Research Reviews for
Media Development Practitioners

#4

Comprehending Media Systems for Media Development

by
Johanna Mack
February 2022

Series | Research Reviews for Media Development Practitioners

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ISSN: 2748-9426

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Dortmund, February 2022

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Abstract

Media development assistance and media systems research are intricately connected: by describing, assessing, and attempting to change them, media development actors produce knowledge about media systems and directly impact them. This research review explores the intersections of academic media systems research and practices of describing and assessing media landscapes in the media development sector and suggests how both could learn from each other.

In what follows, the most important publications on media systems since the Cold War era will be reviewed, tracing the ongoing process of refining concepts and definitions. Alongside a geographical broadening of the research scope, models as well as methodological approaches have been questioned and reinvented. The review places a special focus on the peculiarities of researching media systems in sub-Saharan Africa.

Referring to academic as well as grey literature, it suggests points of departure for meaningfully linking academic knowledge and practitioners' knowledge about media systems, concluding with recommendations for informed practice.

Key findings

» Academic media systems research is most often comparative research that classifies media systems into models and typologies, the best-known examples of which are *Hallin and Mancini's* three Models of Media and Politics *(2004)*. It seeks to make sense of how media landscapes are set up and function under specific conditions, often within the realm of nation states.

» In journalism studies, the term "media system" traditionally refers to the elements that constitute a (country's) journalistic media landscape, its interrelationships, and the relation of the media to political, economic and social spheres. A media system, as defined in this review, includes all elements of the professional mass media sector such as media outlets and journalists, journalists' associations and similar actors, organs observing or controlling media accountability and quality, journalism education institutions, and legislation. The role of the international media development sector in the transnationalisation and globalisation of media systems requires further attention.

» Because of their relevance for the media-development nexus, however, this paper discusses a broader view of communication systems, too. Beyond professional mass media, the perspective on communication systems allows for the inclusion of citizen media, social media, and traditional or informal communication networks. Non-journalistic media such as cinema, movies, soap operas, fiction, etc. are not the focus of this review, although they can be of great interest, especially when these media are used as a tool for communication information as part of "media for development" interventions.

» While much comparative research uses the nation state as a unit of comparison, there are strong grounds for criticising and questioning the existence of homogenous national media systems, including transnational dynamics that connect or merge media systems – international media development cooperation being one of them. This is in line with approaches that criticise Eurocentric tendencies in traditional media systems research and try to open up the geographical, theoretical, and methodological scope of the field.

- » There is a wealth of opportunity to intensify research on African media systems, although recent studies have explored the specific conditions of media in different regions and countries across the continent, pointing to the relevance of African perspectives on political, social, economic, cultural, and developmental entanglements. The particularities of media systems research on the African continent illustrate how the parallel existence of local, global, postcolonial, and transnational dynamics needs to be considered, offering a chance for new theory building.

- » While literature focussing specifically on media development assistance as a variable in media systems research is still scarce, initial studies propose that international media development work is an important factor influencing the development of media systems and their transnationalization.
  More specialised research about development actors' roles in and interactions with media systems could improve models of media systems and offer hints as to why they develop and function in certain ways, and what impact development work has on these developments and functionings.

- » Mappings, indices, reports, and evaluations produced by media development actors are important contributions that shape our knowledge about media landscapes. They thus produce knowledge that has far-reaching implications for practice, including decisions about media development interventions, money flows, laws, and global perceptions. Despite this evident importance, there has not been much research to date on media development actors' knowledge production about media systems.

Conclusions for the practitioners

This review of the academic and grey literature offers insights into the intersections of media systems research and media development actors' engagement with media systems, and the following recommendations for practice are proposed. They apply specifically to the analysis and assessment of media landscapes or precise elements thereof for media development.

Be aware of the limitations of commonly used data sources.

» Indices ranking media systems or important sub-aspects like media freedom, the best known of which are provided by Reporters without Borders, Freedom House, and other NGOs, offer important overviews, data, and comparisons concerning media landscapes, and are rightfully among the first sources often consulted. However, different indices do not always present the same rankings – sometimes they come to different conclusions about, for example, the state of press freedom in a country, depending on their specific focus, data collection methodology, purpose, and context. When using indices (as well as other data sources), check the contexts, purposes, or interests behind their production and reflect on what these mean for the information presented. Are the methods of data collection transparent? Whose interests are at stake, and is there a discernible bias at play? Whenever possible, cross-check with other data sources and with the existing grey and academic literature, and validate with local and international experts and field research.

Make sure there is a shared understanding of elements of media systems.

» Internationally accepted standards and commitments, such as UNESCO's indicators and SDG 16, should orient governments and policy actors, donors, and implementors. Common, universal standards are necessary for international cooperation. At the same time, concepts of media systems are contextualised in specific research traditions and schools of thought and related to power hierarchies. When using widely accepted and institutionalised concepts, understandings on the ground and among target communities should be considered simultaneously.

» Question whether you grasp the local understanding of different aspects of the media landscape and whether they concur with yours. Concepts and terms could be coined differently in a donor country's media system than in a receiving partner's perception. This also applies to political and economic frameworks. Do local partners, for example, have a similar understanding of what a journalist's association should be, what accountability or professionalism mean, or how a journalist's role is perceived? How far are these understandings related to economic concerns, the general political climate, and the degree of professionalisation of the target media sector? Find out whether "cross-media systems-translation" of the concepts you are working with is necessary within the collaboration e.g. with local media actors. Misinterpretation might have consequences for the success of a media development intervention.

Diversify and decentralise knowledge production about media systems. Prioritise local knowledge and participative approaches.

» When the media situation in a country is assessed, for example for an ex ante evaluation, experts with in-depth theoretical and practical knowledge, who contribute to the international "big picture", as well as experts from your target countries/regions/communities should be involved in the process.

