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The Patchwork of Bulgarian Media *

To understand the profound transformation in the mass media system and its development trends in Bulgaria, one should go back to the roots of political upheaval after the fall of the Berlin wall.

The collapse of the totalitarian regime in the country brought about significant changes across the entire social system. For over four decades the Communist Party

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dominated the functions of the State, curtailing the rights and liberties of the people. An atmosphere encouraging social obedience in line with the propaganda requirements reigned in the country. Normal political life was practically non-existent in Bulgaria. The freedom of expression was limited. The public swam in informational fog.

After 45 years of Communism, Bulgaria held its first democratic elections in May 1990, following an inter-party coup that brought totalitarian rule to an end in November 1989. A major political achievement of those early times was the revocation of Article I of the Constitution, which legitimized the leading role of the Communist Party in societal and state affairs.

In following years, a normal political environment was gradually established. The transition period of nearly eighteen years witnessed four presidential elections (in 1992, 1996, 2001, and 2006), six parliamentary elections (in 1990, 1991, 1994, 1997, 2001, and 2005), five local elections (in 1991, 1995, 1999, 2003, and 2007), one EU parliamentary election (2007) and the appointment of ten governments. An encouraging sign of the normalization of political life was that the last two governments (a Center-Right coalition led by the *UDF* in 1997/2001 and a coalition led by a party created only two months prior to the election day by the former Bulgarian King Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha in 2001-2005) successfully completed their mandates. The present-day President, Georgi Parvanov, is the first President to win a second mandate.

However, as a result of fierce political infighting and of the lack of a broad consensus on the future development of the country, the pace of legislative and economic change was slow. That produced significant social problems and their solution was nowhere in sight. Thus the country lost its momentum generated by the quick start of the democratic reforms, missed the chance to get integrated with the Central European countries into important European structures, and entered the 21st century under the already launched Currency Board.

While in the first years of formation of pluralistic political life in the country the parties confronted each other on ideological grounds, the political Left-Center-Right space was subsequently gradually segmented under the pressure of economic interests. A steady trend was observed among all participants in the political process: leftist promises

in the pre-election period and rightist governance after winning the vote. Political migration became quite commonplace, participation in the government catered to personal interests in the process of economic deetatization and strong private initiative. Accession to the European Union and prospects for disbursement of the European funds exacerbated further the political strife for positions of power.

In the meantime, important changes were taking place in the media. In a very short time, without gate-keeping or ideological control, the style and content of the press and of the broadcasts departed strongly from the former patterns. The emerging principles and styles of journalism were created *ad hoc*. The turbulent events had forced the journalists to learn and master their new mission by groping for free expression, while balancing personal risk. They were on a quest for free and significant expression, public control over the State institutions of authority, and an open challenge to the responsibilities faced by the Fourth Estate in a transforming society.

Political pluralism brought into existence different party organs. Thus, early in 1990, political marketing boomed in Bulgaria. The same year marked the start of the political advertising on television. The first live TV debate between presidential candidates was aired in January 10, 1992. The strong press, radio and TV involvement in influencing the final choice of the voters played a significant role during the pre-election campaigns from the very beginning of democratization of political life. Thus, the mass media brought about high polarization of the people in Bulgaria. The public media – the National Radio and the National Television – were under new political control with every shift of power. The catch phrase of one of the former public TV executives, “Television follows the winner,” had squeezed the most powerful media in the country into a corset of self-restriction.

Speaking of political pluralism, the media often act as the main subject of political manipulation, especially prior to the elections. That is why, when powerful media fall under the control of economic or political power groups, this significantly deforms democracy.

In those first years of democratization, journalism operated as a distorting mirror, frequently misrepresenting the political processes in the country, and yet still exerting considerable influence over the public opinion.

Nevertheless, the tendency to democracy became irreversible. Among the major political achievements during that period were the stabilization of political life in the country, entry into NATO in 2004, and accession to EU in 2007.

