



Democracy in the media society: Changing media structures – changing political communication?

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Ever more mergers of big media organizations with capital (and media power) becoming concentrated in fewer hands, growing importance of boulevard-like “free dailies” distributed in big European cities that seem to draw readers away from traditional newspapers, and increasing legal and financial pressures on public service broadcasting that lowers the quality of programming – the structures of the media are changing considerably. These problem diagnoses can be heard in several European countries. However, complaints about changing media structures are old, and media structures still are quite different when we look at a large number of European countries. Furthermore, if media structures are changing: does this mean the content of the media and political communication itself is changing as well? If we see growing media concentration and tabloidization on the level of structures, do we then see more scandals, more infotainment and more drama in political reporting on the level of media content?

All in all, to evaluate changes of media structures, we need an empirical comparative basis, both in a diachronic (over time) and cross-country perspective. And we need a research design that connects the structural aspect of the media with the content side of the media.

In a project funded by the SNF (NCCR Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century), we analyze the trans-

formation of media structures and possible effects on public communication. Which structural changes have affected the media since the last third of the 20th century, and which effects do they have on political communication?

Approach

We argue for a research design that connects the structural and content side of the media, presenting indicators and their operationalization to measure the transformation of media structures across countries and over time and to link them to indicators of changing political communication (content analyses). To build a basis for the evaluation of trends and situations in the various media systems of the “three models of media and politics” (i.e. polarized plural, democratic corporatist, liberal) elaborated in Hallin/Mancini (2004), we systematically analyze and compare the cases of France (polarized pluralist), Austria, Germany, Switzerland (all democratic-corporatist) and Great Britain (liberal). The empirical basis of the measurement of the structural transformation are the suppliers and the supply of the thirty largest newspapers and current affairs magazines (“general interest outlets with political focus”) for 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990 and 2005 and of the thirty largest news and current affairs programs (television) for 1990, and 2005.

In view of differentiation theory, we analyze the (growing) degree of differentiation of the media from their

former social and political ties by capturing and categorizing the structure of media suppliers, expecting different types of (selection and interpretation) logics and orientations (citizens or consumers) depending on the type of suppliers (public service, intermediary, economic). Along with this analysis of the functional dimension of differentiation, we also capture the stratificatory dimension of differentiation (cf. Hallin/Mancini 2004; Imhof 2006) focusing on the dominance (or power) of media suppliers and media supply. Our proposed indicators measure the degree of media concentration on the one hand, and, by categorizing newspapers and current affairs magazines into (1) popular/tabloid press, (2) forum/‘serious’ press or (3) quality press, the dominance of certain media formats and media supply on the other hand. Television programs are categorized into (1) soft news, (2) mixed, or (3) hard news. This method and categorization allows us to show the structural change in a cross-country and diachronic comparison. Below, we can provide preliminary results from this analysis.

Essential findings

First results from our project show that in Western-style democracies, the press has disentangled itself from their former social and political ties. This process is most striking in the small, democratic-corporatist states (Austria, Switzerland) but not linear in a polarized-pluralist state (France). Furthermore the increasing importance

