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### *Media system: scope – structure – definition*

It is without doubt that among media studies terminology one of the most popular and frequently used is the term “media system”. It is present in specialist literature, journalism and in colloquial language. Although it sounds paradoxical, so far this term does not possess a normative or even generally accepted definition. As a result, it is understood and treated various ways by different authors<sup>1</sup>. This is so for two reasons; firstly – because of the term’s content specificity, secondly – because it is dynamic and variable in time and therefore difficult to precisely define.

When we analyse various media studies dictionaries and encyclopedias, we can see that in many of them the term “media system” does not exist, neither as a definition entry (with a general description) nor an issue entry (with more in depth description including historical background and the present situation, basic bibliography, etc.). For example, the term “media system” is not defined in the *Encyklopedia wiedzy o prasie*<sup>2</sup> (Press Encyclopedia), nor in *Popularna encyklopedia mass mediów*<sup>3</sup> (Mass Media Encyclopedia).

Meanwhile, in *Leksykon PWN – Media* (Media Lexicon), although it also does not include this term, we can find an in-depth description of “mass media means” which includes a statement that, “mass media means are the basis of a communication system in mass culture and to a large degree delineate its character”<sup>4</sup>. This means that mass media means are an autonomous creation, as is the entire communication system. It also means that the mass media are part of the “communication system” but are important enough that they are the basis of this system. In other words, mass communication is a complex process and mass media means are its basic component.

Presently, the most valuable source of knowledge on media is the *Słownik terminologii medialnej* (Dictionary of Media Terminology) which includes 1200 entries from 14 different

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<sup>1</sup> There is disagreement as far as the content of normative definitions of various media entriep. Cf. W. Sonczyk, *Wątpliwości związane z definicją normatywną pojęcia „prasa”*, “Media – Kultura – Społeczeństwo” 2008, nr 1, p. 45–54.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Encyklopedia wiedzy o prasie*, ed. by J. Maślanka, Wrocław 1976.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Popularna encyklopedia mass mediów*, ed. by J. Skrzypczak, Poznań 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Leksykon PWN – Media*, ed. by E. Banaszkiewicz-Zygmunt, Warszawa 2000, p. 215.

media studies spheres<sup>5</sup>. In it, we can find three terms of interest: media system, press system and radio-TV system. Since each is a separate entry with its own description, we can assume that according to the authors all three systems are autonomous.

“Media system” was discussed in most detail, understood as, “entirety of organizational rules, norms and regulations within mass communications means, a collection of institutions used to continuously inform society about current events and to interpret them, as well as any and all public, legal and organizational circumstances connected. Media system functions within a country’s political system, is its element and possesses characteristic traits within each country. The term also means the connections between mass media means and other public institutions, influencing information processes as well as intra-system relations. Media system is conditioned by socio-economic circumstances, media functioning, values system, guarantees of freedom of media, political conditions, regulations on the functioning of media organizations and institutions as well as by the level of education and technological advancement. These could be analysed on two levels; programme offer on one hand and the way facts are reported on the other.

Media system character is dependent on the primal market or the relations between media broadcasters, recipients and the advertising market (advertisers, advertising agencies) as well as on the secondary market which includes the connections between broadcasters and media institutions and also the owners of media entities.

The term media system was first developed with the onset of television which resulted in great changes in the reception of mass media communication, also influencing the economic basis of its functioning”<sup>6</sup>.

The above definition leads us to formulate at least two critical remarks. Firstly, it seems that there is no relation between the creation of the term “media system” and the onset of television, even though its development as a mass medium definitely popularized this term. Earlier, (up until the end of 1980s), the term “press system” was used although it not only included the press but also radio, television and other institutions involved in the activity of mass media (ie. information agencies, distribution companies, etc). This was as a result of the Act on press law from 1984 and included in it normative definition of the term “press”.