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Prior to the democratic changes in 1989, the Bulgarian mass media system was centralized, State-owned and subordinated to the priorities of the Party-State system. Thus, for good forty years, journalism was monotonous, instructive and politically controlled. The censoring institution prompted the development of self-censorship, the lack of information entailed misinformation, the absence of pluralistic press and broadcasting resulted in newspapers, magazines, radio- and television programs of marginalized profile.

The democratization processes in society strongly influenced the mass media development in Bulgaria. The new Bulgarian Constitution guaranteed freedom of expression to all citizens. Article 40 (1) specifically defended the freedom of the mass media: “The press and the other mass information media shall be free and shall not be subjected to censorship” (Bulgarian Constitution, 1991).

Of all other institutions, the mass media system most rapidly responded to the transition to democracy after November 1989. It underwent profound changes in structure, management and social functioning during the transition to a Civil Society and market economy.

Liberalization and deregulation of the mass media have led to a strong decentralization process and to the emergence of pluralistic print and electronic media. Different patterns of media consumption and new advertising strategies were introduced. The establishment of a mass media market, although weak and unstructured yet, stimulated the development of new formats and styles of expression, thus fostering the higher selectivity standards of the audiences.

The spirit of pluralism and the understanding that the importance of each medium was bound to its contribution to social change became a pragmatic guideline for survival and development. Audiences forced journalists to assume the role of heralds of political, economic, cultural, and social change. Reality, however, proved quite different in style from “wishful democracy” and the media world accordingly produced parallel pictures of life in times of critical hardships, contests, and challenges. The unstructured Civil Society, however, failed to lay down a steady public groundwork for professional journalism.

Nevertheless, the media found themselves fulfilling the dual function of transmitters and catalysts of political change. This dual function was manifested in several critical situations, including the TV attack against President Petar Mladenov in 1990 that compelled him to resign; the resignation of the *Bulgarian Socialist Party* government headed by Andrey Loukanov in 1990; the mass media war launched by the *Union of Democratic Forces* government of Filip Dimitrov, which led to its toppling in 1992; the exit of the government of Lyuben Berov (under the *Movement for Rights and Freedom* mandate) in 1994; the withdrawal of the *BSP* government of Zhan Videnov in 1996; the siege of the House of the National Assembly during the governmental crisis of 1997, which led to a radical power shift; and the forced restructuring of the *UDF* Government of Ivan Kostov in 1999, following allegations of corruption. In 2005, media pressure accompanied the ministerial shifts in the Government of the *National Movement Simeon the Second* – the Centrist, leader-type party, with Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha (the former King of Bulgaria) as the sole leader. Following media attacks, some ministers in the current Coalition Government (*BSP, NMSS and MRF*) of Sergey Stanishev were forced to resign in 2007 on corruption charges and failure to fulfill the EU accession requirements.

Among the major challenges of the transition period to the media were the general insufficiency of financial and technological resources and the lack of professional standards. Nevertheless, media competition encouraged the emergence of the first dynamic open markets in the country, which established some well-developed media consumption patterns.

However, although the public was offered a highly varied media menu, expectations that the media would aid the processes of democratization in a purposeful and effective manner have proved unrealistically high. The media were themselves in need of transformation. Change of property and departure from single-party control were insufficient to put them on a professional basis. The tabloid context brought about by fast commercialization impeded the media in offering a quality debate on the process of democratization. Public interest was replaced by what was interesting to the public. Although the journalistic community adopted its ethical code in 2004 (Ethical Code, 2004), it failed to build the mechanisms for sustaining it and in many cases still reacts inadequately to important and publicly significant issues, as well as to a number of professional problems. Several journalistic unions were established, but they failed to defend the basic professional rights and responsibilities.

Legislation, or rather the manner of its implementation, also failed to create a media environment equally distanced both from political and business interests, and able to serve the public and the public interest. While there is no law that regulates the print media in Bulgaria (slander and libel are covered by the Penal Code), the electronic media are regulated by the Radio and Television Act adopted in 1998, and under the Telecommunications Act adopted the same year. Both acts have been amended many times. Bulgaria has ratified the European Convention on Transfrontier Television (1997) and since accession to the EU has also been covered by the EU Television Without Frontiers Directive (now Audiovisual Media Services Directive). The current media regulations are closely aligned with EU legislation.

