

# Democracy and new media in Central and Eastern Europe



## **Interview with Dr. Karol Jakubowicz on new notions of media, changing users behavior and impact of new technologies on Central and Eastern European democracies**

The development of new media platforms and players along with significant changes in the users' behavior have changed the process of communication, making it more personalized, individual, creative and interactive. The emergence of online innovations has just become the subject of several different debates emphasizing the role of technology in strengthening the quality of the public sphere and thus democracy. The subject is relevant for both mature and young democracies, where new media platforms, such as blogs or social networks, continue to increase in popularity among young users of the Internet. How do we define the new media platforms that have just become important players in a large number of media systems today? To what extent have new media technologies been adopted in Central and Eastern Europe? Do the new notions of media support the development of democracy in this part of the world? What are the perspectives for the future? (Ed.)

### **To what extent have new technologies changed the nature of communication? How can one define the mass media today?**

A lot of colorful language is being used to describe what is happening in the media field today. Napoli does not venture beyond "an evolving media environment," but Bowman and Willis and Hitchens speak of a new "media ecosystem," the European Parliament notes the existence of a "multi-player environment" within a new "media ecology;" Latzer sees "disorder in communications policy;" and McNair views changes in the contemporary communication environment as a shift from a "control paradigm" to a "chaos paradigm."

If some people see "chaos," it is because technological change and convergence are blurring all old distinctions and enabling new forms of mediated communication, unlike anything possible before. It used to be that we had point-to-point communication (one-to-one) in telecommunications and point-to-multipoint (one-to-many) synchronous (linear) communication in broadcasting. Now, mediated communication can be asynchronous (non-linear), thanks to time-shifting, complemented by place-shifting, due to mobile media. We have on the Internet and other platforms what is known as networked communication, combining all the



content, products and services through, for example, YouTube, eBay or other intermediaries, are a phenomenon that is not addressed in the current legal framework for the digital environment. On another occasion the European Parliament voiced its concerns regarding blogs, noting that “the status of their authors and publishers, including their legal status, is neither determined nor made clear to the readers of the weblogs, causing uncertainties regarding impartiality, reliability, source protection, applicability of ethical codes and the assignment of liability in the event of lawsuits.” The deputies believed that the growth of commercial media outlets for user-generated content (UGC), such as photos and videos, used without paying a fee, raised problems of ethics, right of reply and privacy, and put journalists and other media professionals under pressure.

Search engines, a service of vast importance to the media, also operate in a legal vacuum and have no place in media law. The reason for this is the dual, telecom and information-related nature of such services, meaning that they are primarily regarded as regulated by telecommunications law.

Policy- and law-makers face two major problems as concerns creating a regulatory framework for the new services. The first one is to distinguish media services from information society services. The latter are telecommunication services, which cannot be regulated in the same way as the media. It has taken the European Union many years to develop the Audiovisual Media Service Directive, defining criteria for doing this with regard to non-linear (on demand) audiovisual media services, but the matter is still far from clear. This problem will be with us for a long time to come. The second problem is to know a mass medium when you see one. For example, to use the example given by the European Parliament, should we classify all blogs as mass media, or not? And if not all, then maybe some of them, but according to what criteria? This issue has been addressed for some time by the Council of Europe. The result so far is the already mentioned Recommendation CM/Rec(2011)7 on a new notion of media which calls on member states to adopt “a broad notion of media” and specifies “media criteria” (intent to act as media, purpose and underlying objectives of media, editorial control, professional standards, outreach and dissemination, public expectation) and more detailed indicators for applying these criteria to establish whether we have to do with a mass medium in a given instance or not. It is not clear how they will be applied from an administrative point of view, but most probably citizen journalism, blogs, podcasts and videocasts, as well as any other “media-like” form will have to be assessed on a case-by-case basis to see whether they should be covered by the regulatory framework of the media.

### **Do the new media serve democracy?**

There are four schools of thought in this regard. New technology enthusiasts believe that these technologies and the new media will put us on the road to grassroots, direct participatory democracy. Others claim that the new media and technologies



Southern Europe, “although recent growth rates show that they are catching up.” Most EU-wide comparisons lead to similar conclusions, for example as concerns the broadband penetration rate, DSL national and rural coverage, use of the Internet for e-commerce, disparities in digital literacy across European regions, etc. This is unavoidable: lower income levels and smaller markets mean that business opportunities are smaller and that affects new technology take-up and distribution.

As for the democratic contribution of the new media and technologies in Central and Eastern Europe, it seems clear that, broadly, we have to do with two types of situations. In the more democratic countries, they perform the usual role of a complement to the public sphere, with the blogosphere, citizen journalism, social networks, etc. providing forums for the expression of new ideas, for mobilization and organizing. This is why new media play an increasingly powerful role in shaping the political process. For example, across much of the region political parties and civil society organizations have websites. As in the Arab revolutions I already mentioned, the new media perform two main roles: as “spheres of dissidence” (agoras for dissident or oppositional discourses) and as “tools” for instant communication, mobilization and organization.

When the situation erupts into conflict, these new technologies — especially the Internet and mobile telephony — acquire special importance. One example may be the protest in Moldova concerning government policies and the impending parliamentary elections in April of 2009. The crowd generated for this protest was almost entirely created via Facebook and Twitter.

Another case in point were the street protests, rioting and violence in Hungary in 2006, following the disclosure of the Socialist prime minister’s admission that he and his government had consciously misled the public through a series of lies in order to win re-election. A study conducted by Mónika Mátay and Ildikó Kaposi shows that radical right-wing groups and sympathisers played an active part in the demonstrations. These radical political-cultural groups used the internet for exchanging information, mobilising supporters, and developing their narratives of the events. Yet, despite the sophisticated uses of communication technology to further political goals, no political transformation occurred as a result in 2006. However, the internet served — and continues to serve — as a medium for sustaining an alternative, anti-establishment political narrative for marginal political groups, enabling them to publish their own version of contemporary events and history. In the absence of a revolution, the internet-enabled presence of radical right-wing voices in the public domain continues to be their most significant, symbolic achievement, write the authors.

In the less democratic countries, the new media may be the only relatively free and less controlled area for the expression of dissident and oppositional ideas. The use of new technologies for such purposes and for distributing content that is unwelcome by the authorities has a long and noble tradition in those countries. For example, in the old Soviet Union, one of the technologies used was roentgenizdat,



of Warsaw and has been Visiting Professor at the Institute of Journalism, University of Dortmund, and at the Amsterdam School of Communications Research, University of Amsterdam. In addition, Dr. Karol Jakubowicz has been Chairman of the Supervisory Board as well as Head of Strategic Planning and Development of Polish Television (TVP). In 2004–2006 Dr. Jakubowicz was Director of the Strategy and Analysis Department at the National Broadcasting Council of Poland (KRRiT). Recently he headed Working Group 2 of the COST A30 ACTION “East of West: Setting a New Central and Eastern European Media Research Agenda” of the European Science Foundation. His scholarly and other publications on media and communication have been published in Poland and internationally. Currently Dr. Jakubowicz is Senior Advisor to the Chairman of the National Broadcasting Council and was the lead author of “Regulatory Strategy of KRRiT for 2011–2013.”

Dr. Karol Jakubowicz was interviewed by Michał Głowacki in November 2011