



EUROPEAN MEDIA STUDIES

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The media in Eastern Europe

The collapse of communism in the late 1980s was a momentous event. It represented a fundamental shift in European society. The cold war, with its rivalry between East and West, melted and washed away the divide that had characterized post-war Europe. For many the media played a crucial role. Some argue that television was responsible for the rapid collapse of the Soviet-styled regimes in Eastern Europe by empowering the peoples of these societies to get out onto the streets and demonstrate. It showed people they were not isolated in their struggle for freedom and helped to mobilize opposition against the communist regimes. Western television was crucial in this respect. Technological developments increasingly made it impossible for communist regimes to control the flow of information into their countries. Showing the peoples of Eastern Europe that their counterparts in the West enjoyed better lifestyles is seen as having a 'corrosive effect' on political and social stability, which ultimately undermined communism. This chapter explores the role played by the media – in particular, the Western European media – in regime change in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s. It will also examine the emergence of new media structures in Eastern Europe since the demise of communism, focusing on the extent to which these new media are capable of building democracy in Eastern Europe. How far the involvement of western media interests is contributing to, or detracting from, the development of citizenship and political democracy is also discussed.

The media and the collapse of communism

The events in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s have been described as 'the stuff of great reporting' (Giles et al. 2001: xiii). Demonstrations throughout the region saw people in huge numbers pouring onto the streets of cities such as Prague, Leipzig, Warsaw and Bucharest, calling for freedom and their basic human rights. Some of the protests were peaceful. Some involved struggles between police, soldiers and special forces and angry protestors. Elsewhere radio and television stations were seized so that news could be broadcast of the proclaimed 'revolution'. Serious violent conflict broke out in only a few places; for example, in Romania, where the loss of life culminated in the execution of the country's former dictator. All these upheavals reached their high point with the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, the symbol of the post-war divide between West and East Europe, in 1989. The pictures of men and women

standing on top of the wall, tearing it down stone by stone, represented the end of the Soviet bloc and its oppression of Eastern Europe. Such was the speed with which the old regimes fell apart that many argue that the media 'played a fundamental role in the collapse of the communist regimes of eastern Europe' (Horvath 1997). The media, in particular television, were 'decisive' in determining the outcome of events; not only did they satisfy the need for day-to-day information in a rapidly unfolding situation, but they also played a crucial role over a longer period of time in weakening communism and the regimes it sustained.

The then deputy editor of *Channel 4 News* singled out television as 'one of the catalysts to change in Eastern Europe' (Baines 1990). In the short term, television 'accelerated events' by broadcasting the street demonstrations and protests happening in countries undergoing change across Eastern Europe. The medium produced a 'role model on how to challenge the state apparatus'. Romanians, for example, were emboldened to come out onto the streets as a result of seeing on their TV screens what was happening in Poland, East Germany and Czechoslovakia. The importance of television was emphasized by demonstrators in Romania seizing the TV station to assist their efforts to organize the so-called revolution. The new regime 'actually governed from the TV station', and the pictures shown of military detectors, the trial and – after his execution – the body of former dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu, and crowds standing up to machine-gun fire are deemed crucial in mobilizing and maintaining popular support for change (Alter 1990; Baines 1990). In addition, radio stations such as Voice of America, Radio Free Europe and the BBC 'beamed in reports of the tumultuous events elsewhere in Eastern Europe', which gave Romanians hope. Similarly, pictures of the increasingly large demonstrations in Leipzig broadcast by western TV stations into East Germany encouraged more than half a million people to come out into the streets to call for an end to the old regime. The broadcast media brought to the attention of the public events that were unfolding and turned the small-scale activities of newly born political actors into a social and political phenomenon.

In the longer run, television is seen as having 'acted as a corrosive force on the political superstructure of Eastern Europe' by broadcasting pictures of 'a superior lifestyle and higher standard of living across the wall' (Baines 1990). The receptivity of East European audiences to the images and reports from the West was accentuated by the 'decades of doublepeak' on their television screens (Alter 1990). An unrelenting stream of propaganda had driven people away from the communist broadcast media and undermined their believability. Foreign broadcasters, such as the BBC, taught its listeners in Eastern Europe to 'judge critically' what was happening in their own society, thereby playing a role in undermining the foundations of these societies (Tusa, J. 2001: 15–16). East Germany's leading news programme was watched by only 7 per cent of households (Alter 1990). It is estimated that 85 per cent of East Germans regularly tuned in to programmes from West Germany or Austria, many for the pop music, visions of laden supermarket shelves and scenes of faraway places (Tusa, A. 2001: 30). The communist authorities recognized the threat posed by television. As far back as 1961, East German Party boss, Walter Ulbricht, said that the 'enemy of the people stands on the roof'. Controlling where those aerials and antennae pointed became more and more difficult as technology advanced.

Television – an instrument of revolution?

Assessing the part played by television in the fall of communism is far from easy. The short- and long-term impact of western television on social and political change in Eastern Europe is a matter of conjecture. It is possible to argue that the significance of western television in the events of 1989 was exaggerated at the time, as a result of the prevailing view that the end of the cold war represented the triumph of the West.¹ Believing 'we had won the cold war' there was a tendency to place too much emphasis on what the West in general, and in this case western television and media, had done. The reality was that for many years leading up to the collapse of communism the western media and western society were reluctant to believe that political change was taking place in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. There was resistance to the view that a fundamental change was happening behind the Iron Curtain. This was the consequence of our reporting and interpreting of events in Eastern Europe being dominated by a particular framework of understanding (Halliday et al. 1992). Western reporting had been determined throughout the post-war period by what has been labelled a cold-war ideology.