Deprofessionalization and tabloidization trends accompanied the transformation period. Similarly to the politicians, the both old and young journalists were unprepared to fully shoulder their new role and the respective responsibilities of a Fourth Estate in a society under transformation.

Print media

Many challenges were encountered in the process of establishing a new press. By the early 1990s, State ownership of newspapers and magazines was abandoned and the first opposition daily newspapers –*Svoboden Narod* (Free People) and *Demokratzia* (Democracy) - appeared. In the years after 1989, many new publications came on the market, only to disappear soon afterwards. The absence of any mass-media regulations brought in a boom in pornographic publications, virtually unheard of before 1989. Newspaper prices soared in step with the general inflation and subscription, until then a common practice, was gradually abandoned.

Right after the political changes extreme media partisanship developed. The various parties established their own periodicals, thus giving rise to a new, politically affiliated, journalism. The newspapers of the then leading political parties became quite popular: *Duma*, which was supported by the *Bulgarian Socialist Party* and *Democratsia*, the newspaper of the *Union of Democratic Forces*. The ideological heralds of the various political parties engaged in a newspaper war with no regard for the interests of the public. The broader public was often fed tailored information and interpretations. The highly politicized media outlets seemed to offer an enormous quantity of information, but unfortunately this information was too biased and slanted to provide the reader with a consistent picture of the on-going social change. Such partisanship in pursuit of daily stories segmented the audience reach. Thus, the process resulted in a steadily shrinking readership of political newspapers.

Parallel to that, a wide range of highly varied editions quickly emerged: popular, quality, topical, and specialized publications. A discouraging moment was that the people began to perceive and assess the processes of change via the media models. Professionalism yielded to business interests. Without being held politically or socially responsible, the mass media actually shaped the dynamics of public social and political space.

New titles emerged, however, which presented themselves as politically independent (*24 Chassa*, *Trud*, *Standart*). These periodicals quickly gained the largest market share. Their content corresponded to the pragmatic needs and attitudes of the

economically active part of the general audience. They adopted a new, popular pattern of graphic layout styles in tabloid format, news presentation and new language and syntax, close to the everyday speech of the readers. These newspapers took over the expanding volume of advertising.

However, the generally low credibility of the politically based and sensational independent tabloids failed to convince as trustworthy information sources. What was lacking was higher-quality press: serious broadsheets presenting hard news, interpretive and opinion journalism, without mixing news and comment. The first quality dailies, *Continent* and *Pari* (Money), were established in 1992, followed in 1993 by *Cash* and *Capital*. The general public, however, enjoyed the simple, hard and even sensational practices of the popular press. The quality press was not considered a serious competitive threat to the large-circulation papers, and therefore, it found it difficult to win regular, consistent readership.

Another group of independent publications encompassed a broad diversity of specialized periodicals: leisure, culture, fashion, feminine issues, health care, religion, entertainment, sports, eroticism, hobbies, etc. Most of them had low circulation; some displayed professional design and original content. The same was true of the periodicals aimed at age and gender. World renowned titles, such as *National Geographic*, *Business Week*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Playboy*, etc. are now published in their Bulgarian versions. Also, a special group of publications was established to target the foreign information consumers with periodicals issued in English, French, German, Russian, and Turkish.

Application of the new information technologies was most manifest in the process of newspaper-making rather than in their content. Although the spread of the Internet was seen as a new possibility to revitalize the public discourse, the newspaper websites have been still deficient in public interaction. Given the fact that the web versions of the printed periodicals are created mainly as a supplementary information source, their layout is still simple, unsophisticated, focusing on core information. Nevertheless, their readership is growing, slowly but steadily.

Strengthening of the market marked the start of its consolidation. Several major press groups were founded by professionals close to private banks, insurance companies,

political and trade union establishments, thus starting the concentration process. The rigorously developing media market attracted foreign investors. In 1997, the German *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung (WAZ)* bought the controlling package of the two leading newspaper groups in Bulgaria: *168 Chassa* and *Media Holding*. The inflow of foreign capital helped the establishment of successful business models across the entire range of newspaper-making: from editing to advertising policy, through ownership of own printing facilities and to the distribution network. However, when this model was extended to the local level, it reduced the richness of voices and opinions available to the local population.