» Wherever possible, enable local partners and affected communities to participate not only in the implementation of projects, but also in the assessment of the media landscape and the planning of development interventions; ideally, let them have a say in deciding which interventions would be most helpful. Within participative approaches, be aware of the active power hierarchies between local partners and international actors, which can be solidified by institutions and education systems, including journalism education, and which may be strongly shaped by Western influences.

Consider important communication channels besides the mass media.

» Where do people turn for information – besides radio, TV, newspapers, or social media? Which sources of information do they trust? People might resort to alternative communication channels, especially in situations of crisis, conflict, or fragility, when mass media infrastructures are non-existent, broken, or unsafe, or when certain groups do not have access to them.

» When conceptualising a media development strategy, consider whether in your case it would be useful to look beyond the mass media and take into account local customs and traditions of communication for a more effective and context-sensitive approach. Are social gatherings, local leaders, religious places or authorities, griots, storytellers, musicians, narratives, word of mouth, or other sources of information important? What sources of information are used by people who do not have access to the mass media? To reach target groups beyond the elites, it can be insightful to directly consult members of disadvantaged groups, such as people living far from urban centres, minorities, refugees, internationally displaced persons (IDPs), migrants, and stateless people, who can specify which sources of information they use.

» If there is censorship or regulation of the media, which instruments of communication bypass the restrictions? How can these alternative or traditional communication channels be used constructively to meet development goals, are they within or outside of official legislation, and how can they be protected from misinformation, disinformation, and fake news? What are the opportunities and risks of adopting a broader view of communication systems, as opposed to a narrower view of the media system?

» If relevant, address informal information sources that are not usually part of European practices of data collection about media systems. This should be considered in interventions that use media as a tool to achieve development goals, in order to reach target groups via the information sources they use

and trust. It should also be considered when aiming to (re)construct a free and viable professional media landscape.
Cooperate with experts who speak and read different local languages which might be used by a significant portion of the population, to avoid being limited to official languages and excluding marginalized language groups.
If possible, share information and analyses within the media development community to contribute to overall quality enhancement.

Join forces. Cooperate with academic researchers and other (media) development actors.

» Universities, research institutions, and researchers have in-depth knowledge about the functioning of media systems and constantly develop theoretical and methodological approaches. Some methodological approaches from academic research might be useful for practitioners' analyses and vice versa.

» Academia can learn from practitioners' knowledge, experience, and practices. Consulting and cooperating with practitioners can help them to perform "reality checks" on their ideas and gain better access to the field. Consider cooperation with academic researchers specialised in media systems as well as with researchers in your target countries; and with budding researchers who might be interested in new challenges and opportunities.

» Cooperate with researchers to generate more baseline studies and thus improve the transparency and quality of interventions and accomplish more detailed and insightful evaluation of outcomes.

» Have other media development actors already analysed the media system you want to work in, and are there opportunities for building on each other's knowledge and developing a joint strategy? If there is competition for the same budgets, what might donor coordination within a media development strategy look like?

» Create a database specifically for information about media systems and sub-aspects, assembling knowledge from academia and practitioners. It should be self-explanatory, easy to use, and regularly updated.

Engage in critical debates.

» Needs assessment practices are an important part of the project cycle and should be critically examined, just as the importance of monitoring and ex post evaluation is emphasised and practices of evaluation are critically debated. Within your organisation, check the validity of the information and procedures on which your ex ante evaluations are based, and discuss needs assessment tools and practices. Make sure they are transparent, accessible, tailored to the practical requirements of your work processes, and regularly updated – and foster critical debate about it.

1. Summary of the scientific literature

1.1 Media development and media systems

“Media development” is a term used by practitioners and increasingly explored and conceptualised by scholars. According to Berger (2010), there is no general definition of media development, but “the focus on the ‘development’ of media is conventionally (although not logically) about international interventions in non-dense media environments” *(p. 547)*. Thus, “the object of ‘media development’ is the media, the object of ‘media for development’ is the role of media in society” *(p. 549)*, even though the media development discourse often includes media for development. *Myers et al. (2014)* state that international media development assistance usually refers to “aid to strengthen an independent, diverse, and plural media sector, including press, broadcast, and new/social media” *(p. 1)*. This can involve a variety of actions as diverse as training journalists, improving audiences’ media literacy, or advocating for media freedom.

Although media development actors mostly target the micro level of media landscapes (individual journalists) or the meso level (media outlets and organisations) *(Fengler & Jorch, 2012, p. 7)*, these elements are connected to the larger structures at the macro level (media systems) within which they operate: individual journalists and media organisations both shape and are shaped by media systems, just as media systems and other subsystems of society shape each other. The idea of developing media as a means to serve larger goals, for example as tools for democratisation *(Kumar, 2006, p. 5)*, shows that the field is much concerned with media as a system and with the media system as a part of other social systems. In addition, actors of media development produce an important share of knowledge about media landscapes by describing, mapping, and assessing them. This includes the production of indices that are influential in shaping the public perception of press freedom, the publishing of reports and country profiles, and evaluations.

After a review of the key concepts, theories and models, and their expansion “beyond the West”, particularly in Africa, connections within the international media development sector will be highlighted, in its capacity as an impact factor on media systems and as a producer of information.

1.2 Modelling media as a system: Theoretical foundations and key works

The idea of media as a system is based on sociological systems theories *(Thomaß, 2007/2013)*.[1] In *Die Realität der Massenmedien* [*The Reality of Mass Media*], *Luhmann (1995)* explicitly describes media as a differentiated, refined subsystem of society besides other subsystems such as the political system or the economy. A system not (only) consists of its elements but is constituted by the interrelations or “communications” between these elements *(Luhmann, 1984/2018, p. 193)*.

Traditionally, media systems research uses variables that describe the situation of media in a country in terms of the structure of the media landscape and its relation to politics. This allows for the comparison of media systems, either across time (diachronic) or across countries (synchronic) *(Meier, 2018)*, often based on a

1) Important theoretical foundations for this perspective have been laid by *Parsons (1951)*; *Bertalanaffy (1957)*; and *Luhmann (1984, 1995)*.