Noam Chomsky (1989) describes 'Cold War Ideology' in his book *Necessary Illusions*. It is based on the West's profound and deep-seated suspicion of the Soviet Union, which characterized the conflict between West and East not as a struggle for political advantage but as a struggle between hope and despair, between workable capitalism and unworkable communism, between good and evil. American presidents of different political persuasions shared the view of the USSR as an 'evil empire' (Reagan) and a 'ruthless and monolithic conspiracy' (Kennedy) that was likely to go to war at any time due to its single-minded commitment to global conquest. Central to the mythology of the evil empire was the 'communist plot', 'conspiracy' or 'master plan' for world domination (Halliday et al. 1992: 69). The result was that the West had to be in a permanent state of military readiness to respond to Soviet interventions throughout the world. Attempts to explain Soviet actions in other ways tended to be marginalized by this official mindset, which was triggered by the response to the Russian Revolution in 1917 and cemented in the anti-communist hysteria of the late 1950s. For Chomsky and others, western journalism and entertainment had largely absorbed these assumptions (Chomsky 1989; Herman and Chomsky 1988; Parent 1986, 1992; McNair 1988). The result was double standards in the reporting and representation of Soviet and American global actions. The USSR was motivated by the 'darkest possible intentions', while the USA was seen as providing a necessary response to Soviet perfidy. The reporting of USA–USSR summits and arms control negotiations were typical: Soviet proposals were reported and interpreted as 'ploys' and 'propaganda', while American proposals represented 'new initiatives' or an 'attempt to break the deadlock'. This was described as zero-sum journalism. Global events were reported as either a loss for the USA and a gain for the USSR or vice versa, and occurrences in the so-called Third World were only explicable in terms of the cold war game and nothing to do with domestic conditions in those countries. This view was reinforced by the behaviour of the USSR, a country whose history had made it deeply suspicious of the West and of western reporters. Limitations were placed on information, expression and the practice of journalism within its borders. Inept news

management meant that little or nothing was said about certain events. This helped to reinforce the negative view of its actions in the West. As a result of the cold-war conditioning and the 'endless series of distortions and oversimplifications' in the media coverage, the picture of what was happening in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union was extremely limited.

Cold-war conditioning meant that the western media did not attach sufficient significance to Gorbachev's attainment of power in the early 1980s. He was seen initially by many in the West as a clever operator whose reforms were not part of a process of freeing up the Soviet system, but a new tactic for winning people's hearts and minds in the Soviet propaganda campaign to shape global public opinion. Gorbachev's policies of glasnost and perestroika, which helped to open up Soviet society, were dismissed as a process of change in the Soviet Union by much of the western media. A BBC memorandum in 1989 warned of giving too much prominence to Gorbachev, who was labelled a highly efficient PR operator. It was only when the Berlin Wall came down that the media began to see Gorbachev differently. This event came as something as a surprise to the western media. The initial demonstrations of people power in Eastern Europe took place in East Germany in June 1988. Street protests in East Berlin were reported in news magazines such as *Newsweek* as 'rock riots', a reflection of what was perceived as a growing drug culture in the city. As a result of attitudes entrenched during the cold war, there was a reluctance to accept that these events represented change taking place through popular dissent. It did not fit the frame. The realization that fundamental political change was happening led to a shift in coverage, but again it was rooted in the preconceptions of the cold war.

The focus of the new reporting in the Anglo-American media shifted to the theme of how the West had won the cold war. The tumbling of the regimes in Eastern Europe was seen as confirmation of a victory for freedom and western values. Freedom was often reported in material terms. East Germans who streamed into the West were portrayed as leaving the country in order to buy consumer goods. The impression was that with the fight for freedom over, economic prosperity for the former communist regimes of Eastern Europe was just around the corner, with the 'free' market and privatization as guarantors. Similarly, the political forces that had helped to overthrow these regimes were represented within the frame of the cold war. Coverage concentrated on their anti-communist credentials and western dispositions, as well as their commitment to western democracy and the free market. Groupings that did not fit the frame, such as the New Forum – the main opposition in East Germany – which combined social democracy and environment politics in an effort to define an alternative to capitalism and communism, were not reported fully. Groupings such as the National Salvation Front in Romania, whose anti-communist credentials were open to doubt were reported more critically. Former communists winning power at the ballot box, as happened in Bulgaria in 1995, were ignored. The nature of the political and social movements that toppled communism was never fully explored, as the complexities of political change across Eastern Europe were located within the simplistic framework of the cold war. It is not surprising that such coverage placed too much emphasis on the role of the western media and journalism in the political transformation that took place. What western audiences were left with was a set of comforting illusions, which hid many of the difficult questions

about how democracy would develop in the wreckage that accompanied the fall of communism. This focus on winning the cold war and triumphing over communism meant that the nationalistic fervours which were to erupt in bitter ethnic conflict in the Balkans and other parts of Eastern Europe in the 1990s came as a surprise not only to western audiences but also to western reporters (Johnson 2001: 218).

Development of the post-communist media

Following the collapse of the Soviet Empire, it was assumed that the mass media in Eastern Europe would rapidly assume the form of their counterparts in the West. Democracy and the market economy would be accompanied by media systems that stressed the core practices of western journalism, including objectivity and balance, as well as independence from the state and critical scrutiny of the powers that be. The 'westernization' or 'Europeanization' of the former communist media of Eastern Europe was regarded by many commentators in the West as a formality. This was not shared by many leading intellectuals in the East who had been at the forefront of the movements for democratic change. They had envisaged the development of a 'third way', neither capitalist nor communist, East nor West. The power attributed to the media, particularly television, in the downfall of the old regimes, ensured that they would be at the centre of the process of transition. This process has not been easy or straightforward.