The monopolist position of the state-owned Bulgarian Telegraph Agency (established in 1892) was challenged by new private press agencies, such as Balkan Agency, BGNES and the on-line ones.

Currently, the public enjoys a rich print media scene including 423 newspapers (60 dailies) with annual circulation of 310 023 100 and 746 magazines and bulletins with annual circulation of 13 665 200 (NSI, 2006). The two dailies with the largest circulation are *Trud* (Labor) and *24 Chassa* (24 Hours), both owned by WAZ.

A comparative stabilization of the market has led to a greater professionalization of journalists. Their professional development was encouraged by national prizes for high journalistic accomplishments. The annual ratings of the top newspapers in Bulgaria became a telling indicator of public and professional appraisal, as well as a significant index for the advertisers. A decade of newspaper wars was followed by a period of unification. Currently, over 65 printed media are represented by 22 members in the *Union of Publishers in Bulgaria* (2000) - an independent, non-governmental association united by the principles of freedom of the press, independence of journalists and encouragement of their work so that society would be objectively informed. The *Union of Publishers in Bulgaria* holds membership in the *World Association of Newspapers* (WAN) and in the *European Newspaper Publishers' Association* (ENPA).

Broadcasting media

In contrast to the turbulent transformation in the press, changes in the broadcasting media were slower, incomplete and lacked general consistency. They started and were carried out in an atmosphere of deregulation – the Radio and Television Act was adopted only in 1998.

Although the former Party-State structures in the State-owned electronic media were abandoned, the executive boards of the public service broadcasters still remained open to direct political pressure, causing overall personnel instability and lack of continuity in the programming policy. Problems regarding the freedom of expression, agenda-setting issues, media ownership, and journalistic investigative reporting gave rise to conflicts between the professional managers and bureaucrats. Nevertheless, the public service broadcasters still enjoy the highest audience credibility: *BNT* is approved by $\frac{3}{4}$ of the population and *BNR* by $\frac{2}{3}$, as compared to other institutions such as police 49% and the army 50% (NCPO, 2006).

Presently, the two national institutions that regulate the electronic media are the *Council for Electronic Media (CEM)* and the Communications Regulation Commission (*CRC*). They issue radio and TV licenses and register cable and satellite broadcasters. *CEM* (formerly *The National Council for Radio and Television*) is the regulatory body that monitors compliance with the Radio and Television Act, including issues such as advertising, sponsorship, copyright, and protection of minors. The Council also considers complaints by citizens and organizations. *CRC* (formerly *The State Commission of Telecommunications*) manages the radio spectrum. It also enforces the Electronic Communications Act, adopted in 2007, which has laid down the legal basis for the digital switchover.

Although the advertising market is still not very big or concentrated, the radio and TV environment is oversaturated. Lack of clarity about the media ownership obscures the fact how dependent the electronic media are on the political and business interests and impacts on the media policies. The weak market, which fails to sustain the numerous licensed radio stations, has left a loophole for companies with funding of doubtful origin. A further obstacle to the development of radio and TV in the country has been the fact

that no terrestrial broadcasters have been licensed for years now. Licensing was to be preceded by the development a *Strategy for Development of Radio and Television Activities by Terrestrial Radio Broadcasting* by the regulatory bodies for broadcasting and telecommunications. The Strategy was developed on time, but the Parliament adopted it only four years later, when it became necessary to do so as a condition for the pre-accession process to the European Union. Then, however, the Communications Regulation Commission's arbitrarily refused to take part in the tender procedures for licensing of analogue TV broadcasters. Its excuse was that no licensing could be done until the Plan for Introduction of Digital TV Broadcasting (DVB– T) in Bulgaria was put in motion.