"most similar" or a "most different" approach, thus constructing models and categorising or grouping them. Transnational dynamics such as international media development cooperation point to a possible permeability and overlapping of systems, and to tensions between local, national, regional, and global systems.

Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm's *Four Theories of the Press* (1963) distinguishes between four models, which depict different manifestations of the following variables: the relation between media and state; media control; and media ownership. Based on this rationale, they establish four categories within a typology of world media systems: the Authoritarian, the Libertarian, the Social Responsibility, and the Soviet Media concepts.[2] This work has been exposed as normative in the sense that it "describes an ideal way for a media system to be controlled and operated by the government, authority, leader and public" (*Normative Theory – Four Theories of the Press*), namely the Social Responsibility Theory, and follows the Cold War rhetoric of contrasting a liberal democratic West with a communist authoritarian East. Blum (2005) argues that not only Siebert et al.'s, but also a great deal of prior research on media systems has been normative in its outlook.

The most widely cited publication, Hallin and Mancini's *Comparing Media Systems* (2004), develops "strong and well-established conceptual typologies" (p. 122). Taking into consideration existing documents and studies about media landscapes in Europe and North America, Hallin and Mancini propose three models of media systems: the Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Model; the North/Central European or Democratic Corporatist Model; and the North Atlantic or Liberal Model. The classification is based on four variables: the structure of the media market, political parallelism, the level of journalistic professionalisation, and the role of the state including the degree of the state's intervention in the media (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 296). In particular, the "political parallelism" variable, which describes the media's closeness to political parties, adds a new dimension to Siebert et al.'s criteria. The authors stress that the three models are merely ideal types which most countries' media systems fit only roughly; instead of finding precise and static moulds for the particular media landscapes studied, the models are meant to describe different types of state-media interaction to serve as criteria that enable cross-country comparison (p. 297).

Although Hallin and Mancini's models have been widely applied, their book has also initiated criticism, which has inspired new academic engagement with media systems (e.g. Blum, 2004; Brüggemann, 2014). Voltmer (2012) argues that the Polarized Pluralist Model, initially meant to describe Southern European/Mediterranean media systems, has been overapplied to many systems that do not fit the Northwest European or North American concepts, despite the essential differences between the media landscapes that are presented as part of the same category (p. 225). This overstretching of the model means that these media systems are defined not by what they are, but by what they are not (compared to the Western European and North American media landscapes which are presented as centric) (p. 225).

The "political parallelism" variable has been criticised for being too lofty. According to Albuquerque (2012), there should be greater clarity regarding the ways in which the closeness between media and political actors (like parties or political tendencies in society) should be analysed (p. 92).

2) The Authoritarian Theory, which the authors describe as most pervasive historically and geographically (Siebert et al., 1963, p. 9), referring to contexts such as pre-Renaissance Europe, Imperial Russia, fascist Germany, and "many of the Asiatic and South American governments" (p. 10), includes a top-down concept of the press in which information is determined and controlled by the authorities (p. 3). Under the Libertarian Theory, which the authors illustrate using an Anglo-American context, media are not perceived as a means of governing but rather a "fourth estate", to keep those in power accountable through information (p. 3). The Social Responsibility Theory, connected to Western Europe, is an approach in which market control and the information monopoly of the media are relativised in favour of a system that allows the state and/or the public to ensure "responsible" media practices (p. 5). The Soviet Media Theory shares similarities with the Authoritarian Theory in that the press "serves as a tool of the ruling party" (p. 5) but differs from it in its ideological grounding which centres around a Marxist-Leninist idea of "truth" (p. 5).

3) These are: the liberal-investigative commerce model (USA); the liberal-ambivalent mixed model (Great Britain, Austria, Italy); the liberal-ambivalent service public model (Germany, France); the liberal-concordant service public model (Switzerland, Japan); the controlled-ambivalent mixed model (Russia, Turkey, Iran); the controlled-concordant service public model (Egypt, Syria, Sri Lanka); and the directed-concordant service public model (North Korea, China, Cuba).

Other voices have drawn on *Four Theories of the Press* and Hallin and Mancini's models to refine the study and comparison of media systems. In *Bausteine zu einer Theorie der Mediensysteme*, for instance, Blum (2005) compares the models of Siebert et al. with those of Hallin and Mancini and with the "pragmatic difference approach" developed by Blum's team at the University of Bern in 2001. Analysing existing literature on media systems worldwide, this approach suggests six dimensions (governance system, media freedom, media ownership, financing, media culture, and orientation of the media) and classifies each of them according to whether they follow a "liberal line", a "medium line", or a "regulated line" (p. 8). Based on these categories, the media systems are then divided into seven types.[3] In *Lautsprecher und Widersprecher* (2014), Blum refines his concept and clusters 23 media systems into six further developed categories: ideologically closed systems, patriotically intended systems, controlled half-open systems, liberal-clientelist systems, public service systems, and liberal systems. His case studies include nine European countries, Turkey, Russia, three East Asian countries, four Arab countries, three American countries, and two sub-Saharan African countries, both in West Africa (Senegal and Ghana). Information about these countries' media is gathered from existing literature, reports, and statistics: a strategy that many publications on media systems follow rather than collecting their own data.[4]

Thomaß' *Mediensysteme im internationalen Vergleich* (2007/2013), reviewing a broad range of key publications and looking at different regions of the world, states that when comparing media systems, it is important to ask not only how they differ, but also why they differ and what that implies for the respective societies (p. 7). Research questions should acknowledge globalisation and cross-national frames, just as media politics do (p. 7). Theory building might be facilitated by generating more knowledge about media systems that have so far been neglected (p. 359). Cultural, national, regional, and transnational influences on media landscapes can intersect, just like demands for media to be economically sustainable, democratic, gender-neutral, anti-racist, etc.