The countries of the former Soviet bloc have emerged from communism at different rates and in different ways. Some countries, such as the Czech Republic and Hungary, have embraced western-style media systems more smoothly than others. Other countries have remained attached to the media practices and processes that characterized the communist regimes, including the Russian Federation, where the media have had to struggle to establish their freedom from both the government and business oligarchies. In many of the post-communist societies of Eastern Europe the 'transition' to western media practices and structures is proving more slow and more problematic than envisaged in the heady days following the collapse of the Berlin Wall. For one commentator, the media situation in Eastern Europe is summed up as 'business as usual' (Jakubowicz 2001: 68). Another sees the media in Eastern Europe becoming 'a copy of those in the West', not in terms of the idealized version which emphasizes the social role of journalism and the media in creating citizenship and a public sphere through critical, objective and informative reporting, but in the extent to which they operate as commercial entities, geared to making private profit by the provision of cheap, sensational entertainment formats (Sparks 1991, 1998). Others say that it is far too early to make any assessment of the media operations, the media still being in an early stage of transition. While each country has developed its media system in a unique set of circumstances and at different speeds, there are some common features.

New media systems

The collapse of communism initially led to a flourishing of the mass media and journalism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Johnson (1998: 184) describes how the 'last

days of communism were glory days for journalism' in Eastern Europe. The decline of the influence of the Communist Party freed the media and journalism from the shackles of political control. Horvath (1997) describes how 'newsstands throughout eastern Europe became choked with a myriad of publications, ranging from political analysis to alternative lifestyles and . . . pornography'. The rapid development of new titles happened everywhere. In Hungary alone it is estimated that around 600 new newspapers came into being (Sparks 1991: 11). A similar number of newspapers were established in Poland after Solidarity came to power in 1989, and between 1990 and 1992 nearly 100 new titles were being registered every month (Horvath 1997; Sparks 1998: 102). The early 1990s witnessed rapid growth in the print media in Russia. Between 1993 and 1997 there was a 45 per cent growth in the number of publications, with the establishment for the first time of business newspapers and glossy magazines (Vartanova 2002: 14). Even in smaller nations, such as Slovenia, the number of daily newspaper titles doubled (Sparks 1998: 102). New press forms developed. Tabloid or boulevard newspapers had not existed prior to the collapse of communism. In Hungary their readership had reached more than 786,000 by 2000 (Gulyas 2003: 103). Similarly, lifestyle magazines saw a surge in their readership. Women's magazines and leisure/hobby publications experienced rising circulation throughout the 1990s. In Hungary weekly women's magazines increased their sales threefold from the mid-1980s, only to fall off in 2001 with increased competition from other kinds of material, such as television magazines and celebrity kiss-and-tell publications, such as *Story*, which is estimated to sell 479,000 copies every week (Gulyas 2003: 91; Kiss 2004: 105). Business newspapers also emerged. Some of these newspapers were new; others were the result of established newspapers trying to adjust to the changing circumstances. In Russia *Izvestia* entered into an agreement with the *Financial Times* to produce a Russian publication based on the latter, targeted at the newly emerging private entrepreneurs (McNair 2001: 275). In the immediate aftermath of the change of regime, the most common types of publications to be founded were political. The newly established political parties and factions wanted to have their own official organ or mouthpiece. The flourishing of the newspaper scene in Eastern Europe was set into motion primarily by the process of political pluralization that followed the collapse of one-party rule.

Broadcasting also grew, if not quite so rapidly. By the mid-1990s new, private television and radio channels were emerging. As in the West, these channels began to attract large audiences and the state broadcasters suffered. In Russia major shifts took place in the 1990s, with the birth of private stations, such as NTV and TV-6, which challenged the state broadcasters, ORT (Public Russian TV) and RTR (Russian TV), at the national level; similar developments were taking place at the regional level, where more than 1000 channels existed by the beginning of the new millennium (Vartanova 2002: 14). These private channels – which today include one all-national federal channel (NTV), four federal networks (TVS, which replaced TV-6, Ren-TV, CTC and TNT) and two regional channels with national distribution (Kultura and TVC) – have eaten into the audiences of the former state broadcasters. Nowadays 41 per cent of Russians prefer to watch ORT, while only 13 per cent choose RTR (Vartanova 2004: 196). More spectacular has been the success of private TV in the Czech Republic. In 1994 a new commercial channel, TV Nova, was launched. In its first year it attracted 70 per cent of the viewing audience and in its third year of operation posted

a staggering profit of \$45 million, on the basis of a turnover of \$109 million (Culik 2004: 35). Recent figures show that TV Nova and the Republic's other private national TV station, Prima TV, attract nearly two-thirds of the TV audience, with the two channels of the public service broadcaster reaching only 32 per cent (Culik 2004: 39; Druker 2001: 83).

The expansion in the media industries was facilitated by changes in government policy. New laws and regulations were introduced, aimed at securing media freedom, and previous control mechanisms were rescinded. Democratization demanded political changes and at the forefront of these changes were the removal of censorship and the guarantee of freedom of expression. All the post-communist states moved quickly to undo the subordination of the media to the political authorities which had characterized the Soviet media systems. The new legal and regulatory frameworks guaranteed editorial independence. Political change was accompanied by economic change, with market reforms and privatization the flavour of the month. The free market was embraced with alacrity, as many saw it as a necessary prerequisite for political democracy. State enterprises, including the media, were sold off with almost undue haste. Fuelled by the revival of official belief in the efficiency of the market in the West, substantial voices offering alternatives to the market were non-existent in the newly emerging governments in Eastern Europe. A foreign investor buying into the Czech press compared the situation to the 'Wild West of America in the last century' (Sparks 1998: 143). Embracing open media markets was not matched by an enlightened form of regulation (Molnar 2001: 109). As Sparks (1998: 119) notes, 'there was no attempt to ensure that the newly freed press was an embodiment of diversity either internally or externally'. Alternatives to the market and private ownership arrangements were not considered. The press, as Sparks says, was 'simply passed over to the market and moderated only by the political interests of the government'. Thus in Hungary the sale of the newspaper *Magyar Nemzet* (Hungarian Nation) to a Swedish investor was blocked by the government, who considered the potential buyer too politically liberal (Splichal 1994: 39). Rather than addressing the problems of building citizenship and pluralism, the governments formed in the immediate aftermath of the political changes of 1989 were driven by an ideological commitment to the free market and 'guided by the political agenda of the New Right in the West' (Splichal 1994: 34).