Secondly, the definition talks about means of mass communication, meanwhile *Leksykon PWN – Media* discusses mass media means. We should not treat these two terms synonymously even though that is what often happens, not just in popular language but also in

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Słownik terminologii medialnej*, ed. W. Pisarek, Kraków 2006.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 207.

specialist literature. It seems appropriate to cite here an article by professor Walery Pisarek from 1975, printed in “Przekazy i Opinie”, a media periodical (no longer published)<sup>7</sup>. The author classifies and analyses different ways of mass and individual communication and he calls knowledge on this subject “the science of mass communication”<sup>8</sup>. He states that, “the science and research on mass communication includes all elements, phases and aspect of the social process of indirect communication via mass media means of all kinds”<sup>9</sup>. It should be noted that this means all mass used means of communication, including new ones as a result of technological advancement such as mobile communication, the Internet, videoconferencing as well as all other forms of direct communication used on mass scale.

Meanwhile, according to Pisarek, separate and subordinate to the science of mass communication treated should be press studies, presently media studies which include, “all elements, phases and aspects of mass communication via means (mass media) of periodical character, that is press, radio, television and film” because “not all detailed media studies divagations [...] are general enough to pertain to all mass media communication means”<sup>10</sup>.

One more thing, modern means of communication generally enable two way and direct communication between the sender and recipient (interactivity), which is generally considered to be their most characteristic trait which enables them to be used on a mass scale. Meanwhile, mass media are predominantly one way and not interactive. Since both terms are long and, hence, not easy to use so in popular language, they were shortened to one word – media. In order to distinguish them, used are terms traditional media and modern media, also not entirely rightly so. What is more, in popular language the term “media” is also used to mean home fittings such as electricity, gas, waterline, sewage system, telephone line, etc.

The other two terms from *Słownik terminologii medialnej* are subordinate to “media system”. “Press system” is defined as, “entirety of organizational rules and legal regulations in effect based on which the press functions within a given country, complex of institutions part of the press market as well as public and legal and organizational conditions of its functioning. The press system is made up or relations between publishers and readers as well as relations between publishing houses and the printing market, press photography and press distribution”. The other term, “radio-television system” is, “the entirety of organizational rules and legal regulations in effect based on which radio and television function within a

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<sup>7</sup> W. Pisarek, *Wiedza o komunikowaniu – nazwy i zakres*, “Przekazy i Opinie” 1975, nr 1, p. 11–19. The article was also included in a book by Pisarek, *O mediach i języku*, Kraków 2007, p. 15–27.

<sup>8</sup> Other terminology was also proposed. Cf. W. Pisarek, *Wiedza...*, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19.

given country, complex of institutions part of this market as well as public and legal organizational conditions of its functioning. The radio-television system is characterized by relations between broadcasters and recipients as well as relations between broadcasters and the phonographic and cinematographic markets, producers of programmes and their distributors”<sup>11</sup>.

Analysis of the above entry definitions leads us to formulate at least two reservations. Firstly, if “entirety of organizational rules and legal regulations” is an integral element of the system comprising of three basic mass media (press, radio, television) then there is no basis to talk about a “radio-television system” since we all know that these two are completely different types of mediums, with unlike organizational structure, specificity, journalism, influence on recipients, etc. Secondly, all definitions include statements about the “entirety of rules and legal regulations” and “complex of institutions”, meanwhile necessary are more detailed descriptions of the above rules and regulations as well as the institutions.

### **The system and its traits**

In order to create a new definition of the term “media system”, without basing too much on the above mentioned definitions, we first need to define the word “system”. Its most basic encyclopedic definition is that of a collection (a set, a team) of several (at least two), sometimes several or several dozen elements which together form a different, autonomous entity usually functioning as a fragment of a bigger system or natural or social reality, created and/or used by people<sup>12</sup>. It should also be noted that a system is a functional entirety which could be isolated from the rest. It may exist in nature with man being unable to influence its shape. He may discover it and get to know it better like ie. the heliocentric system or the river system. A system may also be entirely created by man, functioning in accordance with the general rules of its use like ie. the decimal system, the punctuation system or system of rules in a sport.

A system can be material, visible, with structure, it can be measured, weighed, or assessed as far as its appearance or characteristic traits. In this sense, man himself is a system just like any other living creature. A system can be immaterial (abstract) where it is impossible to measure its physical characteristics because it does not possess them like ie. philosophic system, religious system, system of moral values, etc.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Słownik terminologii...*, p. 207–208.

<sup>12</sup> T. Pszczołowski, *Mała encyklopedia prakseologii i teorii organizacji*, Wrocław 1978, p. 237.

