

Comparative media research

European Journal of Communication
2021, Vol. 36(5) 446–449
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DOI: 10.1177/02673231211043179
journals.sagepub.com/home/ejcc

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Jay Blumler was “a pioneer in comparative media research”, writes Curran (2015: 208) in his contribution to the *Festschrift* published on the occasion of Blumler’s 90th birthday in 2014. In fact, Blumler’s biography provided the best prerequisites for this pioneering role. The experience of the US broadcasting system, commercially oriented since the emergence of radio, and of the West European tradition of public service broadcasting, for which the BBC has served as a standard, shaped his view of the various media systems and the evaluation of their performance in the service of the public interest.

The contrast between the two systems determined his work, with the US system always being the negative print due to its susceptibility to the market forces. This verdict is explained by the principles that guided Blumler’s work in comparative media research. Explicitly and implicitly, his analysis of media systems was consistently accompanied by the fundamental question of the media’s contribution to the aims of democracy, with his attention focused on political communication and the news media.

Against this background, it was hardly surprising that Blumler developed a preference for the public service model, to which almost all West European countries committed themselves, some, as the BBC, since the early days of radio, some only after WWII or in the course of their transformation to democracy. Despite adhering to the same idea, they nevertheless organised their public broadcasting quite differently demonstrating that the strengths of the model at the same time are its weaknesses: Ideally, public broadcasting is supposed to be independent of politics and the economy. This leads to an everlasting struggle to ensure this independence and to the assessment of those instruments used by the various states to enable public broadcasters to fulfil their remit and support and foster the functioning of the democratic system.

The way public service broadcasting is financed has proven to be the linchpin for its independence. Under its director Jay Blumler, the Centre for Television Research at the

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University of Leeds prepared a report for the Peacock Committee on Financing, appointed by the British government in 1985, which compared experiences with different forms of financing in five West European countries (Blumler and Nossiter, 1991; Blumler et al., 1986). The country reports were supplemented by interviews with programme makers in the UK and the USA. This research was carried out at a time when, mainly due to new technologies and the subsequent market entry of private broadcasters, a profound change in European broadcasting systems set in, pushing public service into an unprecedented competitive situation. It is hardly surprising that the authors concluded that the licence fee, while not perfect either, was still the best method of funding public service broadcasting and that a change for the BBC could not be recommended.

In view of the “commercial deluge” (Blumler, 1992b: 7) that swept Western European broadcasting from the mid-1980s onward, Blumler (1992d) identified “vulnerable values” that he saw put at risk by the transformation of the media systems. He was concerned about the “loss of consensus over the purposes that broadcasting should serve” (1992a: 2) and that criticism of broadcasting was no longer particular, but was now generally questioning public service principles, which also triggered a discussion about the future of the public service model and its role in the new broadcasting environment.

As the overview of the various financing schemes, “Television and the Public Interest” (Blumler, 1992c) took a different approach than the international project on the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979 (Blumler, 1983). In the latter, teams from the member states examined the election campaigns, media coverage, and resonance in the electorate with the same methodological instruments and therefore made systematic comparisons possible. Instead “Television and the Public Interest” juxtaposed in-depth reports from several countries on the national response to the challenges of “current confrontations in West European television” (Blumler, 1992a: 1) and thus allowed for taking national intricacies into account, whereas the agreement on common methodological tools always requires compromises at the expense of detail. In any case, Blumler proved to be a master of synthesis, deriving patterns from the country chapters and thus revealing commonalities among the selected broadcasting systems and national divergences.

As in his writings on political communication, Blumler’s comparisons of media systems focused on broadcasting institutions and particularly on television. The assignment of a special role to television can be traced back to the early days of the medium and Blumler’s work at the Centre for Television Research (Blumler and McQuail, 1968). It is further explained by the effects Blumler attributed to television which he also saw at the centre of modern campaign communication (e.g. Blumler et al., 1978). Although the quality press retained its importance in the new media environment, especially in political communication and for decision-makers, Blumler rarely mentioned the printed press in his publications and when he did, it was often with negative references to an overly market-oriented tabloid press.

Fully aware of various weaknesses of public service broadcasting resulting from economic and political pressures on their independence, but also from the broadcasters’ yielding to the new competition and to market forces, Blumler saw in this form of organisation the best guarantor of the promotion of democratic values and realisation of the public interest. The concern that with the changes that began in the 1980s, an

American-style commercialisation would take hold of Western European media systems and marginalise the established broadcasting model runs through his publications. Hand in hand with the globalisation of politics, he predicted the globalisation of communication and expected a convergence of media systems, suggesting that national communication systems would have to be studied in part as subsystems of the emerging global communication system, although regulation and governance of the media remain in the hands of nation states to this day, even if the EU, for example, is increasingly intervening in the regulation of television in its member states.

Theoretically, Blumler underpinned the country comparisons with his work calling for increased attention to the macrosocial level and a systemic perspective that defines media systems as social systems (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1975; Blumler et al., 1992; Gurevitch and Blumler, 1990; McLeod and Blumler, 1987). Conceiving media systems as social systems, in a state of mutual dependence with other social systems and competing with them for power, implies that their structures also form and change in interaction with the technological, socio-political and economic environment. Cross-national comparisons are the appropriate methodology to investigate the way different system properties affect these processes and to develop practical recommendations on the best response to challenges of the media's democratic role.

Reading Blumler's publications against this backdrop, one is inclined to add to Curran's assessment that Jay Blumler was a pioneer in comparative media research for safeguarding an independent media in the public interest and in the interest of democracy.

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