Privatization and free market economics were applied to the print media more quickly and more completely than to broadcasting. There was never a process of negotiation and some newspapers were privatized or sold off without any reference to legal considerations and with no effort to regulate the process (Sparks 1998: 103). The privatization of newspapers was often questionable. One controversial example occurred in Hungary, where the Axel Springer group from Germany purchased a large chain of local newspapers. Culik (2004) describes how means were found to close down newspapers to ensure no compensation was paid to the state and then to relaunch them as new, private newspapers, with virtually the same name, to be sold eventually to foreign companies. If the press was 'left to its own resources and to the marketplace almost overnight' (Splichal 1994: 36), politicians from across the political spectrum were reluctant to establish broadcasting institutions free from their control (see Bakardjeva 1995; Sparks 1998; Splichal 1994). The perception of the importance played by television and radio in the process of political change, along with the jockeying between the

newly emerging political parties over the structure of broadcasting in a post-communist society, held back the development of broadcasting in Eastern Europe.

The growth in the print and broadcast media was not long-lived and, ultimately, the events of the early 1990s resulted in a realignment in the media industries. The influence of television in post-communist Eastern Europe increased as a result of two developments: changing media consumption patterns and the decline in the print media. Television viewing has become more popular. Take Hungary as an example: Hungarians are now watching more TV. The average number of hours spent every day in front of their TV screens increased from 2 in the mid-1980s to 3.5 by 1995 (Gulyas 2002: 35). Varranova (2002: 13) describes the same phenomenon in Russia, where newspapers were superseded by television at the top of the media hierarchy, partly as a result of the greater trust people placed in the medium; while 36 per cent of Russians found TV the most reliable media, only 13 per cent selected the press. Increased television viewing and greater trust in the medium has corresponded with the rapid demise of the press. The initial blossoming of new newspapers and titles in the early 1990s was followed by their decrease in the latter part of the decade (Gulyas 2003: 90). Closures and declining circulation, as in the West, became the norm. In countries such as Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic sales of the national dailies almost halved between the mid-1980s and the end of the 1990s (Gulyas 2003: 97). Sparks (1991) identifies a variety of problems that make it difficult for the press to survive. Years of political and economic protection insulated the press in Eastern Europe from the political and financial realities of selling newspapers. The end of state subsidies led to widespread difficulties in raising revenue to keep the press going. Raising cover prices tended to deflate newspaper circulation, but newspapers did become more expensive. In Hungary the average price of a daily newspaper was 21 times more in 1996 than in 1990 (Gulyas 2003: 88). Such increases did not go very far in covering the costs of newspaper production, which, Gulyas points out, were similar in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic to Western Europe. The problem was that the cover price was on average four times lower. Advertising revenue was not always available to cover these costs, given the depressed state of many of the economies of the region. Matters were worsened by the desperate need to invest in new equipment. The technology of newspaper production under the communist system was poor, and underdeveloped by western standards. Investing in new plant and machinery added to the costs of production. It was also unfortunate that the explosion of publications, all of which could only command small circulations, coincided with a crisis in the economies of Eastern Europe in 1990 to 1991, with inflation rising, average incomes falling and demand slumping as a result. The consequence was a marked drop in newspaper circulation. In Hungary, readership dropped by 10 per cent and 100 newspapers closed (Splichal 1994: 39). Of the 80 local newspapers founded in East Germany after the wall came down, only 14 were still operating by the end of 1993 (Hägen 1997: 10). Very soon the newspaper markets of Eastern Europe began to resemble the gradual fading away of the press that has characterized Western Europe.

The fate of the press is indicative of the general problem of adapting to a new form of media economics in Eastern Europe. Structural changes in the financing of the media have meant that newspapers and television stations now have to operate in a more competitive world, driven by ratings and advertising. The influence of advertising and advertisers has

become significant. It has been calculated that by the early 1990s 60 per cent of the Hungarian press was funded by advertising, compared to 25 per cent under the old regime (Gulyas 2002). In broadcasting, advertising has been allowed onto public service television, as well as acting as the driving force for commercial channels. Public service channels, such as MTV in Hungary, Czech TV (CT) and Polish Television (TVP), struggle to stave off financial shortfalls and possible bankruptcy, which seem to recur regularly as a consequence of the inadequate funding arrangements developed by the government. Turning to advertising as a source of revenue has, as in the West, resulted in a significant change in programming, with an increase in entertainment fare at the expense of more serious material. Commercial stations, such as TV Nova, TV Markiza in Slovakia and TV2 in Hungary, often supported by western finance and know-how, have led the way. Competition has seen the audience share of the public broadcasters fall way behind that of their commercial rivals in most cases. Those working in the media industries are not sufficiently knowledgeable about how to operate in a more competitive, market-driven system. Economic realities have quickly punctuated the initial wave of enthusiasm that greeted the events of 1989. As a former editor of *Komunističeskaya Pravda* noted: 'We used to have one profession – journalism. Now we have to be managers and economists' (quoted in Horvath 1997).