Some studies do not examine media systems in their entirety, but elements thereof. Outstanding examples that are based on large-scale data collection and contribute to refining the theory and methodology of media systems research include Hanitzsch et al.'s *Worlds of Journalism*[5] and Meyen's study of journalists' autonomy around the globe (2018).[6]

Many scholars working on media systems insist that there is a need for further research on regions that have so far been neglected by this field of study, or on specific aspects of media systems; it is also imperative to critically examine existing theories and models (e.g. Hallin & Mancini, 2011; Thomaß, 2007/2013; Brüggemann et al., 2014).[7] Against this background, we now turn to studies that cover media systems or aspects thereof in non-Western countries or regions, which is in keeping with new approaches to theory building.

4) Other important theoretical and methodological approaches have been contributed by Kleinsteuber (2006), Blöbaum (2011), and Beck (2015).

5) Worlds of Journalism is an ongoing academically driven research project that seeks links with practice. The publication Worlds of Journalism: Journalistic Cultures Around the Globe (Hanitzsch et al., 2019) investigates journalistic cultures and role perceptions in 67 countries. In addition to exploring the ways in which journalists view their professional responsibilities, the book reveals much about the political, social, and economic contexts in which journalism functions in the countries studied. It also looks at the agency of journalists in shaping these interactions and media system

6) Meyen uses Giddens' (1984) structuration theory to explore 46 mass media systems around the globe, drawing on expert interviews and document analysis. He asks: "Who or what does actually influence journalists' working conditions, their autonomy, and the quality of the media content in certain societies?" (Meyen, 2018, p. 2), and considers historical, religious, and geographic factors in addition to politics and economy. His classification of journalists' autonomy, based on a selection of countries that aims to include the most influential ones, along with BRICS countries and representatives for as many social, cultural, and political country types as possible, differs from press freedom indices in that "there is no judgement; rather, there are differences in how governments and states steer and control public communication channels to serve their own interests" (p. 19). His study stands out firstly because it is based on large-scale data collection, and secondly because it does not categorise media systems as an end in itself. Its aim is not to provide a normativetheory, but to gain results that help to comprehend "the threats to and conditions of journalists' autono-

1.3 Beyond the "West", beyond the nation

More recent studies have attempted to move beyond the Eurocentrism evident in European- or US-dominated media systems research, broadening its scope to include a wider range of countries and decentralising the field; at the same time, they have also sought to reconceptualise and develop new theoretical and methodological approaches.

In 2012, Hallin and Mancini reflected on the shortcomings of their three models for non-Western contexts and clarified that they did not mean to provide a definition that fits all global media systems *(Hallin & Mancini, 2012, p. 3)*, nor to insinuate that non-Western media systems were merely less developed versions of the Southern European Polarized-Pluralist model *(p. 280)*. Rather, they wanted to create a theoretical tool and criteria to concretely compare those already well-researched media systems included in the book *(p. 4)*. Firstly, the book contains chapters that investigate media systems in countries beyond (Western) Europe and North America; secondly, it revisits the models and discusses additional methodological approaches for comparison. In this edited volume, *Albuquerque (2012)* describes the Brazilian media landscape by supplementing the four initial variables with two additional ones: the government system; and a differentiation between "central" and "peripheral" media systems *(p. 93)*. *Voltmer (2012)* looks at new democracies, in which neither the political nor the media system fulfils Western expectations of a democratic system *(p. 244)* and demands redefinitions of established concepts and more empirical research *(p. 245)*. *Roudakova (2012)* questions the use of models altogether, claiming that media systems are processes rather than fixed entities *(p. 246)*. Hallin and Mancini's second anthology assembles important criticisms of European media systems research, demonstrates why the three models cannot simply be applied to other geographical contexts, and points to several research gaps. Contrasting a "West" with a "rest", or a "Global North" with a "Global South", however, is to repeat a dichotomy based on essentialist categories, rather than to dismantle the underlying historic processes and power structures that explain their interconnectedness.[8] *El Richani (2012)* mentions that the book fails to address other important aspects such as state size and the structural peculiarities of small states, as well as the importance of language communities such as the Arabic and Anglophone spheres *(p. 5)*.

An example of a critical guide that does not build on dominant Western models or use Europe as a centric norm is *Nordenstreng and Thussu's* *Mapping BRICS Media* *(2015)*. They describe the development of the Brazilian, Russian, Indian, Chinese, and South African media systems and make comparisons between them. The BRICS members are grouped into a comparable category because they all display rapid economic and technological growth and consequentially exert geopolitical influence. They also impact the media landscapes of several other countries by producing vast and culturally influential content; they have also intervened in other countries' media landscapes by becoming donors.

The dominant models cannot easily be applied to analyses of media landscapes that find themselves in periods of transition, have been rapidly transformed, or are affected by crisis or conflict. Referring to *Voltmer (2012)*, *Dorn and Traunspurger (2018)* explain that "it is important to know the traditional and cultural backgrounds of the journalists' role perceptions besides the requirements of the audience", especially when it is difficult to determine a stable media system altogether. The most

7) For example, *Brüggemann et al. (2014)* recommend further "qualitative in-depth studies of single or small numbers of countries" *(p. 1062)*. They also point out a lack of research on the long-term development of media systems *(pp. 1062-1063)*.

8) One of the most important texts discussing these dynamics is Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* *(1978)*.

extensive literature on transitioning media systems pertains to Eastern European countries *(e.g. Castro Herrero et al., 2017; Kuznik, 2018; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019)*. After the fall of the Soviet Union, former member countries underwent diverging processes of media systems development related to sometimes liberal, sometimes authoritarian political and economic tendencies. Thus, these countries now "reflect a level of political and journalistic cultures that are a mix of post-communist heritage and newly-created features during the transition from communism" *(Dobek-Ostrowska & Glowacki, 2015, p. 36)*. *Peruško et al. (2021)* investigate the historic development of media institutions, critical junctures, and path dependency of media systems in Southeast Europe using a fuzzy set methodological approach.