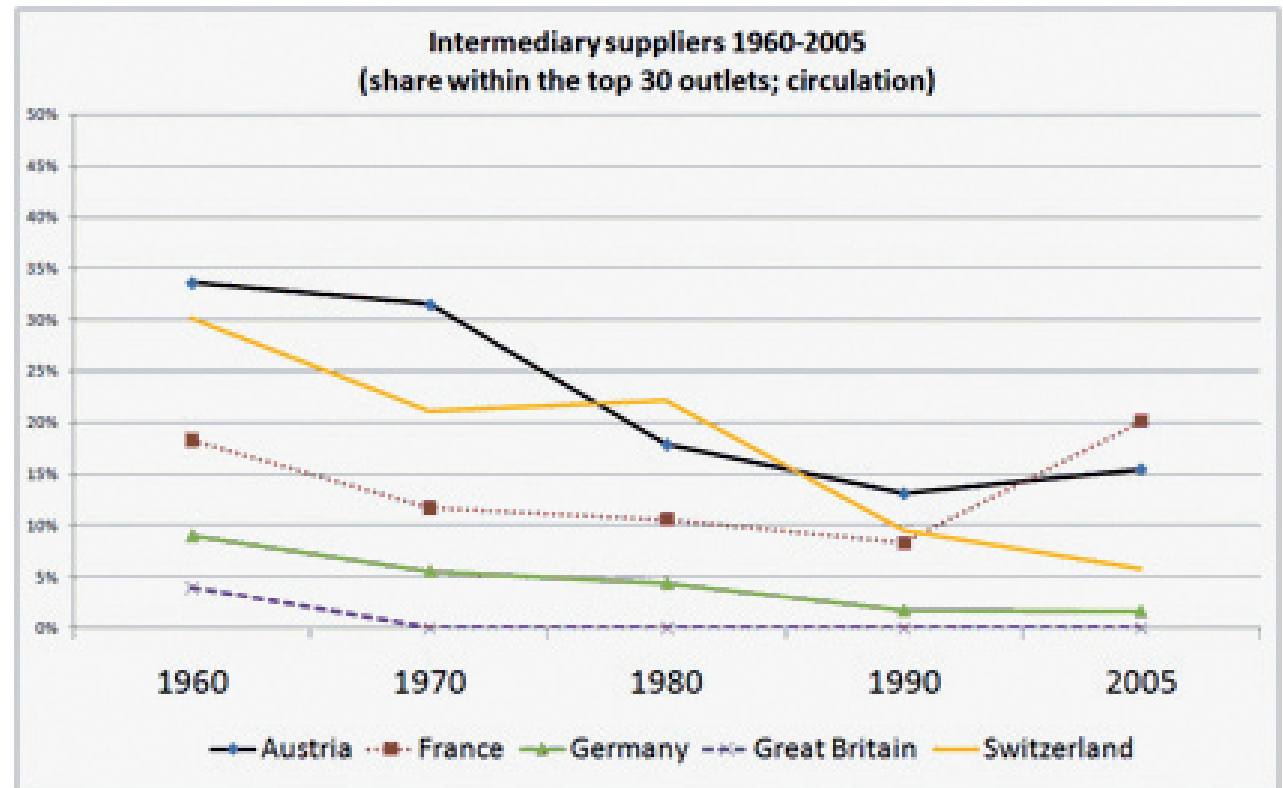
of tabloid media is a phenomenon affecting all countries but to differing degrees.

Figure 1 shows the development of the structure of suppliers of the thirty largest general interest titles with a political focus in Austria, Germany, Great Britain and Switzerland (data for France is work in progress).

The analysis clearly shows the process of ‘disembedding’ of the press, most strikingly in press systems of the democratic-corporatist model. Especially in Germany and Switzerland, the press has disentangled itself from their former social and political ties, as suppliers now almost exclusively are private businesses (economic). In Austria, the same process can be observed but stronger structural intermediary links remain than in Germany or Switzerland. France saw a disembedding of the press from 1960s on but, more recently, a (temporary) lack of differentiation from political actors (e.g. political mandate of Dassault). Great Britain, on the other hand, only had a (weak) intermediary press 1960, with economically shaped suppliers dominating the press market ever since.

Despite the (positive) result of differentiation of the media from its political and intermediary environments, there is reason to assume that the public sphere is challenged (if not “colonized”) by market imperatives (Habermas 2006). Two possible indicators of this are a growing media concentration and a growing number

Figure 1: Structure of suppliers: Differentiation of the press from its environments – Intermediary suppliers