The effort to attain financial stability is increasingly the most important activity of those working in the media. Sparks (1991) identifies some of the revenue-raising options the media have examined. They could turn back to the state to obtain a grant, which many found unacceptable, given the recent past. They could take out a commercial loan, which, given the precarious state of their business operation, was fraught with problems. They could align themselves with a political party or faction, hoping to fund their operation from political funds, but at the expense of their independence. Or they could enter into a partnership with western commercial operations. If there was some degree of interest shown by western media industries in their country, most of the new media – and some of the established media – chose the last option.

Thus western media interests quickly moved in to take control of the media. Foreign ownership soon became a feature of the development of the media in Eastern Europe. Large sectors of press and broadcasting industries fell into the hands of foreign capital. Hungary was one of the first countries to sell off its media. By 1990, a majority of the country's newspapers were in the hands of multinational media companies, including Bertelsmann, Springer, Maxwell's Mirror Newspapers, Hertsant and Murdoch (Splichal 1994: 38). Overnight acquisition and direct ownership were common. Agreements were made, with the former communist newspaper *Nepszabadság* signing a deal with Bertelsmann when it was privatized in 1990. Similarly, Robert Maxwell signed a deal in the same year to take a 40 per cent interest in the Budapest evening paper, *Esti Hírlap*. By 1999, it was estimated that foreign ownership of the Hungarian press accounted for over 80 per cent of newspaper circulation (Gulyas 2002: 37). Elsewhere in Eastern Europe western interests moved into the newspaper industry. In East Germany the larger newspapers were taken over by West German interests: 31 of the 34 daily newspapers found West German partners (Splichal 1994: 34). Most of the old East German magazines were bought up and then closed down; ultimately, the print market of the former GDR was controlled by the 12 largest West German publishers, who

owned more than 85 per cent of the former East German press (Hagen 1997: 9). Splichal (1994: 35). Not that every country in the region was equally appealing to western media conglomerates. Few companies showed any interest in buying into the press in smaller or more troubled nations, such as Bulgaria or Romania or the former Soviet Republics. But even in these countries western interventions did occur: the Swiss publishing house, Ringier, launched a business weekly in Sofia, and Maxwell donated 1000 tonnes of newsprint to the country (Bakardjieva 1995; Sparks 1991). The primary interest of foreign media concerns was in the larger and more developed media markets of Hungary, Russia, Poland and East Germany, which promised greater profits.

Foreign involvement in broadcasting took a slightly different form, as a result of greater political and cultural sensitivity about direct ownership of television (Sparks 1991: 12). Television, in particular, was identified as a political and cultural asset that new governments were unwilling to allow to pass completely into foreign hands. Partnership and joint ownership were more common: today both of Hungary's most watched channels, RTL Klub and TV 2, are co-owned by Hungarian and western interests, including Sweden's SBS and the Pearson Group from the UK (Gulyas 2002: 37). Programme purchasing agreements with western broadcasters developed rapidly. The latter years of communist rule had seen a considerable increase in the amount of western programming appearing on Eastern European television screens. In 1986 Hungary's state broadcaster, MTV, purchased 601 programmes from western sources, including Britain and West Germany, representing almost 70 per cent of its total acquisitions (Sparks and Reading 1994: 251). Hungary was the most open television system, but others, including Poland and Czechoslovakia, were major importers from the West. Following the collapse of communism, this kind of arrangement was entered into more throughout the region. Bulgarian TV established relations with Central TV in the UK – partly owned by Maxwell – America's Worldvision and Turner to explore programme purchasing agreements (Sparks 1991: 12). Even in countries where there were greater efforts to resist foreign intervention, state or state-protected channels were forced to buy from western companies because they offered the cheapest programmes. Western programmes also became highly popular. In Poland, for example, the American soap opera *Dynasty* drew an audience of 16 million viewers every night, Monday to Friday. Relations between local and foreign interests were not necessarily comfortable. TV Nova started as a partnership between a group of former dissidents, led by Vladimir Zeleny, and Central European Media Enterprises (CME), an American company run by Ronald Lauder, the heir to the Estée Lauder Cosmetics empire, and a former diplomat, Mark Palmer, both of whom had served as ambassadors in Eastern Europe (Druker 2001: 82). The success of the channel, which by 2001 had amassed three-quarters of the Czech advertising market, coincided with an increasingly fraught dispute between the partners, which saw Zeleny go on TV news in 1999 to explain his side of the argument in a 9-minute item, while CME received only 30 seconds (Druker 2001: 84). At the heart of the dispute was the nature of the agreement between the parties, which led to Zeleny taking the station off-air, replacing it with his own Nova TV 2 in August 1999. The outcome of this act was a legal dispute which saw CME win substantial damages from the Czech government, estimated at \$500 million, and Zeleny repaying \$28 million (Culik 2004: 35). Zeleny left the channel and CME continued to expand into other countries,

including Slovenia and Slovakia, furthering what one commentator has called Lauder's wish to 'become the Murdoch of the former communist countries' (Sparks 1998: 171).

The consequences of foreign companies playing a leading role in the development of Eastern European media should be a matter for close examination. European companies have been more active than their US counterparts. Many of the US firms that have intervened have done so as a result of historical and personal factors as much as financial. The Lauder family's interest in CME is the consequence of their Hungarian-Jewish background as much as the potential they see in making money in Eastern Europe. Only in the former Soviet Union do US firms seem to be playing a leading role. There seems to be a division inside Eastern European societies over the role of foreign investors and conglomerates. The hold these companies are exerting over media markets is tightening, as it has in Western Europe. For example, the press throughout the region is increasingly owned by outside interests. Thus two-thirds of the national newspaper market in Hungary is controlled by the Swiss media company, Ringier (Kaposi 2004), which also holds considerable interests in the press and magazine business in the Czech Republic (Cull 2004). Of the 90 leading publishing houses in Poland in 1998 nearly half were totally or partly owned by foreigners (Jakubowicz 2004: 170).

