

## **HOLISTIC THEORY OF MASS MEDIA SYSTEMS. OLIGOPOLIZATION OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA MARKETS**

In the social sciences, Ludwig von Bertalanffy is considered to be the first researcher to lay the foundations of modern general systems theory. He defined a system as a “definite whole consisting of parts remaining in a state of interaction”.<sup>1</sup>

It is worth emphasizing that the definitions related to systems were used primarily in the analysis of political systems, the activities of communities and institutions. This has far-reaching implications, articulated in the ways of creating the definition of a media system or mass communication system. If we look at the schemes related to the systemic approach to mass media, for example those presented by Bogusława Dobek-Ostrowska in the book *Mass media and political actors in the light of studies on political communication*<sup>2</sup> or by Maciej Mrozowski in the publication *Mass media. Power, entertainment and business*<sup>3</sup>, we can easily see that they are focused primarily on the political and social functioning of the media. In Dobek-Ostrowska's work, there is an additional element called by the researcher, "the core of the system (media system)", in which we can observe such structures as "television system", "press system", "radio system", "new media"<sup>4</sup>.

Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, in their book *Media Systems. Three models of media and politics in a comparative approach*, adopted four determinants of media systems, which are:

1. development of media markets with particular emphasis on the development of the mass press,
2. political parallelism, reflecting the degree of ties between the media and political parties,
3. development of journalistic professionalism,
4. degree and nature of state intervention in the media system.<sup>5</sup>

Thanks to these criteria, the researchers were able to distinguish three models of media systems present in the countries they studied. These are the models:

1. Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralism Model,
2. Northern and Central European or “Democratic Corporatism Model”,
3. and North Atlantic or “Liberal Model”.<sup>6</sup>

Bogusław Nierenberg in the book *Media Management. The systemic approach* rightly notes that this classification could be supplemented with a model that he proposes to call totalitarian or authoritarian, present in countries such as North Korea or Cuba.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> L. Von Bertalanffy, *General system theory: Essays on its foundation and development*, George Braziller, 1968, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> B. Dobek-Ostrowska, *Media masowe i aktorzy polityczni w świetle studiów nad komunikowaniem politycznym*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2004, p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> M. Mrozowski, *Media masowe. Władza, rozrywka, biznes*, Wydawnictwo ASPRA-JR, 2001, p. 123.

<sup>4</sup> B. Dobek-Ostrowska, *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> D. C. Hallin, P. Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems. Three Models of Media and Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>7</sup> B. Nierenberg, *Zarządzanie mediami. Ujęcie systemowe*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2011, p. 52.

The adoption of the above criteria and the division derived from them is obviously functional - it allows you to check the ways of functioning of the media in individual countries using objective and relatively comparable assumptions. Therefore, it is very often used in studies devoted to the media systems of individual countries. Other books on media systems have similar structure. The authors analyze the legal and political conditions of the functioning of the press, radio and television, in more recent publications the reflection is extended to include Internet portals, most often those of an information and journalistic nature. I do not want to undermine the legitimacy or purposefulness of this type of research in any way, they are undoubtedly valuable, they bring many interesting observations, they allow to indicate the differences and similarities between individual countries and media markets. However, based on socio-political research methodologies, they ignore a significant part of the media market or mass communication system, which is not (at least not so directly) related to broadly understood politics.

### **Are mass media “news” media?**

Reducing the concept of mass media only to the problems of the development of the mass press, the relationship between the media and the political system, or the professionalization of journalism, i.e. to the segment of the media focused on information, seems to be a double reduction. Not only does it push aside all other media, but it also seems not to notice that the journalistic messages themselves, related to informing the public about political and social issues, are only a narrow section of the press, television, radio or Internet systems. After all, even in dailies, political information is only part of the content of these newspapers, which are also filled with news from areas that have little to do with the issue of freedom of speech. The weather forecast, the results of the volleyball or football league, gossip about the life of stars and starlets, of course, can somehow be related to the ideological line of a particular press title, but this dependence is often not very important. Focusing in the analysis, for example in the case of television, on the (in)dependence of news programs, which seems to dominate content research, is obviously important and often brings important conclusions, but one should not forget that news programs account - although it probably depends on the profile of individual stations - no more than 20 percent of all airtime. Channels specializing in round-the-clock news coverage, on the other hand, have an audience that almost never exceeds 10 percent. The situation is similar when we study the radio market - apart from a few strictly information channels, the vast majority of the rest of the most popular radio stations is filled with music, today most often selected by specialized algorithms, matching it to the tastes of the listeners the broadcaster wants to reach.