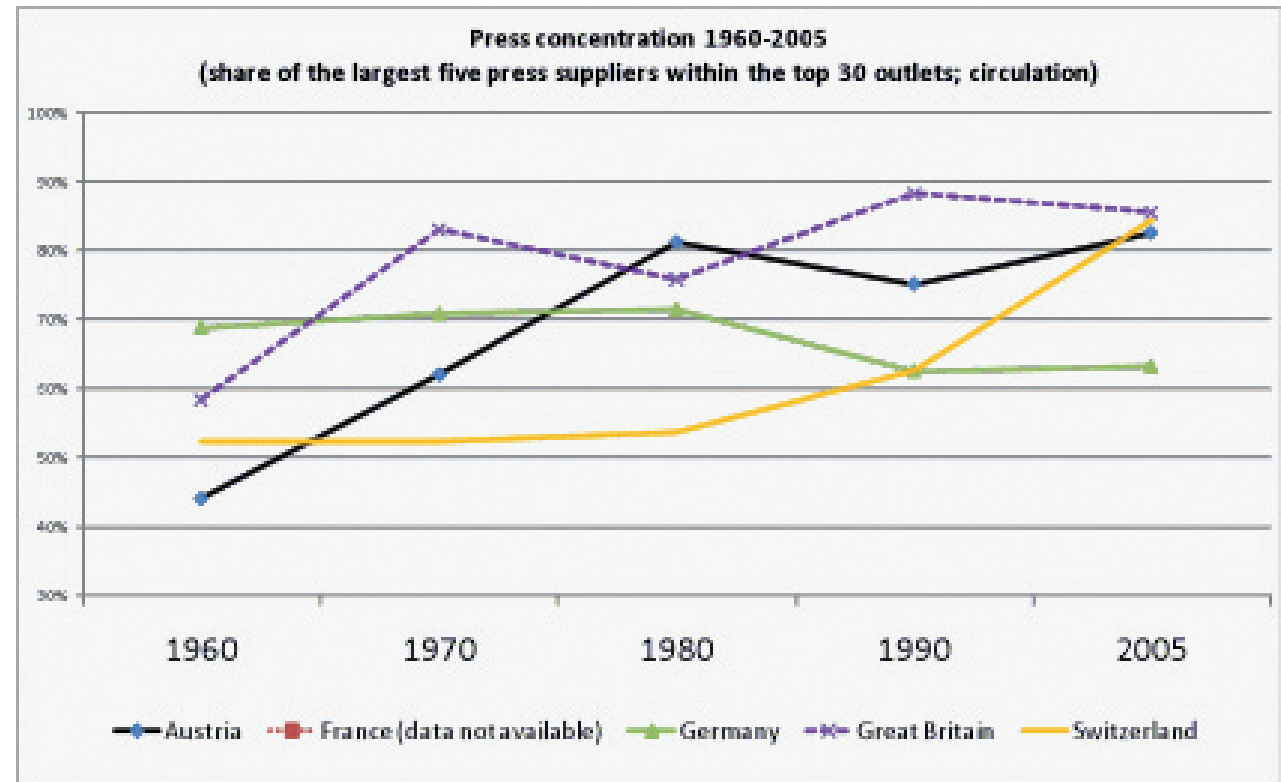


or influence of the tabloid media (which typically are targeted at large audiences to generate the revenue). Both are supported with our data.

Similar to the “disembedding” of the press, press concentration is – comparatively speaking – high already in 1960 in the liberal model (Great Britain) and in the large state of the democratic-corporatist model (Germany) whereas the small states of the democratic-corporatist model (Austria, Switzerland) experience a press concentration later but rapidly. Especially for Switzerland, this process is remarkable, with press concentration becoming a main issue only after the 1980s.

The (overall growing) press concentration we can see in our data often stands in tandem with a (growing) supply of the popular/tabloid press (Figure 3), together indicating the economization of the press. A strong “tabloidization” can be seen in Austria and Great Britain, whereas the popular press plays a slightly smaller role in Germany and Switzerland (according to circulation rates) and a significantly smaller role in France (cf. also Adam/Berkel/Pfetsch 2003). What is crucial, however, is the development of the popular press in the course of time. Here, the small countries within the democratic-corporatist model (Austria, Switzerland) both experience a tremendous growth of the popular press. Great Britain and Germany, whose press outlets have been disembedded for a longer period of time, also have had a fairly strong popular press but for these

