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## **The concepts of media pluralism and media policy under the conditions of the development of digital platforms**

### **KEY WORDS**

pluralism, concepts of pluralism, media pluralism, media policy, digital platforms, the chamber effect

### **ABSTRACT**

This article is devoted to various concepts of media pluralism and derivative from them concepts of media policies. Particular attention has been paid to the changes in media environment in the context of the development of digital media, and in particular to development of digital platforms like Facebook. The activity of users and generated by them content poses new challenges to the regulatory policy of media pluralism. The author refers to the conception of the “worlds” of Tamotsu Shibutani.

The theory of pluralism is pluralistic. And it cannot be otherwise, since pluralism is interesting for different scientific categories – ranging from philosophy, to the economics, to sociology and political science, to media studies. Anyway, in the discourse around this concept, diversity is the central issue.

For philosophers, the essential ontological meaning is multiplicity of forms (existence) that occur in reality, which cannot be brought to a common denominator, and therefore their differences (multiplicity) should be agreed upon. Sociology perceives pluralism in the context of the existence of different groups that can articulate their interests and participate in the exercise of power. Political science focuses on the idea of individual freedom and equality of citizens as the foundations of democratic societies. Political pluralism thus becomes the principle of formulating parliamentary systems, under which, in democratic systems, there is a multiplicity of political parties (at least two) with different programs and struggling for power<sup>1</sup>. For economics, the concept of pluralism is expressed in the idea of competition, both in the supply and demand, combining with the optimal allocation of resources and freedom of choice for the producer and the consumer.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Chmaj, W. Sokół, *Polityka, ustroj, idee* [Politics, system, ideas], Lublin 1999.

Pluralism in theoretical perspectives is therefore diverse and close to all ideas of competition, rivalry and freedom.

Media studies contribute much ideas to the theory of pluralism, combining different perspectives of analysis and research fields, such as law, economics, political science and sociology<sup>2</sup>. Among the many perspectives for perceiving pluralism, a good basis for discussion would be the classification of concepts and approaches proposed by Karol Jakubowicz<sup>3</sup>. The starting point for the analysis is to distinguish between two basic concept of media pluralism: one – derived from the tradition of public services and the other – the free market. In reference to the first of them, we can, among other things, identify the concepts of organised, proactive, open (also referred to as egalitarian), internal (intramedia) and polarised pluralism.

The organised pluralism is the effect of intervention of the law or other regulation, and its message is struggling to impose to the practice of conduct various entities of a particular type of diversity of media offers, the multiplicity of their suppliers, representing various social groups, cultural communities and political forces. The characteristic feature of this kind of approach are strong relationships between media and the institutions representing various groups and interests.

Proactive pluralism is a diversity of opinions, political assessments, individual choices and cultural representation among media users, which results from the operation of the media, services provided by them, offered content and structural solutions.

The idea of open or egalitarian pluralism is based on the belief that the media should uniformly reflect the preferences, political divisions and cultural differences (conditioned by ethnicity, language and religion) occurring in the population.

Internal (intramedia) pluralism is a variety of content, services and sources of their origin within a given unit of the media, as a result, offering a broad spectrum of opinions, points of view, representing and determining the value of social, ethnic, political and cultural matters. The concept of internal pluralism is one of important elements of practical realisation of the idea of public media.

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<sup>2</sup> *Media pluralism and diversity. Concepts, risks and global trends*, eds. P. Valcke, M. Sükösd, R.G. Picard, Houndmills, Basingstoke 2016.

<sup>3</sup> K. Jakubowicz, *New media ecology: Reconceptualizing media pluralism* [in:] *Media pluralism and diversity* . . . , op. cit., pp. 23–53.

The polarised pluralism is the field for journalism understood as a representation, a kind of advocacy of different interests, opinions and comments. In this concept, media have a strong political identification, specific cultural, ethnic and religion individuality.