### **Holistic system of mass media markets**

Today, the statement that the new media do not "kill" the older media, but only complement them, seems to be a media science dogma that is no longer worth discussing. That is why even today it is worth remembering about the media that dominated in more or less historical periods. In one of the most classic and textbook studies, Denis McQuail's *Mass Communication Theory*, the author, describing the birth of mass media, presents them in chapters containing reflections on individual stages of the development of tools for mass communication. These are chapters on the development of print media (books and libraries) and then newspapers and other printed media such as: plays, songs, tracts, serials, poems, pamphlets, comics, reports, prospectuses, maps, posters, music, leaflets, wall newspapers and much more. Then follows a description of film as a mass medium, radio and television, phonographic music, and ends with considerations about "new media" (such as the Internet), which at the time of writing this book by McQuail were still in the first phase

of their development.<sup>8</sup> Very similar considerations can be found in Lyn Gorman and David McLeen's book *Media and Society into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. A Historical Introduction*, in which the authors begin with a reflection on the press as a mass medium, and then describe the rise of the film industry, the development of radio and advertising, and later (in relation to the post-war period) television and consumer society<sup>9</sup>. It's just that in the description of the following decades, both in McQuail and in Gorman and McLean, the "older" media - such as film - seem to disappear from the field of view, moving to the regions of "irrelevant", "marginal" or simply "unnoticed", although they still play a significant role in the media landscape. At the same time, it seems that several elements are missing in the mass media "catalogues" mentioned above.

If we want to get a fuller (though at the same time much more complicated) picture of mass media, we must today include other areas of communication in the field of reflection, which could be described as "creative-entertainment media" and add research methodologies other than logocentric, primarily those related to with extensive visual research. In the era of digitization, oligopolization and media convergence, it seems that the concept of "media system" should be juxtaposed and supplemented with certain content hidden under the concept of "system of cultural and creative industries". This is so for at least several reasons. Today, for example, we have a growing problem with defining the very notion of "media" or "mass media", traditional distinctions are blurring and it is difficult to clearly define the boundaries between media - especially "analog" and "digital". So we are faced with difficult terminological problems. Today, we can ask, for example, whether a book published only in electronic form and read on a reader can still be called a book? Can we still call a Netflix series a TV series? Is a newspaper with only an online edition still within the scope of press studies? etc., etc.

At the same time, the progressive mediatization of reality makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish reality from a media spectacle. Today, even eating breakfast or buying a new blouse can be a "media event" in social media. The blurring of the line between life and the media has never been as visible as it is today. To this we can add the progressive "entertainmentization" of "traditional" media, which means that media must also be creative in order to remain attractive to audiences, which also makes them increasingly shift from the scope of "information media" towards creative industries.

Thus, even if we adopt a narrow view according to which the media constitute a "technical" mediation between the sender and the recipient, then undoubtedly, apart from the media described in traditional media studies books, i.e. the press, radio, television and the Internet (if the Internet in all its complexity is indeed a medium), "intermediaries" such as books, photography, phonography, film/cinema, computer games/electronic entertainment should be included. If we wanted to expand this field of research even further, we could refer to the definition of cultural and creative industries, created, for example, by the European Commission, which in 2012 proposed to name industries based on cultural values, cultural diversity, individual or collective creativity and skills and talents that can generate innovation, income and jobs through the creation of social and economic value, in particular from intellectual property; these include the following segments based on cultural and creative inputs: "architecture, archives and libraries, artistic crafts, audio-visual (including film, television, video games and multimedia), cultural heritage, design (including fashion design), festivals, music, performing and visual arts, publishing and radio".<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> D. McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, SAGE Publications Ltd 2010.

<sup>9</sup> L. Gorman i D. McLeen, *Media and Society into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. A Historical Introduction*, Wiley-Blackwell 2009.

<sup>10</sup> COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS, Promoting cultural and creative sectors for growth and jobs in the EU, Brussels, 26.9.2012 COM(2012) 537 final, p. 2. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/pl/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52012DC0537> (access 18.10.2022)

In order to slightly simplify this extremely extensive and complicated system of dependencies, I would like to propose a slightly more limited, and at the same time definitely more holistic than traditional approaches, model of the system of contemporary "mass media markets". The term "system of mass media markets" allows, on the one hand, a much broader view and indicates elements often overlooked in the previous considerations, and on the other hand, it is also a proposal firmly rooted in the economic reality of modern times, it is not therefore only a theoretical proposal, but empirically anchored in research on today's appearance of business dependencies occurring on the mass media market.