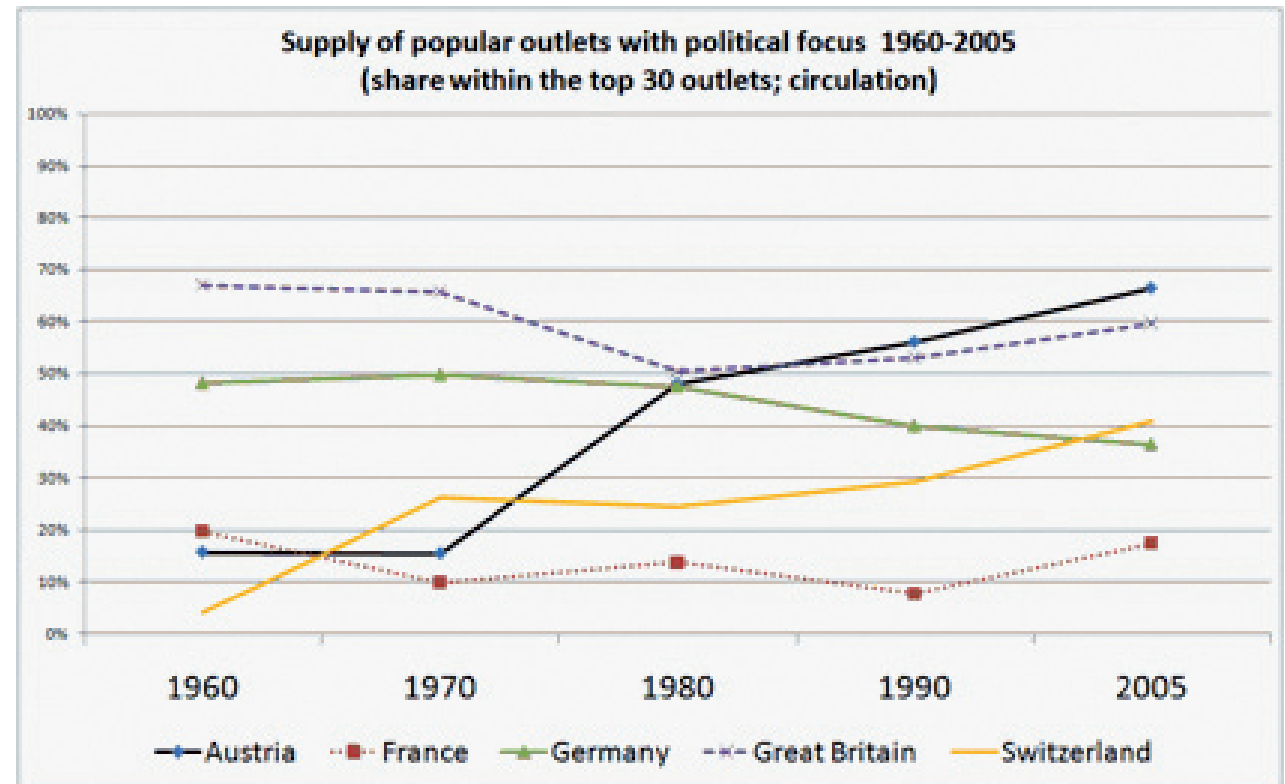
Figure 2: Press concentration over time



countries, the assumption of a growing “polarization between prestige and mass newspapers” (Curran 2000) is probably overstretched, especially for the case of Germany (strong “forum” papers). The press system of France, finally, turns out to be remarkably stable, if we only look at the supply of popular, forum or quality outlets.

These findings, though, have to be interpreted against the background of a television sector where ‘soft news’ have come to play an increasingly important role. It is true that in Germany (cf. also Lucht 2006), Switzerland, Austria and France, the programs with a high degree of ‘hard news’ (still) dominate (mainly in public service broadcasting), while political information programs in Great Britain, also those of the BBC, reflect a slightly different concept of information and display more elements of human interest and emotionalizing, thus resulting in a higher number of programs that could be categorized as a mixture of ‘soft news’ and ‘hard news’. But as regards the development over time, our preliminary results suggest a growing ‘tabloidization’ at the expense of clear hard news formats in all sample countries.

Figure 3: The growing importance of the tabloid/popular press



Effects on political communication?

All in all, we expect that this increasing commercialization leads to a diffusion of „media logics“ into political communication as a whole. This means:

- rising chances of resonance for those actors who adapt to the media logics (especially populist parties) (e.g. Mazzoleni 2008)
- more disclosing and scandalizing in public communication a) over time and b) especially in those media systems where both the supply of popular papers and ‘soft news’ or mixed programs is high
- increasing personalization and privatization of political actors a) over time and b) especially in those media systems where both the supply of popular papers and ‘soft news’ or mixed programs is high

To answer the hypotheses about the effects of changing media structures on political communication (the content side), we have started conducting content analyses in the summer of 2008 by analyzing one quality, one forum and one tabloid paper each in each of our sample countries, from 1960 to 2005.