These concepts of pluralism assume an active role of authorities, which, through legal, organisational or political actions, are trying to achieve organised diversity resulting from disbelief in automatic operation of the market, unit's freedom of choice or self-organisation ability (including self-regulation) of market players (media). Generally, different point of view is represented by the libertarian, free-market concepts, among which we can indicate on the ideas of spontaneous, reactive, reflective, external and moderate pluralism.

Spontaneous pluralism assumes that the media systems and the diversity of content arise spontaneously, the media represent the multiplicity of interests and values based on individual choices, and the basis here are interactions between media consumers and media entities (companies, concerns, editorial offices, etc.). Crucial element for this concept is the contents of the media, while other attributes, such as ownership and structure, are not relevant.

Reactive pluralism is expressed by reflecting in the media various opinions, political views, identity choices and types of culture among media consumers. Mechanism, which provides that, is operation of the media, their desire to make profits and struggle for optimisation, offering a variety of services, content customised to the needs and structure of the market, allowing for competition.

Reflective pluralism is similar to the reactive one, except that it accepts the assumption of need to preserve the principle of proportionality in media content, which is to be expressed through the ability to "reflect" the preferences found in society – including those concerning politics and culture; present differences and divisions – including ethnic, religious and linguistic ones. It treats the media as a special type of mirror, in which the public can view themselves.

The idea of internal (intermedia) pluralism, as a starting point, assumes the existence of a diversity of independent and autonomous media and their respective owners, which differ in the offered content (topics, focus on content type or certain point of view). Control of ownership, production, performance and distribution is found in many control centres.

And finally, when cultural, ethnic and linguistic differences are not particularly exposed in the media, and ideological distance between the media is not too extensive, as well as if there is a clear centre-oriented tendency, we are dealing with moderate pluralism.

The presented classification of theories or concepts of pluralism in media does not exhaust the topic, but points at the kind of competition or rivalry of opinions on the pluralism itself. The goal of media pluralism is, as it seems, to provide freedom of choice. The question of whether it is possible to provide freedom by legal or economic coercion mechanisms, probably is still unanswered for the followers of different concepts. Each of the concepts of pluralism is essentially idealistic, as it is not able to reflect all the complexities of the media and systems they create. Undoubtedly, awareness of multidimensionality of the issue led the market makers of European Media Pluralism Monitor to create a set of indicators which, when analysed together, will produce possibly complete picture of the situation at the level of individual Member States<sup>4</sup>. In particular, there are three types of indicators: legal, economic and socio-demographic, as appropriate for an in-depth analysis of the media pluralism. The legal analysis focuses on obtaining the answer to the question of whether there is legal and/or regulatory (e.g. co-regulation with interested circles) protection of the media pluralism and is such protection effectively implemented. In this respect, by asking specific questions, which are in fact indicators, we seek to obtain possibly most objective and quantitative results. Economic indicators focus on the analysis of concentration of ownership, pluralism of types and kinds of media, cultural and geographical pluralism. Used measures include indicators of concentration of CR-4 and CR-8, Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI)<sup>5</sup>, associated with nearly 60 different economic indicators relating to pluralism. Socio-demographic observations focus on the content of the media, their use, functioning of the media companies, and, largely, result from the identification of the basic elements of risk for the pluralism of the media. The following have been considered particularly important: risk associated with types and kinds of media, political pluralism, cultural and geographic pluralism. A special field of observation are public media.

Design of indicators of Media Pluralism Monitor notes that pluralism can be analysed at different levels, and in particular:

- at the level of the individual content of the medium, when attention is focused on the identification of different preferences and opinions (this may be the level of a program or even an article);
- at the level of a particular medium and its overall offer, when the editorial content, as a whole, is subject to analysis (TV program, newspaper or magazine);

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<sup>4</sup> P. Valcke et l., *Indicators for media pluralism* [in:] *Media pluralism and diversity...*, op. ct., pp. 121-137.

<sup>5</sup> T. Kowalski, B. Jung, *Media na rynku. Wprowadzenie do ekonomiki mediów* [Media on the market. Introduction to media economics], Warszawa 2006, p. 115.