It should also be noted that a system treated as an entirety is not a uniform monolith. Just the opposite, it is a complex structure. Its different components influence each other and the entire system itself, at the same time no single element can be the only influence. One more thing, it is very difficult to precisely delineate the scope of influence of an element on the whole just as it is also difficult to establish which elements are more imperative than others, etc. In other words, a system is a functional and durable entirety possessing its own, characteristic structure.

A key trait of a system is that its components are not random. It is not a basket into which nature or people “threw” any elements. Just the opposite, they are all there for some purpose and appear in specific order (ie. chronological, functional). They are compatible and together they make up the whole, logical structure. Another characteristic trait of a system is that its components are closely tied to each other, depend on each other and complement each other (ie. in influence on society). What is more, their ties are so strong that if one element is eliminated (by chance or on purpose) from the whole, the system is, at best, dysfunctional (it exists but does not operate in an optimal way) or it breaks down and ceases to exist.

An example of a system, in a biological sense, is man or any other living creature. It is definitely a material, complex (made up of various organs which are part of different systems, ie. the cardiovascular system) entirety whose elements are strictly connected. Man functions well only when all its systems are working properly. If he somehow becomes disabled, his organism does not function in a normal way, it becomes dysfunctional or in the worst case, he dies.

### **Media system and its structure**

It can be said that a media system is an autonomous entirety part of a bigger system such as a state or society. It possesses its own structure, is internally organized, has a legal basis and its existence and functioning has various social consequences. And vice versa, different components of a state system influence, with various intensity and result, the media system as a whole or its component(s). This is natural, as the media system does not exist in a vacuum or in isolation from different elements of reality, constantly changing in space and time.

If a media system is a complex entity, then what elements constitute it? In order to answer this question, we first need to establish what is meant by the term “media”. It also possesses many definitions, as noted by the author of this entry in *Słownik terminologii*

*medialnej* (Dictionary of media terminology)<sup>13</sup>; is treated synonymously to “communication means” and “despite its terminological character” even in specialist literature it is used to mean various things. Mentioned are eight: 1) national languages, 2) any types of symbols used to record information based on any recognizable signals such as pulsing, buzzing, tapping, 3) content in newspapers and periodicals, novels, radio programmes, 4) material on which content is recorded such as paper, magnetic tape, compact discs, 5) equipment to broadcast such as microphones, cameras, 6) equipment for reception such as radio transmitters, televisions, etc., 7) carriers of information such as newspapers, magazines, films, radio, information networks, 8) institutions involved in the proliferation of information such as agencies, publishing houses, radio and TV corporation, etc. In order to make some sense of this terminological chaos, Pisarek proposes the following classification of media: 1) means of expressing information such as natural and artificial languages, 2) means of recording information, ie. paper, pencil, cassette recorder, 3) means of information transmission (diffusion), ie. newspapers, cable television, etc. 4) means of information processing (including searching), ie. computer<sup>14</sup>. It should be noted that both of the above descriptions are very limited in their definition of mass media and therefore cannot be used in order to establish a precise definition of the term “media system”.

*Słownik terminologii medialnej* (Dictionary of media terminology) also includes a definition of “mass media” which is as follows, “means (channels) of mass communication, that is all equipment used in mass communication for transmission or diffusion of information. In other words, the mass media are a technical apparatus via which public information is distributed indirectly and one way to dispersed and unstructured, real and potential audience. Mass media understood this way are both means of diffusion and means of expression targeted not at individuals but at a specific audience possessing particular socio-economic and cultural characteristics.

Mass media include newspapers, magazines, posters (also billboards), large circulation publications, radio, television, films, cassettes and partly the Internet (due to the individualization of its services not always treated as a mass medium)<sup>15</sup>.

It seems that due to both terms’ broad definitions and focus on their technological aspects, it is not possible to use them to precisely and unambiguously define the term “media system”. It is without doubt that technological advancement, telecommunication industry

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<sup>13</sup> Professor Walery Pisarek, long standing director of Media Studies Centre and chief editor of the quarterly “Zeszyty Prasoznawcze”, is the author of this entry.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Słownik terminologii...*, p. 117.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 118.

development and general new technologies in this sphere create new ways or channels of mass communication in connection with other services. We are all aware of the multiple uses that various new devices such as computers, mobile phones, etc. possess. But all this has little to do with the essence of mass media activity in the traditional sense. The new equipment, such as computers, mobile phones, compact disc, MP3 players, should not be called mass media just because it is used by the masses. It would make more sense to call the above means of mass communication and, in fact, many specialists call them just that.