Rodny-Gumede (2020) suggests applying the findings from the study of transitional systems in Eastern Europe and East Asia to the study of postcolonial societies – with equal methodological rigour and specific foci for precise theory building. The unique contextual factors in postcolonial societies, she stresses, must be regarded from within an analytic framework that avoids dichotomies *(p. 613)* and instead includes local knowledge, appreciating the hybrid presence of multiple diverging tendencies within a postcolonial media system *(p. 615)*.

More knowledge about state-media interactions is required when it comes to weak or failed states – when the state and its institutions are *de jure* present as actors, but *de facto* unable or unwilling to perform regulating roles in the media system *(El Richani, 2012, pp. 4-5)*. Attention should be paid to the implementation gap between media laws and the actual practices on the ground. There is not much literature on countries where crisis is pertinent and where the system's media and politics are not as refined and clearly differentiated as in established democracies. In this regard the lines separating a professional journalistic media system from a broader communication system would be an interesting subject for further study.

Many publications question whether the nation as the most common unit of comparison is the most useful. *Thomaß (2007/2013)* argues that considering regional rather than national contexts allows researchers to point out recognisable similarities between geographically and culturally close countries, although this could not account for all existing differences between them *(p. 9)*. An example is presented by *Kraidy (2012)*, who explains the transnationalisation of Arab media systems through pan-Arab media and concludes that media systems research should exceed national boundaries more often *(p. 198)*. He suggests expanding the notion of professionalism to include entertainment media in the scope of analysis *(p. 200)*.

Haas and Wallner (2008) call for a transnationalisation of research and try to tackle the lack of theoretical and methodological clarity as well as empirical data by applying the Structure-Conduct-Performance Model (SCP Model) derived from new industrial economics *(p. 86)*. Although media cannot be equated to (other) economic goods *(p. 86)*, they argue that this analytical tool can be used to define the criteria of an "ideal" media market and compare them to empirical information about a given media market *(p. 88)*.

Another reason for questioning the national framing of media systems research is that nations are internally heterogeneous: they comprise different regional and political contexts, ethnic groups, or language spheres. *Chakravartty and Roy (2013)* look at sub-media systems in India's federal states and find several "media systems" coexisting alongside one another.

Despite these important considerations, the nation state remains the most common unit for comparing media systems. Indeed, *Flew and Waisbord (2015)* insist "that nation-states remain critical actors in media governance and that domestic actors largely shape the central dynamics of media policies, even where media technologies and platforms enable global flows of media content" *(p. 620).* In what ways can states as well as international dynamics influence media systems in geographically, historically, or culturally defined contexts, and how does this hybridity reverberate in media systems research? These questions can be discussed in the context of African media systems.

1.4 Media systems in Africa

Many publications lack detailed perspectives on the various dimensions of media systems in the African continent. Key publications with a global outlook often mention few African examples and some African countries hardly appear at all.[9] However, the scope of literature from African scholars, dealing with the particularities of African conditions, is widening, bringing specific aspects of African media systems research to the fore.

As previously mentioned, the dominant models for theorising media systems are often Eurocentric and recurrently use European or American conditions as a normative reference for comparison. It is therefore no surprise that *Hadland's (2012)* attempt to "Africanise" Hallin and Mancini's models leads him to recommend the development of one or several new model(s) able to grasp the situation in African countries more precisely. Hadland notes that while aspects of all three models can be recognised in the South African media system, the country is "a poor example of any of the Hallin and Mancini models" *(p. 102).* Important aspects such as race and ethnicity need to be given more attention *(p. 102).* This feeds into *Blum's (2014)* attempt to define more differentiated and detailed models. His attempt to categorise Ghana and Senegal's media[10] based on secondary literature remains vague because the clustering of countries seems random and his application of the variables superficial, as yet again, Western concepts of journalism and professionalism are used without redefining their meaning for the given contexts. This would have demanded more in-depth research including data collection in the relevant countries.

Scholars are also examining whether geographical and cultural proximity can be used as a basis for comparison *(see e.g. Thomaß, 2007/2013),* and whether it is possible to study "African" media as a unit that embodies certain cross-national similarities despite its heterogeneous variety. *Hadland (2012)* assumes that, notwithstanding the obvious important differences between the 54 African countries, it is possible to speak of a "shared African experience" *(p. 117),* with commonalities resulting from a specifically African history of colonisation and decolonisation, geographical and cultural proximity, and other unifying factors which also guide discussions about pan-Africanism *(p. 117).* In contrast, *Tereshchuk (2018)* argues that an "African regional media system" *(p. 55)* developed after the end of the bipolar Cold War era and concludes that despite attempts to create a pan-African media landscape, there is still no integrated African media system, neither are there integrated African political, cultural, or economic systems *(p. 56).*

Mano (2008), too, relativises the claim that African countries share a common colonial past which has led to a postcolonial present, pointing out that discrep-

9) In Hallin and Mancini's Comparing Media Systems Beyond the Western World, South Africa is the only African case study *(Hadland, 2012).* While *Blum (2014)* examines Ghana and Senegal, thereby focussing only on West African countries, he neglects East, Central, and Southern Africa. *Thomaß'* edited volume *(2007)* includes a chapter by *Brüne (pp. 341-354)* that presents an overview of media in Africa, yet in its continental breadth can only mention exemplary spotlights.