- at the level of the type of medium, when the market variety of available offer is interesting (journals, magazines, radio, television, etc.);
- at the level of communication system as a whole, when the field for analysis is the structural pluralism of media offer in a given country or in certain area<sup>6</sup>.

The multiplicity of concepts and the complexity of the observations of media pluralism invites us to reflect on the base for different ideas, including pluralism as such. Here, distinction between the ideas of public service and free market is crucial. For the idea of public service of the media, the most important seems to include the belief that media affect the citizens, their way of thinking, values and authorities, choices. From this point of view, if the media affect people, it is important to provide access to diverse ideas and views, which not only requires a rich and diverse offer, but also some tips are needed for how should the media function, and even indications for journalism (principle of impartiality seems especially important here). Normative ideal for such understood diversity is that the media keeps equal distance to reality (*at the arm's length*), not preferring anyone over anyone else. Such thinking, close to political correctness, leads to “passing of the torch”, encouraging market intervention, legal and administrative actions that will approximate the actual system to a desired ideal. Undoubted shortage of this approach is the lack of reference to the social and cultural scale of various social phenomena – those often occurring and popular would coexist on an equal footing with marginal phenomena.

Free-market concepts generally take different perspective. Here, it is believed that the preferences of people (citizens) affect the media. Therefore, the base is behaviour of the consumer – media recipient. His/her free choice, opinions and preferences create the media system, which responds to effective demand, delivering what is expected and desirable. Moreover, it is market experience that decides how is the supply of media created, which propositions, forms, contents, genres are accepted and in what scale. Therefore, the empirical element decides, not the normative one. Media are a phenomenon and economic enterprise, the result of their actions is expressed in the ability to meet effective demand.

The paradox is that both concepts, and the resulting practical procedures, are to some extent legitimate and reasonable. As van Cuilenburg aptly noted, there is a dialectical dependence between them: "(...) media fully reflecting social preferences inevitably ill perform at openness to a great variety of different social positions and conditions, whereas

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<sup>6</sup> J. van Cuilenburg, *On measuring media competition and media diversity: Concepts, theories and methods* [in:] *Measuring media content, quality, and diversity. Approaches and issues in content research*, eds. R.G. Picard, Turku School of Economics and Business Administration, Turku 2000, p. 55.

perfect media openness harms majority positions in favour of minority beliefs, attitudes and conditions...”.

In the era of communication systems based on the pattern of "one – to many", where the different types of media were clearly separated from each other and had a clearly defined identity form, and some markets (e.g. newspapers) showed a tendency to monopolisation, concepts of reflective diversity, as well as openness, found use. Consumer – the media recipient – seems to be the most rational element in the consideration of media pluralism. Even relatively early studies from the late 80s showed that on monopolistic markets, readers expect the openness of the medium (so to form their own opinion on various matters). In turn, on highly competitive markets, the clarity of opinions, the unambiguity of the judgements, and therefore some bias, are more appreciated<sup>7</sup>.

### **Communication and digital platforms**

Subject of the analyses is however subject to deep transformation processes which may be generally described as mediamorphosis<sup>8</sup>. The progressive convergence, and thus blurring of base identities of various media forms in multimedia forms, globalisation and increasing fragmentation of demand, create a critical mass for discussions over media pluralism in a changing environment. Media are inherently a market phenomenon. For a long time, almost two centuries, the 19th and the 20th century, they were developing in specific *equilibrium*, linearly increasing influence in a predictable manner, or – in the event of failure – disappearing from the market or changing the owner, becoming another entity. Media supply and demand were relatively balanced, and rivalry in the competitive market conditions led ultimately to consolidation of the various segments, also through a number of M&A (*mergers and acquisitions*). This period and type of media development exhausts its explanatory power.