Radio

The liberalization of radio broadcasting was much slower than in the case of the print media. The liberalized rules for licensing of local radio and television stations encouraged a rapid development of the private radio. The first licenses for private radio stations were issued to several foreign radio broadcasters: *Voice of America*, *BBC-World Service*, *Free Europe*, *France International*, and *Deutsche Welle*. They were selected because of their sensitivity to the democratization process in Bulgaria. The first domestic private radio station, FM+, went on air in October 1992. Currently two national radio stations are broadcasting: *BNR* – the public service broadcaster and the commercial *Darrik* radio.

The new radio stations developed some more flexible and attractive formats and styles, targeting different audience niches. They quickly gained popularity. The necessary conditions (financial, technological and personnel) for differentiation of the private broadcasters on a national scale were at hand. Nevertheless, the State-owned and operated public radio network still holds a commanding lead in audience share. The process of liberalization of the national public radio operator from political tutelage was difficult and painful, and passed through many a crisis. The latest of those crises entailed amendments to the Radio and Television Act (2001), which brought an end to the existence of the first program-regulating authority: the National Council for Radio and Television. It was the journalists of National Radio who proved most active in the efforts

of the journalists to get rid of political influence over the programs. Reducing to the minimum the political appetites for control over the public radio broadcasts helped normalize the functioning of BNR and for the first time secured for its Director General two consecutive terms of office (2001-2007).

The inflow of foreign capital and radio broadcasters (*Emmis Communications, SBS Broadcasting, Community Corp.*) reflected positively on the radio market in terms of optimizing its production cycle. Along with that, there was a negative side to the process: the purchase of telecommunication licenses by powerful foreign players from the local owners served to reduce the pluralism of voices. Only 10% of all licensed radio programs in the country are specialized. The rest are generalist and aimed at an age-segmented but relatively mass audience. The specific interests and music preferences of the small audiences, though, were doomed to economic failure.

After the resumption of the licensing process in 2006, the Council for Electronic Media already announced 37 procedures for radio broadcasting and 9 procedures for TV broadcasting with a local coverage. Five licenses for radio broadcasting have been issued so far. The announced tenders for TV broadcasting have not been finalized yet.

Several telling trends in the radio program dynamics could be discerned during this period of transition. Radio broadcasting has grown considerably. In 1988, prior to the political changes, some 46 810 hours of programming were aired. In 1989, the number increased to 48 498 hours; in 1993, the inclusion of private radio boosted the total number of air time to 161 278. By 2006, the public was enjoying 591 834 hours of programming, over twelve times the number of hours broadcast in 1988 (National Statistical Institute, 2006). Currently, there are 104 terrestrial radio program services and 46 services on cable. (Current developments..., 2007).

In recent years, political control of radio has largely been replaced by economic control. Program supply has been strongly diversified. Local radio stations have developed a clear-cut public profile, as well as introduced technological innovations, such as computer-run, RDS and on-line versions of the regular radio programs. The introduction of new styles, formats and standards has led to steady segmentation of the radio audiences. Bulgarian National Radio tops the ratings. The concentration trends have

conditioned certain monotony in broadcasting and disregard of the specific preferences and, supposedly, marginalization of the public interest.

Television

As compared to the other media, changes in television came much more slowly. Some major reasons for that included the State monopoly over national telecasting, political pressures resulting in the frequent replacement of TV executives (in seventeen years, fourteen Directors General had headed in succession the *National Television*), lack of research and development concepts and strategies, inefficient management, economic constraints and obsolete equipment. The last Director General was actually the first who completed his term of office and was re-elected for another term.

1994 is regarded as a landmark for liberalization of telecasts in Bulgaria. The first private locally broadcasting television station, *Nova Televizia* (New Television), was launched in 1994. Because of the lack of financial, technological and personnel resources, it was limited to a modest programming: primarily movies and imported popular entertainment programs. The opening of the *7Dni* (7 days) local TV station in 1995 signaled the beginning of competition in telecasting in Sofia. In December 1999 Rupert Murdoch's *Balkan News Corporation* was the successful bidder to become the first private TV operator functioning on a national scale. Currently, the number of TV program services broadcast by cable and satellite is 215; but only seven licensed TV program services are authorized to broadcast terrestrially. The television market includes three national TV channels: *BNT* - the public service television broadcaster and the two commercial television stations: *bTV*, licensed in 2000 and owned by Rupert Murdoch's *Balkan News Corporation* and *Nova Televisia*, licensed in 2002 and owned by the Greek Antenna Group.