10) *Blum* points out that Ghana has comparatively advanced laws to ensure press freedom, but at the same time the country has a big implementation gap; and journalistic work is characterised by low professionalism and low salaries *(p. 194).* He therefore interprets Ghana as a "liberal-clientelist system", putting it in the same category as Italy, Latvia, and Lebanon. In Senegal, which has the longest press history in francophone West Africa, there is close political parallelism (many media openly follow either the government or the opposition), and religious leaders traditionally influence the political expression of their followers; this is defined as a controlled half-open system, together with Russia, Turkey, and Thailand *(p. 159).*

ancies between the media systems of different countries on the continent can be explained by their various histories of (de-)colonisation and nation building *(p. 2)*.[11] While the British encouraged the establishment of newspapers in the colonies, the French prevented the publication of local newspapers through strict regulations and, instead, promoted the circulation of media produced in the colonial 'metropolis' France *(p. 2)*. Similar dynamics can be observed with the emergence of radio, which quickly became the most important type of mass medium in large parts of Africa – although "in both the French and the British colonies, radio was from the outset an arm for colonial policies." *(p. 3)*. *Mano (2008)* does not reflect on African countries that were colonised by Portugal or Germany but mentions that Belgian colonisers left broadcasting to private individuals or religious groups *(p. 3)*. The (post)colonial divide is also a divergence of language and dominant cultures. *Capitant and Frère (2011)* assert that the media landscape and academic research are divided along linguistic lines, creating "two fields of knowledge" *(p. VII)* for one continent, with very little exchange between anglophone and francophone research. They appeal to scholars of both "fields" to share their findings and highlight the role of sociology and anthropology in explaining different journalistic traditions, while stressing the importance of including the diaspora when investigating African public spaces *(p. XIII)*. This also applies to lusophone and Arabic spheres within Africa.

Hamusokwe and Tomaselli (2019), in an attempt to provide an African media history, warn against presenting the colonial impact as the only shaping factor, for many traditions have preceded and outlasted colonialism:

> In fact, the imagery of media systems in postcolonial Africa still reflects not only the legacies of colonial administrations, as is generally believed, but mostly the sociocultural modes of traditional Africa. Thus, African philosophies are evident in the manner in which people experience communication in social and cultural settings. *(p. 15)*

An example of the perpetuation of oral traditions is provided by the griot, an important figure in several West African traditional societies such as the Malinke in Guinea or the Wolof in Senegal. The griots constitute a caste and a profession whose complex and differing roles include the oral transmission of information and knowledge about their society, especially the history and culture of their communities *(Hearn, 2010, p. 131 f.)*. Several authors explore the development of these communication traditions and their relation to modern media *(e.g. Mohammed, 2019; Mpala-Lutebele, 2019; Akpabio, 2021)*.

Despite the undeniable importance of local and regional traditions of communication, transnational influences have a continuing impact on African media systems. Media produced in the colonisers' languages and by media companies owned by former colonial powers still dominate local languages and local media sources *(Serwornoo, 2019)*. In some countries, years after independence, media continue to be owned by foreign stakeholders *(Tereshchuk, 2018, p. 56)*. However, as *Shaw (2009)* argues, it is misleading to simply transfer European concepts to African contexts. He proposes a redefinition of terms such as "journalist" and develops an "African journalism model" based on "oral discourse, creativity, humanity and agency" *(p. 491)*.

There is rich potential for studying the hybridity of external and internal influences on African media landscapes. Apart from the lasting imprints left by former colonisers on media norms, foreign actors continue to exert soft power through devel-

11) Here, comparisons with the varying developments of post-Soviet media systems could be drawn.

opment assistance, investments, media contents, and other exchanges – including new actors such as China or Saudi Arabia *(Tereshchuk, 2019, p. 64)*. China's influence on African media systems, in particular, is much debated in recent academic and grey literature. In a global survey by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) *(Lim & Bergin, 2020)*, two thirds of respondents from journalistic unions around the world mention a strong Chinese influence on the media landscape in their country *(p. 2)*, which the IFJ interprets as a sign of "a strategic, long-term effort to reshape the global news landscape with a China-friendly global narrative" *(p. 8)*. China's intensified media presence on the African continent "across various levels, namely infrastructure development, training, content production, content distribution and direct investment" *(Wasserman, 2018, p. 108)* has raised concerns among some, especially Western, scholars who fear that illiberal Chinese imprints might outweigh liberal and democratic tendencies in African media landscapes *(Weseka, 2017, p. 11)*. On the contrary, *Ngomba (2012)* argues that the Chinese influence on structural changes to media systems will remain limited, because Africa is in his view deeply imprinted with Europe-imported media *(p. 52)*. Citing the examples of South Africa and Kenya, *Wasserman (2018)* adds that "deep-seated preconceptions, biases and stereotypes about Chinese media among African journalists and audiences" *(p. 111)* could be a factor that limits Chinese influence. On the other hand, *Umejei (2018)* writes that "(t)he fact that the African media systems lack an ideological base leaves the continent susceptible to China's influence" *(p. 12)*. He forecasts a coexistence of Western and Chinese influences on African media systems, resulting in hybrid forms of journalistic orientation *(p. 2)*. *Weseka (2017)* urges researchers to take a pragmatic, nuanced view of Sino-African media relations, rather than to "fall into the positive-negative trap" *(p. 19)*.

To achieve a more detailed picture of African media systems, several publications put forward the argument that it is important to conduct research on technological and economic aspects of media in "Africa" in order to explore the "common uncertainties" *(Capitant & Frère, 2011, p. XV)* that connect different countries' experiences. According to *Mano (2008)*, research is required to analyse the effects of the wave of mobile phone use that has swept the continent since 2000 on media systems *(p. 6)*. He postulates that "regulatory and technological issues dominate the twenty-first century African media system" *(p. 6)* and points to the importance of quickly developing local entertainment industries *(p. 7)*. *Brüne (2007)* agrees that Africa's "leapfrogging" over a major step of telecommunications development, namely landline telephones, directly to an exponential growth of mobile communication, deserves special notice *(p. 343)*. Technical progress as well as social and political change can further media pluralism in some places *(p. 342)*. However, it must be noted that this development can also go "backwards", i.e. towards more control and repression, as has been observed in the case of Zimbabwe's crackdown on freedom of expression *(Muvunyi, 2020)*. As *Thomaß* pointed out in 2007, there is a distinct lack of regionally and culturally differentiated research *(p. 362)*: further investigation is needed to properly understand the media's functions in response to cultural and ethnic differences as well as the links between oral and mediatised communication cultures. In their "academic quarrel" *Milton & Mano (2021)* call for enhanced and more intelligible African media and communication studies; there is, they point out, a general tendency in academic discourses to "misrepresent, essentialise or marginalise the continent", and this represents a gap that needs to be addressed "at a time of decoloniality and renewed questioning of knowledge about Africa" *(p. 2)*.