In addition, foreign ownership has coincided with the increasing concentration of ownership. The market share of the leading companies has increased year on year. The worry expressed by an Estonian editor about the concentration of ownership on the development of pluralism in his country reflects the views of many media workers in Eastern Europe. 'Pluralism, which was so hard won, is still very fragile. In Estonia we have markets where radio, television, the weekly paper, the morning paper and the evening paper are all from the same group. It's very easy to manipulate the political agenda in such a situation' (quoted in Nelson 2001: 174). Others do not share this concern, seeing the main threat to media freedom coming from political forces rather than large private owners, who are not seen as a threat to democracy in the same way as the state (Gulyas 2002: 37; Kaposi 2004). There appears to be little public uproar about foreign media ownership. Some argue foreign funding is preferable to the situation in Russia, where many newspapers have fallen into the hands of a small number of wealthy 'oligarchs', who use the press to promote their own narrow political agendas (Nelson 2001: 172). Perhaps of more concern is the strength and extent of the commitment of such companies to long-term development of Eastern European media. The rapid disappearance of these companies, whether for financial or political reasons, has highlighted the fragility of their involvement. The lure of higher profits elsewhere or a failure to perform to expectations have seen western media interests pull out of Eastern European media markets.

New media outlets and the changing economic structure of the media industries have been accompanied by adjustments in media content. New economic realities, as we have seen, resulted in a huge increase in the amount of western programming on Eastern European TV screens. The most significant change is the growth of entertainment material, particularly on the commercial and cable channels. For example, in the Ukraine 29 private channels were launched, all of which were devoted to entertainment, in particular cartoons and B films imported from the West. TV Nova's success was put down partly to its purchase of the rights to dozens of US sitcoms, soaps and dramas, such as *Dallas*, *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Days of*

Our Lives (Druker 2001: 82). Nudity, sensationalist and glossy news coverage and crime also feature prominently. *Pocasičko*, the late evening weather forecast, is usually presented by a stripping female forecaster. Guesome pictures of accident victims and celebrity gossip are regular items on news programmes. Quiz and game shows, associated directly with the spread of consumerism, became a staple feature of television. The Soviet version of *Wheel of Fortune*, even with its creaky sets and cheap prizes, such as an old vacuum cleaner, was very popular. Similar changes in the content of newspapers are apparent. After the initial flourishing of the political press, newspapers went downmarket. The rise in sensational papers corresponded with a decline in the political and quality press. After years of boring copy, focusing on the comings and goings of the party faithful, people demanded something different, and sensationalism, celebrities, scandal, gossip and titillation seemed to fit the bill. The new economic need to tailor media products to reach audiences willing to pay forced newspapers to change their content. The huge surge in sex and sensationalism is a reflection of the new economic structures.

One medium of mass communication that did not thrive in the wake of the events of 1989 was the cinema (Horvath 1997). Under the communist regimes, the film industry had received considerable subsidies from the state. Massive cuts, the withdrawal of secure funding and falling audiences contributed to 'volatile structural changes' in the industry, which resulted in rapid decline (Jordanova 1999). Without experience of western fundraising techniques, and with many leading film-makers moving into the more lucrative world of advertising, the industry basically imploded. Hungary's capital city, Budapest, saw a fall in cinema attendance from a yearly average of 17 million prior to 1989 to 5 million by 1995. Ticket prices had risen in this period by over 500 per cent, as desperate attempts were made to cover the inflationary costs of making a new film and respond to the need to overhaul the poor state of the city's theatres (Horvath 1997). The film industry in the former Soviet Union had, in the era of perestroika, established a reputation for energy and achievement, producing over 300 films in 1990, the merits of which were acknowledged by the regularity with which these films won prizes at international film festivals (Grafy 1998: 188). However, the changes in the industry which accelerated after the collapse of communism set the stage for the destruction of the cinema. The loosening of the production and exhibition systems resulted in a huge influx of foreign films into the country. These films were highly popular, and the ending of state subsidies and the privatization of the studios meant that Russian film-makers struggled to finance their productions. Matters were worsened further by the rise of cable TV, which showed more and more films on the small screen, and the growth of the video industry, which saw video saloons being set up to show often pirated copies of films not yet released in the cinema (Grafy 1998: 189). Cinema attendance fell drastically and the production of films plummeted; while 300 films were produced in 1990, the number of Russian films made in 1995 had slumped to 46 (Grafy 1998: 190). Some high-quality films were still being made, but Russian directors and actors were increasingly working and filming abroad and cinema screens at home were showing more and more American movies or cheap Russian imitations. Elsewhere a similar picture emerges: state funding disappearing and audiences falling drastically. In some countries complete meltdown has been averted only by the intervention of television. In the Czech Republic, film-making would have disappeared

completely without the support of Czech Television (Culik 2004: 37). Without an economically strong television system, other countries have presided over the demise of their film industry. Hungarian films, which had gained an international reputation, virtually ceased their production in the 1990s. Public television, with its financial difficulties, could not step in. In 2001 the industry went through a limited revival. The basis for this revival was a return to state subsidies, which, while sparking a debate about politically biased cinema, has at least enabled a significant number of Hungarian films to be made again.

The new journalism?