The emergence of alternative television encouraged program diversification in the national TV landscape. Meanwhile, the almost uncontrolled reception of satellite, transborder and cable programs exerted significant pressure on the domestic channels. Infiltration of foreign audiovisual products had an equally strong impact on the national broadcasting policies.

The privately owned TV stations undoubtedly challenged the monopoly of the State-owned television. A diversified TV market was gradually established in the country. Recently *bTV* has taken the lead in the audience share from *BNT* in a country where 98% of the households have a television set. According to June 2007 statistics, the national audience of *bTV* is 94.7%; the corresponding numbers for *Nova TV* are 85.1% and 81.6% for *BNT - Channel 1* (Alpha Research, 2007). The same order is valid for the advertising revenues of the three broadcasters. The fact that the commercial TV operators are allowed 12 min of advertising per hour, while the public operator has only 15 min for advertising daily to add money to its budget voted by the National Assembly, has also contributed to that. The broadcasting fees expected to be collected for the public radio and TV never materialized.

In 1988, prior to the political changes, 5886 hours of TV programming were aired. A dramatic growth of 500 hours of telecasts was registered during the critical year of 1989. By 1994, when private television was officially introduced, audiences enjoyed 7178 hours of TV programming, while in 2006 the number of the hours reached 599 135 – an over tenfold increase! (NSI, 2006). Diversified program supply encouraged higher audience selectivity. Digitization, mobile TV and webcasting are the current technological opportunities challenges that Bulgarian broadcasters need to embrace.

Recently, inclusion of some foreign licensed game-shows and reality formats in order to bring quick profit to producers and operators has pushed national TV production out towards the lower margin of the viewers' interest. Along with this, some meaningful programs serving the public interest enjoy little following as they are less attractive than reality shows. Thus it becomes evident that the fulfillment of the principle of structural pluralism is closely bound to the meaning of content in the TV programs, i.e. to the realization of meaningful internal pluralism. That is, the pluralism of content has been brought to nil.

In terms of cultural pluralism, there are two risks in this regard: dilution of the national cultural identity and uniqueness. Transnational TV formats gain ever larger following, displacing cultural traditions. Threatened are the main public values. Thus pluralism may turn into its opposite by condemning to oblivion entire styles, epochs,

national models, and favorite works of other generations. In this sense, it is important to preserve the cultural identity, the letters and languages in the EU integration processes and to protect the constitutional rights of minority groups (ethnic, religious, cultural, linguistic and other) to education and information on their mother tongue.

The morning programs have acquired tabloid character, news-coverage departed from the professional requirement for strict clinging to facts and for avoiding comments. There was a concentrated monopoly in advertising to boot. Instead of becoming a corrective of the authorities, television stations rushed to offer them air time. The public interest was marginalised, while business interests impeded the further development of the process of licensing and all nine announced tenders were called off. Legislative gaps have permitted the telecommunication operators to acquire rights to terrestrial distribution of TV programs that have never seen a licensing tender. Thus, there is not a single properly licensed TV program service in the country. This rendered pointless any media regulation via registration and licensing procedures.

For nearly 18 years a highly saturated radio and TV landscape has been developing in the country. At present, a total of 372 radio and television program services are created on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria: (150 radio and 222 TV program services), offered by a large number of national, regional and local radio and TV terrestrial, cable and satellite operators. Most operators have a rather unstable license programming status. There are still 160 broadcasters distributing 118 radio and 42 TV programs in the so- called “temporary tolerance” mode. Their statute is settled legally by tenders in the respective inhabited places.

The number of licensed radio and television telecommunication operators, which use limited frequency resources and broadcast by terrestrial transmitter, is 197. The terrestrial market includes three national TV channels and two national radio stations.