2. The media development sector and media systems: Grey literature in contextualisation

2.1 International assistance as a variable in media systems development

Media development assistance connects media systems across nations. Indeed, foreign or international actors intervene in a country's media landscape and actively attempt to change, or to "develop", (elements of) media systems, applying concepts that are either internationally agreed upon or relative to the specific actor or case. *Thomaß (2007/2013)* points out that there is little knowledge about the ways in which media systems in different (regional or cultural) spaces impact each other, and whether they merge into bigger systems, for example regionally or linguistically connected *(p. 364).* Similarly, there is little research that focuses specifically on the important functions and impacts of media development within media systems.

Analysing foreign impacts on the media in Malawi, which, being small and landlocked, strongly depends on foreign aid *(p. 402), Harris (2018)* demonstrates that international donors such as transnational corporations, transnational media corporations, intergovernmental organisations, and NGOs have a huge influence on media policies and media structures, especially in times of a power vacuum *(p. 404).*[12] As donorship is concentrated in a limited range of countries, and the allocation of financial assistance is often bound to conditions imposed by donors *(p. 407),* media development assistance comes along with normative understandings of democracy or of media practices emerging from donors' media systems. As a result, media assistance projects may not always serve the actual needs of the community; they may fail to achieve their intended impacts, or target groups might reject donors' and implementors' ideas. If participatory approaches and dialogue between donors, implementors, and beneficiaries are intended to render cooperation more fruitful, hierarchies of dependencies between actors at different ends of money flows for foreign aid need to be considered. Harris points to the possibly detrimental effects of power structures in which donors impose conditions for giving certain types of (financial) aid *(p. 407).* For instance, "forced liberalisation" describes "the process whereby one sovereign state or foreign donor coercively forces another sovereign state to liberalise the media through the use of conditionalities" *(p. 407).* Empirical research could shed further light on these dynamics.

To date, there has been little research on how international media development influences media systems. However, knowledge about media as a system is key for practices of assessing a media landscape's state of development. Media systems research and research on media development share several relevant concerns, such as questions about the transnationalisation of media systems, media market structures and power structures, tendencies of convergence, and the dominance of Eurocentric norms and values and "Western"-based research.

2.2 Development actors' grey literature on media systems

Descriptions of media systems or their elements are a relevant part of media development work, and for various purposes many actors publish indices,

12) Malawi was one of the last countries in the world to receive television *(p. 404).* According to *Harris,* donors increased budgets for Joyce Banda to support his candidacy for President in 2012, cutting budgets for his opponent, because they believed he would initiate political change that could help to install a freer media system *(p. 404).*

classifications, or mappings of media landscapes for the countries in which they operate. As part of their work process, many conduct needs assessments, which are also used for proposals or to justify their interventions concerning donors or the public. However, this is not yet a mainstream practice for all actors and projects. Often, specific aspects of media systems (such as press freedom, media literacy, or media development) are analysed, rather than the entire media system. Some reports focus on detailed in-depth insights into single countries.[13] Based on the "knowledge" thus produced, decisions are made about the funding, implementation, and evaluation of development interventions. In some cases, such analyses and classifications of media landscapes are published, for example UNESCO's *Media Development Indicators (MDIs)*, IREX's new *Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE)*, DW Akademie's *Media and Information Literacy (MIL) Index*, and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's (FES) *Afrobarometer*); such publications, however, are often internal documents.

Mappings by author collectives at the intersection of academic and grey literature provide important information about media systems across the globe.[14] *Toustrup and Nielsen (2011)* have analysed two such mapping projects in Mongolia and Libya which were conducted to gain information on the basis of which "civil society, politicians, media owners and journalists can make informed decisions" *(p. 1).* Reviewing these two exemplary projects, they make a list of guidelines for mapping media in transitioning countries, highlighting the importance of context (e.g. violent or non-violent, different phases of transition), acceptance and integration of the project in the local setting, and the need to consider transnational influences *(p. 26).* Mappings may also be internal documents within media development organisations that guide the collaborators in media development projects and give them practical information about media outlets, contact persons, and how they can be reached.

For the purpose of their analyses of media systems, practitioners gather information by different means and from different sources, including expert interviews and field research, but another important source comes in the form of indices. Indices often compare several countries or even attempt to generate information on a global scale, for example Reporters Without Borders' (RSF) *Press Freedom Index* or Freedom House's *Freedom of the Press Index*. As *Dorn and Traunspurger (2017)* note, such indices give useful overviews, but they simplify the contexts they are studying and often lack scientific evidence and transparency about the methods used. For example, it is difficult to compare indices on media freedom published by different organisations because they use different methods and because they may be subjective and biased.[15] The interests that play into the production of an index are not always made transparent to the user (para. "Rankings of Media Freedom"). Even within one index, methods, research teams, and intensity of research (i.e. size of data sample or number of interviewed experts) may differ from country to country or from year to year. This is demonstrated by *Sapiezynski and Lagos (2016),* who analyse how the press freedom indices by RSF and Freedom House assess the situation in Poland and Chile. They find that the indices are "much more useful for evaluating nondemocratic countries and fail to detect the problem areas and challenges regarding media freedom in democracies." *(Sapiezynska & Lagos 2016, p. 565 f.).* According to the authors, this difference arises because the criteria focus on attacks against journalists and (negative) state influence on the media, but do not consider other constraints, for example related to ownership structures or advertisement, to the same extent *(p. 566).*

13) For example, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation has published several reports under the title African Media Barometer, describing the 31 countries in which they work; and the consulting agency Balancing Act describes different aspects of media landscapes in Africa across several publications.