The system of mass media markets understood in this way would include:

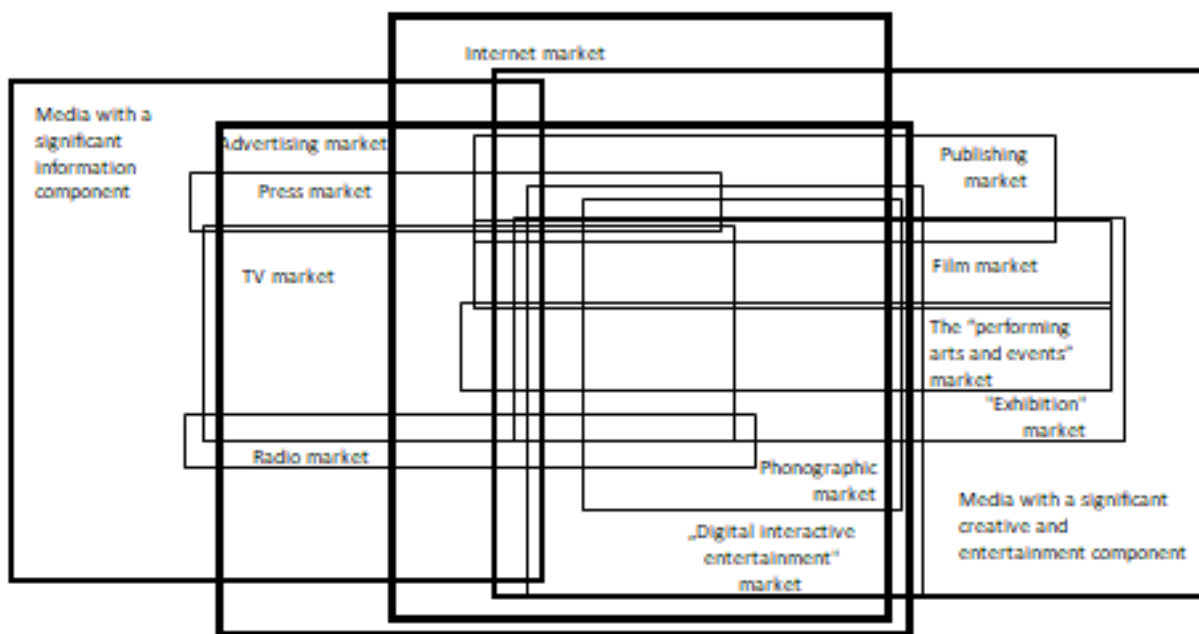
I. "Media with a significant information component", i.e.:

1. Press market,
2. TV market,
3. Radio market,
4. Internet market.

II. "Media with a significant creative and entertainment component", i.e.:

5. Publishing market,
6. Film market,
7. Phonographic market,
8. "Exhibition" market,
9. "Performing arts and events" market,
10. "Digital interactive entertainment" market,
11. Advertising market.

If we were to try to represent this model graphically, it would look like this:



Of course, I am aware that the presented scheme, which is a disadvantage of all schemes, is simplified and does not take into account all possible connections today, because nowadays almost all markets are interconnected by a complex network of mutual interactions. An additional problem is probably the term "signi-

ficant component" - "information" or "creative-entertainment", which only means that in the reflection on certain media so far there was a clear reflection on their factual or journalistic function, in considerations on other communication channels the focus was on mainly over their artistic or ludic functions, although today these functions are mixed on various levels.

While most of the terms seem pretty self-explanatory, I would like to clarify my understanding of a few of them. The term "exhibition market" can be defined in the simplest way as all kinds of organized ways of publicly and commercially presenting objects. It would house various types of exhibitions serving entertainment (but also providing information): from world exhibitions, through museums, amusement parks, art galleries, to trade fairs or a whole range of outdoor advertising. Historically, the beginning of this industry can be dated to the mid-nineteenth century, when in 1851 the "Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations" took place in London's Hyde Park. If we realize that the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1900 was visited by over 50 million visitors<sup>11</sup>, and in 2017 the Louvre was visited by 8.1 million tourists<sup>12</sup>, and since the opening of Disneyland Paris in 1992, it has been visited by over 300 million visitors<sup>13</sup>, then it turns out that it is not justified to ignore this type of message in the reflection on mass communication. And if we add to this the huge sector of marketing and advertising external communication in the form of posters, banners, billboards, advertising screens decorating not only New York's Times Square, but also the streets of even small towns and villages, it turns out that it is one of the most important "markets mass media".