It seems sensible to establish that part of a media system are not means of mass communication but means of mass transmission or, in other words, traditional media – press, radio and television, also in modern forms ie. online editions of existing papers as well as online only press, the same with radio, traditional TV as well as satellite, cable, HDTV and *pay-per-view*.

The above three media institutions should be treated as basic components of a media system, determining its structure, effectiveness and efficiency in the process of influencing society. Their one common characteristic is that media consumers use them systematically as all three are generally available<sup>16</sup>. What is more, also media recipient activity has a significant influence on the structure of a media system since it is readership, radio listeners and TV audience figures that largely determine whether a given paper, radio or TV programme will continue to exist<sup>17</sup>.

A media system is also comprised of institutions which the average media recipient does not directly use or know much about. However, they are key to the general functioning of the system as upon them dependent are some or all of mass media means. These are, for example, information agencies which provide, based on agreed conditions, their services to all media interested. Without their information, most daily newspapers as well as radio and TV news programmes could not function as they are often their main, although not only, source of current domestic and especially international reports. It is the same situation with press distribution companies, without them a great majority of newspapers and magazines would cease to exist. Another element of a media system in Poland is the Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji (KRRiT), whose activity, delineated by the Act from 1992 on radio and television, is to co-create the structure of electronic media (public and commercial), to monitor and to

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<sup>16</sup> In 2006, there were 6 759 press titles 8 070 000 radio subscribers and 7 820 000 TV subscribers.

<sup>17</sup> This is particularly visible in case of dailies, their overall number continues to drop, in 2004, there were 68. in 2005 – 65, in 2006 – 59.

control the programme offer and to make sure that radio and television are “open and pluralist in character”<sup>18</sup>.

Other institutions part of the media system, complementary to the activity of mass media, are several organizations (associations mainly) which analyse and assess the media market. One of them is, for example, Związek Kontroli Dystrybucji Prasy (Press Distribution Control Association), established in 1994, a union of 250 media subjects (publishing houses, distributors, advertising agencies, etc) which analyses information on circulation and distribution of over 450 press titles (including nearly 50 dailies). Another example is the Izba Wydawców Prasy (Press Publishers Association), created in 1996, a union of about 120 publishing houses and distributors which represents the interests of this group to the government. There are also trade union organizations such as Stowarzyszenie Dziennikarzy Polskich, Stowarzyszenie Dziennikarzy RP, Katolickie Stowarzyszenie Dziennikarzy (journalist unions) and other quasi-media ones, as long as their activity is directly tied to mass media.

### **Media system – definition attempt**

The term “media system” can be understood as a collection of organizations and institutions which take part, each in its own way, in the process of mass communication between people, of periodical character. It predominantly includes mass media means (press, radio, television), complementary organizations and institutions (information agencies, distribution companies) and monitoring organizations (KRRIT, ZKDP, journalist organizations).

Since there are three main mass media means, it can be said that each one of them is a separate, complex and largely autonomous structure. If so, then we can also distinguish three systems within – the press system, the radio system and television system. This can be justified by the fact that each one of these has its own history, structure, organization, rules of functioning. Moreover, each one influences society in its own way and has got different perspectives for development.

A media system understood this way should be treated just as one way (channel) of mass communication, for many not considered to be the most important one and surely not the most credible or trustworthy one. This is especially visible during times of crises or

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<sup>18</sup> R. Chruściak, *Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji w systemie politycznym i konstytucyjnym*, Warszawa 2007.

various socio-political conflicts when the media or the entire media system can be subject to acute criticism.

It needs to be stressed that the media system is just one of the elements of a much larger and more complex system – the state<sup>19</sup>. What is more, dependent on the state, its political system, economic situation, culture, tradition, etc., is the structure and functioning of the media system. A good example of this would be our country, if we compare the situation from before and after 1990. In an ideological system of communism, prior to 1990, the media system was organized and functioned entirely differently than in a democratic one, post 1990.

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<sup>19</sup> T. Malmon, T. Opoka, *Mały słownik polityki*, Radom 1998, p. 128–129.