14) Examples include medialandscapes.org and mappingmediafreedom.org.

15) It is interesting to note, for instance, that French government-funded RSF has given France a higher ranking in their index than Freedom House, which is US-funded and has in turn ranked the USA more highly *(Dorn & Trauspurger, 2017).* However, in 2021, both Freedom House and RSF ranked the United States lower than France.

Schneider (2020), too, addresses the strength and weaknesses of indices. The author reviews definitions of media freedom around the world, before analysing and criticising the five existing global press freedom indices[16], and interviewing and surveying more than 1,000 experts. She concludes that despite their crucial relevance, these indices suffer from substantial weaknesses that negatively impact their results and use *(p. 123)*. She suggests a new instrument for measuring media freedom globally and indeed constructs a theoretical concept, a set of indicators, and an explanation of how these indicators should be weighted *(p. 193)*. This *Media Freedom Analyzer (MFA)* is a tool designed to offer more objectivity and transparency so that it can be "potentially accepted across cultures" *(p. 2)*. Schneider's work builds a bridge between thorough academic research and knowledge of the practical realities of the field.

Several media development actors have developed tools to assess media development in a given country. UNESCO's MDIs were endorsed by the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) Intergovernmental Council in 2008 as an "important diagnostic tool for all stakeholders to assess media development in a given country and to thereby determine the areas in which assistance is most needed" *(UNESCO: MDIs, "Background")*. Hence, UNESCO invited practitioners of media development assistance to consider the MDIs when determining national communication strategies. The MDIs "define a framework within which the media can best contribute to, and benefit from, good governance and democratic development" *(UNESCO: MDIs, "A framework for assessing media development")*[17] . *Berger (2010)* says that there is "ample room for critique and revision of the UNESCO approach" *(p. 548)*, as the MDIs are not based on a congruent definition of media development *(p. 552)*. Rather, they define five dimensions[18] which, as Berger puts it, "play a circular role: they are 'media development' and 'media development' is them" *(p. 552)* – an overall logic is missing. In addition, he points to "social conventions" *(p. 552)* that have fed into the indicators, such as the existence of public broadcasters as a sign of more advanced development. On the other hand, Deutsche Welle Akademie has recently established a new tool for assessment, the *Media Viability Indicators (MVIs)* *(Moore et al. 2020)*. Five indicators (and several sub-indicators) consider a range of aspects encompassing politics, economics, community, technology, and content, to assess the ways in which different types of expertise shape media in various contexts *(pp. 4-5)*. They have added a new perspective that combines the media's economic sustainability and ability to produce quality journalism. The aim is to "provide a foundation for understanding the environment in which news media organisations are operating, so media development efforts can be prioritised, and potential synergies identified" *(p. 7)* and to find a common terminology for aspects that can affect media viability in any country.

While some research has been conducted on the subject of monitoring and evaluation as part of the project cycle, e.g. by *Noske-Turner (2017)*[19], there is at present very little research on practices of needs assessment, mapping, and media landscape analysis. An inclusive perspective, however, has been contributed by *Stremlau (2013)*. Looking at Somali territories as a case study, she criticises the tendency of media development actors to typically analyse media landscapes by examining the mass media but disregarding informal communication structures such as information disseminated by local or religious authorities, music, poetry, or word of mouth. Especially in conflict and post-conflict settings, or where official channels are strongly regulated, these might be extremely important channels and therefore should not be ignored in media development efforts *(p.*

16) Released by RSF and Freedom House, along with the IREX Media Sustainability Index, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation's African Media Barometer, and UNESCO's MDIs.

17) So far, UNESCO has applied the MDIs to assess media development in 24 countries, including six sub-Saharan African countries.

18) 1. The legal environment regarding free speech and pluralistic ownership;
2. The performance of the media regarding diverse voices and democratic discourse;
3. The state of media skills;
4. Media-related associations;
5. The degree of public access to media infrastructure *(p. 551)*.

19) The monitoring and evaluation of development projects, often by external observers, is an important part of the project cycle that not only contributes to the transparency of work processes but is also a crucial part of quality control. However, evaluation has not always been an obligatory part of the project cycle. *Noske-Turner (2017)* reviews the emerging knowledge on theories and practices of evaluation in media development and points to the lack of interest that was shown in evaluation, particularly critical empirical evaluation, when media development interventions started picking up speed after the fall of the Soviet Union: "The value of media assistance was assumed, and the "success" of media assistance was judged largely on the counting of outputs, such as the number of journalists trained, or the number of articles produced. These outputs were then tenuously linked to ill-defined, western-centric notions of media freedom (…)" *(Noske-Turner, 2017, p. 1)*.

287). Instead of the usual "templates", she suggests a "relatively unstructured" (p. 280) and therefore flexible diagnostic approach that treats a media system like a patient and identifies its structural elements and needs (p. 282). The diagnostic approach looks at "power", "flows", and "participation" within the media landscape (p. 282).

It would be insightful to study how the diagnostic approach can be applied to contexts that are not currently in conflict, but determined by continuous instability, where the state is a weak actor and the media system has been strongly influenced by colonialism or other international actors. It could also be useful in places where traditional or informal communication structures remain relevant, as described above with the example of griots in parts of West Africa.

Given their importance for practical work, practices of knowledge production about media landscapes should be examined to understand exactly how they work across organisations, how needs assessments can be useful, and whether there is enough critical debate about these practices.

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