Journalism has also been changing since the upheavals of 1989. The old Leninist model, which ensured journalists served the propaganda needs of the party (see Altschull 1995), disappeared. The journalism that replaced it was modelled on that of the West. Post-communist journalists dressed like their western counterparts and introduced western ways of doing things. Presentation and camera styles are examples of this. Soviet television and film work used to be of a high standard. In fact, many of the key developments in the history of cinematography are the result of innovations pioneered in Soviet cinema. Much of the camerawork on Russian and Eastern European television today conforms to western ways of doing things. Western styles of political reporting have been copied, with gladiatorial and inquisitorial styles used to interview politicians and ministers becoming more prominent in news and current affairs programmes. Western concepts of journalism have also been introduced. Objectivity, critical scrutiny, independent comment and balance and fairness are some of the new skills that have had to be learned. Investigative reporting has also made an appearance in the East European media. TV Nova launched investigative shows that exposed government corruption and uncovered some of the excesses of the new capitalist system (Druker 2001: 86). Poland's leading newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, has played its part in toppling cabinet ministers guilty of corruption or other offences (Jakubowicz 2001: 66). Some reporters have embraced these imports eagerly, while others have resisted, seeing them, at best, as inappropriate to the conditions that the media and journalism face in the post-communist world, and, at worst, as an example of cultural imperialism. Journalists, at first highly responsive to change, have become more sceptical about the new business ventures of which they have become part, realizing, in the words of one Russian journalist, that the free market's demands could be even harder to come to terms with than the communist censorship of the past (quoted in McNair 2001: 275).

Establishing the independence of journalism in the post-communist societies of Eastern Europe has not been without its difficulties and there is some way to go before it is possible to see the practice of independent journalism fully accepted. Journalists continue to be harassed, jailed and murdered. In some countries – Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Belarus and, most notably, the Balkans – the situation has not improved very much. In Belarus the authorities have not accepted that journalists and the media have the right to criticize the government. In the early 1990s the country's prime minister said he would 'support all the press, except publications opposing the government' (quoted in Splichal 1994: 42). There are numerous cases of journalists who have exposed the wrongdoings of government paying with their lives.

In the Ukraine the television reporter Gorygy Gongadze was killed after investigating the activities of the president, Leonid Kuchma. New laws, often promulgated in the name of media freedom, have been used or abused to restrict the ability of journalists to investigate and report. The absence of significant economic growth means that many journalists in the region are still poorly paid and open to bribery. Nelson (2001: 176) notes how journalists simply sell their services to companies who wish to promote a particular product or require good news. Perhaps the most significant obstacle to the development of independent journalism is the mindset of the journalists themselves. Years of developing their skills under a communist system has made many working in the media more comfortable with the practice of political journalism, serving the interests of their party masters and propagating a particular political line or agenda. There is still a degree of discomfort at criticizing those in power and the preference exists for commentaries, editorializing and opinion, rather than reporting (Splichal 1994: 72). McNair (2001: 281) refers to the struggle of Russian journalists to throw off their 'genetic memory' of their professional role as agitators and propagandists. He cites the example of Sergei Dorenko, who is biased and proud of it, in using his prime-time slots on Russia's leading public service channel to promote a particular politician or party. He was 'an unremitting propagandist for President Yeltsin' during the 2000 election campaign. As McNair (2001: 278) says, the development of independent journalism requires much more than simply putting into place legal instruments to protect practitioners from state and government interference. Effective change depends not only on building new media structures and institutions, but also on changing the culture and mindset of the people who work in these organizations, as well as the people who consume their products (Molnar 2001: 103). This depends on a much more fundamental shift in political culture and society than is so far apparent.

Continuity

One of the features of the media systems of the post-communist societies of Eastern Europe is the extent to which there has been a continuity of personnel, structures and attitudes. In the early 1990s Splichal emphasized how the emerging systems carried with them 'important characteristics of the former totalitarian model', and how the new governments operated 'in the same way as did previous communist governments', using 'communist-like means of media control' (Splichal 1994: 43, 86, 60). Sparks (1998: 175), in a detailed examination of the nature of the transformation of Eastern European societies and media, based on a study of the Visegrad countries, makes a similar assessment at the end of the decade. In spite of a shift 'towards a much more commercial media system, integrated into the world market ... [a] ... surprising amount of the old order survives'. The capacity of old media associated with communist regimes to survive and, in some cases, prosper, is apparent in several ways. Media from the old regimes still exist. In the print market of East Germany, West German newspapers failed to make significant headway (Russ-Mohl 2001: 126). East German regional newspapers lost nearly a third of their circulation in the 1990s, but increased their market share from 63 per cent before 1989 to 78 per cent in 1999 (Russ-Mohl 2001: 125). Gulys (2003) reveals how the former newspaper titles of the Communist Party survived the changes

in the system in Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic and went on to prosper.

Nezavisniasg, the former organ of the Communist Party, became Hungary's most popular quality paper in the 1990s, while its equivalent in the Czech Republic, *Pravo*, established itself as the second best political paper (Gulyas 2003: 93). Continuity is also maintained by many of the same people working in the media. While senior editors and those whose faces were closely associated with the old regimes may have gone, it is the same journalists and reporters who run the papers and the radio and TV stations as was the case under communism. Nearly 70 per cent of those working in East German newspapers today were in employment before 1989 (Russ-Mohl 2001: 125). Many of them are seen as more critical of the new political order than the old. Hence it is argued that they are associated with popular support for PDS, the old Communist Party in the East, and popular dissatisfaction with the process of transition. The failure of many West German reporters to move to the former East Germany in the wake of reunification is seen as contributing to the problem. However, by focusing on local news, identifying with the problems of surviving in the new order, the former GDR journalists have been responsible in no small part for the success of regional newspapers in East Germany (Hagen 1997; Russ-Mohl 2001). The continuation of those working in broadcasting is a result of the policy of trying to change organizations 'without a witch-hunt' (Hankiss 1994). Critics believe the failure to purge the personnel of the old regimes has led to 'the same mafia . . . still running things' in television (cited in Sparks 1998: 101). Internal restructuring of the media has happened relatively slowly: today media institutions have been left untouched in some countries. The problem is more complicated than the continuation of a discredited political ideology. Cullik (2004: 32) sees the problem of rank-and-file journalists simply switching sides as inhibiting the 'courage of individuals to produce independent and critical writing because they could at any time be accused of behaving questionably in the past'. Younger people coming into the profession are less inhibited, but the continuity in media personnel has resulted in journalism that for the most part is 'timid, unenterprising, superficial and conventional' – words used by Cullik to describe the Czech Republic in the 1990s, but which could apply to any Eastern European country.