All these five national broadcasters are members of the *Union of Bulgarian National Electronic Media* (2005) - an independent non-governmental association, formed to defend freedom of speech, independence of journalists, and promotion of their creative work aimed at providing objective information to the public.

The programs of the national and other channels are further distributed by over 1800 cable networks and over 23 nation-wide satellite networks. Two telecommunication operators provide a digital package of program services. Radio and television broadcasting on the Internet is developing briskly. (Current developments..., 2007).

As of April 2007, over 160 radio and TV stations hold membership at the *Association of Bulgarian Broadcasters* (ABBRO) founded in 1997 as a voluntary, independent, non-political and non-profit organization, representing the broadcasting industry in Bulgaria (Association of Bulgarian Broadcasters, 2007).

Online media

The advent of new information technologies has had a strong influence on the media production cycle. Internet was officially introduced in Bulgaria in 1997 and its market has expanded at encouraging rates ever since. Access to the Internet is provided mainly via telephone (dial-up), or via cable by specialized providers or as an additional service by the cable television operators. Satellite Internet is practically not used by the end users. Overall Internet penetration in Bulgaria, however, remains relatively low: only 17.0 % of the Bulgarian households and 84.3% business companies have access to Internet (National Statistical Institute, 2006).

The use of new technologies is increasingly regarded as the key survival factor in the overcrowded media space. The newspapers with highest circulation maintain online editions, but some of the online versions require paid access (*24 Chassa* (www.24chassa.bg), *Trud* (www.trud.bg), *Standart News* (www.standartnews.com), *Monitor* (www.zone168.com), and *Sega daily* (www.segabg.com). News agencies and broadcasting media have also entered the online world: the *Bulgarian Telegraph Agency* (www.bta.bg), the national broadcasters: *Bulgarian National Television* (www.bnt.bg), *bTV* (www.btv.bg/home/), *Nova TV* (www.ntv.bg), *Bulgarian National Radio* (www.nationalradio.bg), *Darrik Radio* (www.netissat.bg/), and most of the local media. Several web-based media exist: www.Mediapool.bg, www.novinite.com, and www.news.bg. A steady tendency towards increasing in number and quality the electronic information and media sites has been observed.

In addition to traditional media and online-only news sites, some citizen-generated content has entered the World Wide Web. The Internet is beginning to be used for the so-called “citizen journalism.” Even though this is a relatively new phenomenon, blogs on different social and political issues have multiplied. Another interesting phenomenon is a group of websites designed to facilitate public debate, where members of the public can write a story on a social, political or economic topic. These articles are published after the approval of the site’s staff and its most active users. A telling example for that is <http://www.newsfactory.org/>.

The increasing popularity of the Internet has definitely influenced the media system. However, the online media business model is still problematic. A combination of content sales, subscription fees and advertising revenues cannot bring sufficient income to assure a content variety that would attract bigger audiences. Searching for their identity in the transforming social and market environment, the online and traditional media are more eagerly serving the advertisers instead of the audiences.

Conclusion

The significance and role of the media in Bulgaria have grown tremendously with the development of new platforms for distribution of audio-visual content. The political elites are quick to use the media for their PR purposes. For the economic elites, the media are the main distributors of their advertisements. The needs of the public are increasingly neglected by the media. Paradoxically enough, the Government engages in regulatory protection of the public service broadcasters which are supposed to be its most vehement critic. Even enhanced interactivity could hardly strip the recipients of their assigned role of users and consumers. The Internet environment is aiding the fragmentation of audiences, but still fails to change the prevailing vertical communication model. When it succeeds in doing that, it will probably set in train a large functional restructuring of the traditional mass-media system.