Along with the development of the internet and media converging (multimediality, as the most characteristic feature), competitive rivalry is more intense. The subject of the competitive struggle are time and attention of the recipient or the user. It is in fact the only common currency that can be exchanged for financial values. This is because the existing *equilibrium* has been seriously strained. Globally, we are dealing with a specific *anti-equilibrium* that is the state of the vast superiority of supply over demand. The scale and pace of growth of digital data are unheard of in the previous history of the development of

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<sup>7</sup> S. Lacy, F. Fico, T. Simon, *The relationship among economic newsroom and content variables: A path model*, "Journal of Media Economics" 1989, vol. 2 (2), Philadelphia, pp. 51–66.

<sup>8</sup> R. Fidler, *Mediamorphosis. Understanding new media*, Thousand Oaks 1997.

mankind. At the beginning of the 21st century, it is estimated that only one-fourth part of the information was stored in digital form; in a little over a decade later (2013), the number of information in analogue form remains almost unchanged, while information in digital form reached 1,200 exabytes<sup>9</sup>, and only 2 percent is an analogue form<sup>10</sup>. Digitisation means opening up for a new world of immense possibilities of acquiring, using and processing information in a mass scale.

A radical change in the basic model of communication in the context of ongoing digital convergence, involving the development of a dynamic model of “many – to many”, at the present stage of development of the media is carried out in conditions of specific oversupply of content. For an economist, it is quite obvious that such an imbalance leads to asymmetry in the producer-consumer relations, with an indication on the growing importance of the consumer, and in relation to the media, specificity consists of the mass presumption. Media users are more and more creators (including co-authors) of the content, the phenomenon of content generated by users (*user generated content*) is becoming more common. Traditional concerns about the lack of information and access, expressed by supporters of organised pluralism, cannot find solid justification in virtual reality.

New age media companies are significantly different from the traditional ones. First of all, there are technology companies, which, unlike traditional publishers and broadcasters, do not produce content (or this activity is of minor importance). Their task is to create a platform for the development of communication in a scale and scope dependent of the will of the user. How big is that scale?

The largest media company nowadays is Facebook – it has about 1.7 billion users – which on each visit are offered approx. 1500 news, including 300 selected and available in the so-called *news feed*. Once watched, news are moved to the background on next visit, so they are less exposed. The question: which traditional company is able to provide such an abundance of news, is rhetorical. Is this pluralism? We should refrain from answering.

The content generated by users is impressive. If, as confirmed by factual data, 59 percent of 1.7 billion users publish one post per month, it gives 31 million posts per day, or 1 billion per month. Companies and institutions present on FB publish about 60 posts monthly,

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<sup>9</sup> One exabyte is equivalent to 1 billion gigabytes.

<sup>10</sup> V. Mayer-Schönberger, K. Cukier, *Big Data. Rewolucja, która zmieni nasze myślenie, pracę i życie*, Warszawa 2014, pp. 23–24. (oryg. *Big Data. A Revolution that will transform how do we live, work and think*, 2013 by V. Mayer-Schönberger, K. Cukier)

which gives about 3 billion posts per month and 100 million posts daily<sup>11</sup>. Facebook is not the only digital platform – dozens of applications develop somewhat in parallel; they make life easier, providing entertainment, information, thus satisfying various utilitarian needs of the users.

The primary task of the platforms is to promote communication between users, facilitating this communication and exchange of goods and services, but also social values essential for the participants in general. A special feature of the value formation with the participation of platforms is that – in contrast to traditional economic activity – they create value by using resources they do not own or control. Moreover, this particular property is a basic premise for the rapid growth of the market value of the platforms. The basis of the values is to serve its users, whose activity in the production of communication valuable for themselves (e.g. likes, comments, reservations, shopping, etc.) indirectly translates into the platform value. In virtual reality, traditional boundaries between businesses are blurred, companies are subject to numerous changes and their focus around external values is transformed into the orientation on processes taking place outside.