It seems that in today's landscape of "media with a wide social impact", one cannot omit "performing arts and event" - theatre, opera, ballet, cabaret, musical, but also a musical concert or a political meeting, which assume (at least primarily) the physical presence of the viewer and the live "performance" element. If we were to look for a simple definition, this term would cover all organized forms of structured and commercial presentation of people with the participation of the audience. Today (although in historical times - if we take into account the scale effect - it was similar) they are also means of mass communication. Since over 3.5 million fans turned up at the concert of Jean Michel Jarre in Moscow (1997) or Rod Stewart at the Brazilian Copacabana (1994),<sup>14</sup> not considering these events as belonging to mass communication also seems unjustified. And when we realize that the most popular audience participation show, Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera*, grossed more than twice as much as the highest-grossing film of all time it becomes even more visible. The musical's official website states that it has grossed over \$6 billion, been seen by over 140 million viewers, and performed in 166 cities in 33 countries in 15 different languages<sup>15</sup>. An additional argument in favor of including this type of event in the system of media markets would be the fact that today even "live performances" do not do without elements of "intermediary media" - fragments of films are increasingly an integral part of theatrical performances, at concerts we see (usually through the screen camera recording the event in the phone) a large screen on which the character of our idol is presented, etc.

It seems unjustified to omit such phenomena in the consideration of contemporary mass media. Just like the lack of in-depth reflection (economic, cultural, media studies) on today's largest "entertainment" industry, which has become the production and distribution of computer games. In 2018, "the revenues of the gaming sector amounted to nearly USD 44 billion. According to the Entertainment Software Association, this figure

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<sup>11</sup> J. Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, translated by P. Camiller, Princeton University Press 2015, p. 36.

<sup>12</sup> *W Luwrze coraz więcej turystów*, <https://niezalezna.pl/213553-w-luwrze-coraz-wiecej-turystow> (access 18.10.2022).

<sup>13</sup> *Disneyland® Park*, <https://www.parkmania.pl/parki/115/o-parku/Disneyland-Park.html> (access 18.10.2022).

<sup>14</sup> *5 największych koncertów w historii. Liczby widzów szokują*, <https://www.radiozet.pl/Muzyka/5-najwiekszych-koncertow-w-historii-Liczby-widzow-szokuja> (access 18.10.2022).

<sup>15</sup> *Facts & Figures*, <https://www.thephantomoftheopera.com/facts-figures/> (access 18.10.2022).

exceeds the profit made by producers in Hollywood, who, despite a record-breaking year for cinematography, earned just under \$42 billion".<sup>16</sup>

Of course, the description of the broadly understood "media market" poses a whole lot of methodological problems, resulting from different traditions of researching individual areas of the media industry. However, the transition to such a holistic model seems very desirable, because it would show the diversity of the media, but also indicate how close these individual markets are to each other. Especially today, when large media concerns (operating on a global or local scale) already have the vast majority of the areas listed above in their business portfolios.

### **Oligopolisation**

In 1983, 90 percent of America's media was owned by 50 different companies. In 2012, 90 percent of the media belonged to 6 media giants. Over the last decade, the process of oligopolisation of the media has only deepened as a result of successive acquisitions and mergers of large media companies. Today, four media giants control the vast majority of the American (and also global) media market. They are: The Walt Disney Company, NBCUniversal (owned by Comcast), Warner Bros. Discovery and Paramount Global (formerly ViacomCBS). If we add to this the Japanese concern Sony, which operates on the American market (Sony is the owner of the Columbia film studio) and the tycoons of new media, referred to as GAFAM (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft), it turns out that by taking any action today related to the use of widely understood media, we pay (in cash or our attention and personal data) to one of 10 media companies. In addition, these companies have in their portfolio basically all of the media segments mentioned in the holistic model of media markets. They own newspapers and magazines, radio and television stations, they publish books, they produce movies, they own the rights to much of the music we listen to, they own popular theme parks, they produce musicals and theater shows, they are involved in the production of computer games and other interactive forms digital entertainment, they also shape the modern internet and advertising market.

The holistic model of media markets that I have presented is therefore not only a model that allows for a more accurate description of the complex relations of contemporary media, but also a model indicating the real shape of today's media market, dominated by several global players.

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<sup>16</sup> M. Szweida, *Rynek gier wart więcej niż filmy z Hollywood*, <http://www.benchmark.pl/aktualnosci/rynek-gier-wart-wiecej-niz-filmy-z-hollywood.html> (access 18.10.2022).