. For instance, the fallacy of technological presentism suggests that the emergence of social media did not render television obsolete as a medium. Similarly, the widespread use of television did not lead to the elimination of radio or print media from our lives. These media platforms continue to be highly relevant and influential in the media consumption of individuals, political actors, economic entities, and others, as concepts such as convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006), hybrid media systems (Chadwick, 2017), or media ecologies (Fuller 2005) clearly indicate. According to these sound theories within the field of media studies, what constitutes media does change with technological innovation and what this entails in terms of how citizens consume, process and engage with different forms of communication. However, it does so in a process of gradual influence and interaction among diverse technological modalities of communication, almost never resulting in rapid and radical upheavals in what media is and tend to signify.

Among these semantic domains and theoretical foundations of the discipline, the concept of the media ecosystem perhaps best encapsulates the continuous state of perpetual evolution and change that characterizes the media concept. The idea of "media ecosystem" refers to the interconnectedness and integration amongst various technologies and media platforms available today. It can be likened to an ecosystem in a small pond, where each component

nourishes, mixes, and interacts with the others, creating an environment characterized by mutual adaptation, survival, and evolution (Scolari 2012). Likewise, the media ecosystem interacts and engages with other ecosystems such as the economy, politics, religion, and more, seamlessly merging with every aspect of people's lives, both public and private. This is why Mark Deuze (2012) coined the term "media life" to signify the blurring of boundaries between the technological realm and the more distinctly human and social realms, which have traditionally been analyzed as separate or even disconnected.

From this intricate complexity, numerous scholars have raised questions about the applicability of the concept of a system to that of media, leading to the notion of media system. In a recent analysis, Paolo Mancini (2019) highlights that while certain sister disciplines of media studies have corresponding notions of a system, such as the concept of a political system, others, like psychology, do not. Through a comparison between the political system and the media system, Mancini emphasizes the presence of certain characteristics that aid in the understanding of what a media system is, its properties, and most importantly, its conceptual boundaries. Drawing upon the theories of David Easton, he asserts that every system should be primarily understood as "a unified whole comprised of the inputs it receives from external actors and the outputs it produces" (p. 8). By doing so, it becomes easier to comprehend a system as the outcome of mutual interdependence with other systems, involving shared actors, practices, and even institutions.

It is therefore highly challenging to arrive at a single, clear, and definitive definition of the concept of media system. Attempting to do so risks narrowing not only its explanatory capacity but also its ability to transcend time and space in order to comprehend the meanings, implications, and purposes of media within, in relation to, and sometimes even in symbiosis with a specific society or political entity. Recognizing this complexity, in defining and analyzing the concept of media system, it is in the literature exploring the relationship between politics, the media and journalism that the concept has gained solid ground in international scholarly discourse, acquiring a distinct scientific identity and significance that it previously lacked. The scholars credited with this significant contribution are Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini, whose influential book "Comparing Media Systems" has effectively ushered in a "pre- and post-Hallin and Mancini era" in the study of media systems.

## **Media system(s) according to Hallin and Mancini**

When Hallin and Mancini published their book "Comparing Media Systems" in 2004, the literature faced a significant limitation: it lacked the theoretical and conceptual tools necessary to compare countries where media behaved, sometimes convergently and other times divergently, in relation to the political system. To address this, Hallin and Mancini identified four dimensions that characterize the relationship between media and politics in Western liberal democracies: i) the diffusion of the press; ii) state control; iii) political parallelism; and iv) the professionalism of journalism. By examining these dimensions in eighteen Western liberal democracies, they identified three distinct models of media systems: the Pluralist-Polarized or Mediterranean model, the Democratic-Corporatist or North/Central Europe model, and the Liberal or North Atlantic model.

Another significant contribution made by Hallin and Mancini, in their seminal study, is the recognition of the multiple and plural dimensions of the concept of media system. They argued against the idea of a singular media system and emphasized the importance of considering the combined influence of agency and structure, including other systems, in shaping a media system. They highlighted that different political, cultural, and economic systems have the capacity to influence a media system to such an extent, leading to changes in its characteristics, properties, and functions. Their conception of media systems acknowledges the dynamic and non-deterministic nature of media, considering them as highly susceptible entities, not only to changes within their own ecosystem but also to influences originating from other systems, with the political system being one of the significant factors, although not limited to it.

As the meaning and implications of media have undergone radical changes since Hallin and Mancini's book was published, it is not surprising that in recent years some scholars have questioned whether the rapid technological advancements within the media have rendered their model, and its four dimensions, obsolete. However, these studies have so far refuted this hypothesis. When asked if it is time to move beyond Hallin and Mancini, the response has been that while there have been significant technological, social, political and economic changes in the past 10-15 years, these changes have not invalidated the analytical capacity of their four dimensions. Instead, the literature identifies the need to potentially update the dimensions to capture changes not only at the technological level but also at the political,

social, and cultural levels. This is evident, for example, in the increasing demand from citizens to play a more active and impactful role in the political processes of their communities.

### **Media systems after the digital revolution**

Among these studies, two have specifically focused on the four dimensions and the three models identified by Hallin and Mancini. The first study is conducted by Alice Mattoni and Diego Ceccobelli (2018) in their article aptly titled "Comparing Hybrid Media Systems: A theoretical framework for analysis." They emphasize the continued relevance of employing the four dimensions identified by Hallin and Mancini to understand and analyze contemporary media systems within Western liberal democracies, even in the era of the internet revolution (Castells 1996), social media logic (Van Dijck and Poell, 2013), and the platform society (Van Dijck et al., 2018). However, Mattoni and Ceccobelli argue that it is crucial to incorporate at least one additional dimension, which they refer to as v) grassroots participation. This dimension captures the emergence of new media types and genres as well as the bottom-up participation of lay citizens. By including this dimension, Mattoni and Ceccobelli suggest that a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of contemporary media systems can be achieved.

Another noteworthy study, conducted by Edda Humprecht and colleagues (2022), explores the influence of recent technological and non-technological revolutions on the conceptualization and analysis of the media system proposed by Hallin and Mancini. The research aims to understand how the digitization of societies, including the realms of politics and journalism, has impacted the theoretical and analytical dimensions of defining and utilizing the concept of the media system, particularly Hallin and Mancini's typology introduced in 2004. The study confirms the robustness of the analytical framework presented in "Comparing Media Systems" for comprehending and comparing media systems. However, it also proposes the necessity of updating their typology, to incorporate the effects of digital media on the contemporary relationship between politics and the media.

Based on these and other recent studies, it is evident that the concept of media system remains a fundamental pillar of our discipline. It not only facilitates comparisons between

different media systems but also provides a deeper understanding of the interplay between agency and structure, and their dynamics in countries with rapidly evolving media ecosystems. We argue that the rapid changes and transformations taking place do not render the heuristic and analytical value of the media system concept obsolete. Instead, they are reshaping the meaning and implications of the concept in contemporary times, adapting to the inherent and continuous changes in our society, encompassing not only the media landscape but also cultural, social, political, and economic dimensions (Mancini 2020). This adaptability is not surprising, as it aligns with the principles of system theory, which recognize that the concept of media systems, like any other systems, adapts and evolves to reflect the ever-changing nature of our complex and interconnected world.

All these changes need to be duly considered when engaging with the concept of the media system. As this contribution has tried to point out, the concept of media system is continuously nourished and influenced by transformations occurring not only within its own system but also across all the other systems with which it naturally interacts in everyday life. However, the extent to which these changes require a complete reevaluation of the existing understanding of media systems is still a subject of ongoing scholarly debate, which is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

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