Industrial era was characterised by the pursuit of economy of scale, based on volume of production; in the digital era, the active side is demand, and network economy of scale results directly from the users' demands. Communication model, paradoxically, is becoming closer to the natural interpersonal communication, with the major difference that it is becoming virtual by nature. Media, their content, the desire to use it, process it and share the evaluations, emotions and meanings, is one of the elements of digital platforms, which grow on to become a kind of a demiurge of all existing forms of media.

Digital platforms are becoming the essential medium for a growing number of media users, who often have active attitude towards them. The media contents are, as in the real world, element of interpersonal communication.

According to a Global Web Index report from 2016<sup>12</sup>, users from 34 countries around the world point to the following motivation for using the social networks:

- 43 % – to stay in touch with friends
- 39 % – to fill the free time;
- 37 % – to keep up with news and current affairs;
- 35 % – to find a funny or entertaining content (videos, articles, etc.);

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<sup>11</sup> Global Web Index 2016, Internet users 16–64 in 34 countries, <https://www.globalwebindex.net> [accessed: 23.03.2017].

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



- 34 % – to share photos and short films with others;
- 30 % – to share, express an opinion;
- 26 % – to meet new people;
- 24 % – to search for/find products/services to buy;
- 22 % – for professional networking;
- 20 % – to make sure that they won't miss something important.

Motivation with an index of 37 and 35 percent is clearly addressed to the media, journalists, all producers of media content. News and media content is an important motivation to use digital platforms, therefore pessimistic predictions and opinions are not true when communicating the end of traditional media forms, such as newspapers, radio or television. Among the ten leading motivations for using the platforms, they are in high positions, thus confirming the need for its existence. In addition, the motivations are in some sense public.

### **Towards a new regulation**

Digital platforms, the new media, constitute a significant challenge to the traditional media policy, and not only because of their global nature. The nature of competition and building competitive advantage is radically changing. Ultimately, the user is to decide: he/she may accept the proposed solutions and services or reject them and refuse to participate. In the market of competition for time and attention, this constitutes a fundamental change. However, this does not mean that we should lose interest in media pluralism in the new media reality. Platforms offer highly diverse content and ownership is irrelevant, as something is accepted and reaches the thresholds of economy of scale, securing the return of capital, or it fails. The owner, who is not able to create the conditions for the desired or expected diversity, fails.

The majority of users act rationally, they know what they need, what interests them and are able to make a choice, though this choice sometimes happens to be contrary to the concept of balanced, pluralistic media order. A multinational group of researchers pointed to the existence of the echo chamber effect: "(...) users on Facebook tend to select information that adheres to their system of beliefs and to form polarized groups — i.e., echo chambers. Such a tendency dominates information cascades and might affect public debates on socially relevant issues"<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> A. Bessi et al, *Social determinants of content selection in the age of (Mis)information*, Social Informatics 2014<sup>22</sup>.

The echo chamber effect, sometimes also referred to as an information bubble effect, seems particularly important for the future of communication systems. This is the goal of all regulatory and legal actions, as well as media policies; to use the currently popular term – the “sovereign” becomes the subject of the pluralism. The sovereign decides independently about what he wants to see, what he is interested in, whether opinions, views, information and comments are important to him, and which ones are not allowed, not tolerable, eliminated from his communication world.

Thus, in the context of ongoing convergence change, the concept and expectations of Tamotsu Shibutani become real: “a social world is an interactive unit, a »universe of regularized mutual response«, communication or discourse; it is not bounded by geography or formal membership »but the limits of effective communication«. »Society as a whole«, then can be conceptualized as consisting of a mosaic of social worlds that both touch and interpenetrate”<sup>14</sup>.

Probably, there will be no shortage of field of action for pluralism policy, though the context in the sense of changes in communication model is becoming significantly different. In the author's opinion, the field of actions for pluralism will move toward providing security in the network (including personal data), fight against cybercrime, elimination of the digital divide, development of media education and social self-organisation in the virtual world.

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<sup>14</sup> T. Shibutani, *Reference groups as perspectives*, “American Journal of Sociology” 1955, vol. 6, pp. 562–569.