

## **Conference: Models of public media in Poland and in Europe March, 1<sup>st</sup>, Warsaw**

### **“The quality of state, democracy and media” by Jan Zielonka, University of Oxford**

The relationship between the state, democracy, and the media is said to be symbiotic:

democracy can hardly exist without a state, while free media can hardly exist without democracy

However, the notion of „cosmopolitan democracy” is vague and contested.

Polities without a state may well be democratic, but they are not called democracy.

My famous colleagues in Oxford such as Stepan or Dahrendorf always argued that: „Apart from nation-states, we will never find appropriate institutions for democracy.”

A similar symbiosis is said to exist between the media and democracy.

Democracy generates media pluralism and diversity.

Democracy prevents undue state intervention in the media, as well as the capture of the media by political interests.

All this seems simple and straightforward. The problem is that the notions of state, democracy and media are fuzzy and ever changing.

Consider the notion of the state. Poland has just accomplished an evolution from a communist state to a capitalist one or if you wish from a class state to a nation state. But what is the end product? Is Poland more a nation state or a market state at present? The two are about different things.

A nation state puts emphasis on the community: united, pure and chosen in its extreme form.

A market state puts emphasis on the individual and its numerous rights, especially as an investor and consumer.

A nation state maximalization of welfare. A market state maximalization of opportunities & choice.

A nation state relies on law and regulations. A market state relies on market incentives & deregulation.

The principle of government in a nation state is representation, while in a market state the principle of government is responsiveness.

Is Poland more a nation state or a market state at present?

Without an answer to this question, one can hardly say anything sensible about the media and democracy in Poland.

Equally tricky questions can be asked about democracy. Is democracy in Poland chiefly about parliamentary representation or public deliberation? Is it social or liberal? Consolidated or transitory? Participatory or delegative?

John Keane who studies linkages between the media and democracy talks about monitory democracy manifested by the rapid growth of numerous extra-parliamentary, power-scrutinising mechanisms.

He points to the ever growing number of political think-tanks, surveys, focus groups, deliberative polling, online petitions and advocacy services that put politicians, parties, and elected governments permanently “on their toes.”

Business firms also take active part in this monitoring. There is hardly any serious firm today with a communication director and they all rely on surveys companies.

These scrutinizing institutions question the authority of formal institutions, force politicians to change their agendas, and break long-standing corporatist arrangements.

Democracy is no longer about delegating power to elected officials. Nor is democracy a government implementing the common “will” of any given (national) majority.

Today democracy is more about self-governed networks monitoring traditional political institutions and forcing them to make regular adjustments of their policies.

If Keane is right we’ve got a problem. Access to social networks can be restricted for various formal and informal reasons such as class, profession or money.

The notion of public participation within the prime monitoring institution, the media, is very one sided: audiences are invited to take part in media debates, but editors can choose only some of the inputs to reach the public.

Networks may well be self-governed, but they are not always governed in a democratic manner, and they are notoriously unaccountable.

Monitory democracy tends to focus on single simple issues better than on complex aggregated problems requiring broader, informed and sustained deliberation.

The selection of issues highlighted by monitoring institutions can be either manipulated or accidental. For instance, the public’s attention is often diverted to politicians’ private lives and away from their voting records.

The argument here is more and more about the media rather than democracy. The media, especially the new media such as internet, change democracy the way the invention of printed press has done so in the past.

Democracy cannot be expected to function alike in the ages of papyrus and the internet.

However, the media is not only about technology; it is also about institutions, ethos, power and money.

Journalists and media owners participate in the process of change; sometimes in a role of victim unable to resist market and political pressures; and sometimes in a role of predator trying to extract public and private resources for partisan gains.

Journalists and media owners do not operate in isolation, but form alliances with other political and commercial elites. Some of us call these informal networks or alliances: mediocracy.

Mediocracy is never transparent, institutionalized or accountable and it often operates in a mode of dirty togetherness by exchanging favours, fencing off competition and promoting partisan regulatory standards.

My colleagues at this panel will talk more about manifestations of these complex relationships between the state, the media and democracy in various parts of the world. I will only restrict myself to one final comment related to the essence of our debate on the public media in Poland and elsewhere.

The notions of state and democracy has evolved over ages, and so have the notions of the public and individual good. Yet, despite these changes one task seems to remain central for democracy: the need to balance liberal and communitarian values.

The former are chiefly about individuals and their rights, while the latter are about collectives and their ability to provide common good.

Liberals are right to put individuals at the centre stage, but individuals live in collectives, and good life for individuals usually requires a good polity.

Liberals should also be complemented for their concern with individual's rights, however they tend to underrate the sociological and economic conditions on which the attainment of these rights depend. In other words, enjoyment of individual rights requires a well-ordered polity.

Both liberalism and communitarianism tend to be dogmatic and not tolerant of each other. In reality, they often need each other. Liberal values constantly need communitarian support to be sustained, and the other way around.

State power should be checked and balanced to the extent that it is not able to do ill, but not to the extent that it is prevented to do good.

Individuals are not able to exercise free choice without a conducive institutional environment.

The art of good government is to balance or even marry liberalism with communitarianism.

This might sound a bit abstract, but one cannot talk about the public service broadcasting without comprehending the interplay between liberalism with communitarianism.

Hyper liberalism does not recognize the need for a collective good in a form of public radio and television, because it believes that individuals are able to make rational choices without patronage of the state.

The problem is that information received by individuals is often distorted by vested interests operating the media. Think about the empire of Murdoch or Berlusconi.

The problem also is that liberal values are not being taken care off by the media operating merely according to the logic of profit and entertainment.

Hyper communitarianism tends to identify the common good with the good of one party or a government of the day. It also tends to treat the PSB (Public Service Broadcasting) as a tool of governmental propaganda. We have seen this in Italy and now in Hungary.

Yet, media audiences are not just consumers passively purchasing commercial or political products. Audiences are composed of citizens in search of sophisticated and unbiased information that is usually provided by the genuine public media, however boring.