Several main trends in the mass media development have accompanied the democratization processes in Bulgaria:

- **Politically**, decentralization of the mass media system set in, accompanied by the emergence of a pluralistic press and commercial broadcasters. The development of a free and unhindered transmission of audiovisual services is important for the pursuit of EU objectives. In view of the democratic, social and cultural significance of the media, policy-makers and public authorities should enforce adequate measures so as to ensure transparency in the media sector and prevent the conflicts of interest which pose a threat to the independence and plurality of the media.
- **Legally**, liberalization and regulation of the mass-media system was achieved, with increasing harmonisation with the mass-media policies in the European Union. In terms of regulation, the gradual integration of the media, telecommunications and entertainment industries have led to changes in the legal basis of the regulatory approaches (in the structure and duties of the regulatory authorities, in the methods of regulation (regulation, co-regulation and self-regulation) and in the audiovisual content subject to regulation).
- **Technologically**, new information technologies were introduced in the mass- media production and dissemination. The turbulent progress of information and communication technologies challenges the concept of traditional broadcasting, which is limited to the number of analogue channels. The rapid spread of cable systems and broadcasting satellites has expanded the offer of diverse programs. Digital technologies, broadband and webcasting increase the number of channels, providing the viewers with multiple choices of programs and audio-visual services. Contemporary audiovisual reality becomes ever more complex with interweaving between linear and non-linear programming as well as between broadcasting and audiovisual service.
- **Economically**, the mass-media market has developed into a highly competitive environment at local, regional and national level. The expanding tendency towards deregulation and privatization has conditioned the predominance of commercial entrepreneurs. Media content is becoming ever more dependent on market forces. Thus, merger control at the European, as well as at the national level should be complemented, where appropriate, with specific measures to protect and promote media pluralism.
- **Socially**, fragmentation of audiences accompanied by higher selectivity standards and a better social feedback has taken place. The quantity of the program offer entails fragmentation and demassification of the audiences of traditional media, thus opening

ground for non-broadcasting and interactive audiovisual services. Via citizen journalism and citizen media, the individuals can produce and disseminate information and opinions marginalized by the mainstream media. The broad media impact on the general publics in real time has been reduced owing to asymmetric communication offered by diverse electronic sources.

- **Professionally**, there was a departure from the former media standards and introduction of new formats, styles and liberal journalistic ethics. The rapid introduction of technological innovations challenged the traditional formats and styles. The significance of self-regulation and application of ethical codes of conduct has become ever more important for journalistic practices. Public service broadcasters should contribute to media pluralism by providing a diverse range of quality programs. Media organizations should develop media accountability systems in order to strengthen the professional values, editorial and journalistic independence and quality journalism.

The growing role of the mass media in the period of transition to democracy and market economy has changed the status, rights and responsibilities of the media professionals. In 18 years, a pluralistic media marked has gradually evolved. Media pluralism is usually linked to the democratic performances of society. However, a greater number of media outlets does not necessarily mean that diversity of contents has been achieved.

Media pluralism can be assessed through the number and type of media outlets, number and structure of their owners, editorial content, and access of different societal groups to media channels. The pronounced trend for media concentration has had a negative impact on the quality of information and diversity of opinions, and has curbed the opportunities of certain minority groups (ethnic, religious, cultural, linguistic, etc.) for a broad public outreach through the media. Polyphony has gradually become transformed into tabloid monotony and gives priority rather to information that is interesting to the public than to information in the public interest. This gives rise to the question whether a consolidated media market (especially on a local level) could be held accountable when serving the public interest, especially in times of crisis and emergency. Gradually, the ultimate results of such media market consolidation mean a poorly-informed public, with

access to media which offer mainly information that supports the interests of the media owners.

The absence of a critical debate on issues of public interest and the increased commercialization of contents illustrate how difficult it is for the journalistic community to become a true corrective of the authorities. In fact, the internal professional debate on the place and role of journalism for the democratic performance of society has been constantly postponed. Nevertheless, the power of mass media has become increasingly viable in social life. The changes have provided the journalists with a strong hold on public opinion. Thus, the mass-media system often operates as a Fourth Estate, influencing social attitudes, political opinions and decision-making on national priorities. However, bearing in mind the rapid technological developments in a highly competitive market, a major concern about the vitality of the new regulatory rules may be how long the pillars of the European audiovisual model (cultural diversity, protection of minors, consumer protection, media pluralism, and exclusion of racial and religious hatred) will be protected.

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