More significant in terms of continuity between the old and new is that the political elite running the political systems of post-communist Eastern Europe do not depart radically from their predecessors in their attitudes and actions towards the media. In every one of these countries, even the more liberal, such as Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, governments have shown considerable resistance to the growth and spread of independent media, particularly broadcast media. On becoming president of Poland in 1994, Lech Walesa – former leader of the Solidarity movement, which played a leading role in the overthrow of communism in his country – intervened regularly in broadcasting to ensure that media managers who were too independent and unwilling to comply with his wishes were dismissed (Sparks 1998: 159). In doing so, he brushed aside challenges from parliament and legal rulings that declared such action outside his powers.

Another leader associated with popular resistance to communism who appears not to have been able to tolerate criticism was Boris Yeltsin. In 1996 Yeltsin dismissed Oleg Poptsov, head of public service broadcaster, RTR, for what was seen as negative and 'excessively doom-laden' coverage of events in Russia (McNair 2000: 90). Later that year, in the name of democracy,

nearly the entire Russian broadcast media suspended all criticism of Yeltsin in the face of the electoral challenge he faced from nationalists and communists, neither of whose candidates were given equal time to Yeltsin on Russian TV. The lack of media criticism of Yeltsin did not represent a return to the old ways, but, according to McNair (2000: 91), it reflected the 'lingering authoritarianism and lack of democratic maturity' that characterized Russian political culture. In Romania, where the fight for freedom had resulted in the loss of life, press freedom failed to materialize fully under the National Salvation Front, which used

unfavourable economic circumstances to impede the development of opposition newspapers (Splichal 1994: 41; Ruston 1991). Cronyism still exists, with the new political parties selecting their own men and women to serve in key decision-making positions in the press and broadcasting. The allocation of TV licences often depends more on political connections than on any understanding or experience of the TV business. Sparks (1999) describes the success of TV Nova, whose 'political capital' enabled it to win the first commercial TV licence in the Czech Republic. Various governments have used their control of printing facilities, ownership of the means of distribution and monopoly of newsprint to exert their influence over what the press reports. Laws have been passed in nearly every Eastern European country, providing for the punishment of those who malign or defame public officials (Ogianova and Scott 1997: 372). Political change has not necessarily meant more independence for the media.

Censorship and control still exists in the new democracies, but now they take different forms. It is not surprising, therefore, that there are doubts about the capacity of the media to assist in rebuilding democracy in Eastern Europe. Pessimists talk of a 'long night' facing the peoples of the region and a 'new media order' being established by 'riding roughshod over the interests' of the population (cited in Splichal 1994: 237; Kilborn 1993: 469). Sparks (1998) argues that the media operate as agencies of control in both capitalism and communism. On the other hand, Gross (2002) believes that, in spite of failings, the media have played a key role in the development of civil society in Eastern Europe. He argues it is impossible for the media today to ignore the non-governmental organizations that have developed, and coverage of issues such as ecology, women's rights, health, children's concerns and housing matters has increased. Non-governmental bodies have also proved adept at using the media to get their message across, importing the techniques of public relations. Gross also argues that, more recently, popular agitation has played a part in the depoliticization of broadcasting. A mass rally involving journalists and the public in the winter of 2000/1 against political interference in Czech TV played a key role in toppling the station's director, a political appointee (Gross 2002). The result was that the Czech Parliament ensured that the council that runs TV shifted from a political party base to one rooted in civic associations. Johnson (2001: 228) sees the politics and sensationalism of the media as helping to 'draw readers and viewers into the circle of political participation'. Whatever the viewpoint, the debate about the future of the media in Eastern Europe increasingly resembles that which is taking place in the West.

Conclusion

The development of the media in Eastern Europe since 1989 has been a dramatic story. Press and broadcasting structures are now radically different from the communist era. Private

ownership and market economics have come to dominate the operation of media systems.

Media freedom has been asserted in the passing of new laws and media practices have changed in the new environment. While these changes represent the consolidation of the anti-communist revolution, the contribution of the media to the construction of a democratic political culture remains problematic. There has been limited opportunity for the new media structures to develop their own particularities. In most cases they have become pale imitations of the structures in the West. A distinctive voice and style of journalism has not emerged. The basic continuity of those working in the media has not facilitated the growth of independent journalism and media. The end of censorship has not accompanied the growth of private and market-led media. Politics still constitute the major determinant of the ways in which the media operate, and politicians in the new democracies are just as willing to use their power and influence to control anti-government publications and broadcast stations. Private ownership is dependent on a process of accommodation with the political powers that be. Reliance on the market in a hostile economic climate is producing media that are increasingly financially unstable and politically supine. The content of the media in Eastern Europe is more and more entertainment-oriented, which ensures they are less able to play their part in the construction of democratic structures and a democratic political culture. Most of the post-communist media systems are, to a greater or lesser extent, 'free but not independent' (Jakubowicz 2001: 59).

(This chapter draws on several articles from the magazine Deadline, which is published in New York by the Center for War, Peace and the News Media.)