

## LIFTING THE CURTAIN ON PUBLIC TELEVISION AND TVP IN POLAND

Agnieszka Węglińska: *Public Television in Poland: Political Pressure and Public Service Media in a Post-communist Country*, London: Routledge 2021, 141 pp.

The recent developments in Poland's media landscape have made headlines around the world. Western democracies and the European Union have been especially concerned with these developments, as Poland continues to decline on the World Press Freedom Index for the seventh consecutive year. It is no surprise to anyone that these seven years neatly coincide with the second Law and Justice party administration beginning in the year 2015.

This timely volume situates Poland's state media company TVP and its journalists as operating within legal, political and economic environments that have evolved dramatically since the 1989 fall of communism in Poland. Agnieszka Węglińska also draws parallels with two other formerly communist European states – the Czech Republic and Hungary – the latter of which has experienced an even more dramatic decline in press freedom under the Viktor Orbán administration. This short but succinct book proves itself to be a fascinating read for students and researchers of not just Polish journalism and media studies, but for the discipline at large.

In her introductory chapter, Węglińska does not explicitly reference the aforementioned, not-so-coincidental phenomenon as the *raison d'être* of her book. Instead, she focuses on how public service media (PSM) in Poland might be influenced by both the political class and the market. She provides her rationalisations for not examining Polish journalism broadly as an occupation nor PSM in Poland as a whole. Rather, she chooses to home in on the television journalists working at Poland's state media company TVP. She also makes it clear that the intent of her book is not necessarily to argue for or against the existence of PSM in Poland, but rather to critically examine how TVP journalists conduct their professional activities in the backdrop of their political environment, institutional structure, working conditions and corporate management. In addition, she lists five key research questions that she tries to answer in this volume, questions which address regulations, public objectives, new media, structural change, and brand identity. In this chapter, she also describes the structure of the book, which comprises of two parts with two chapters each. The first half of the book focuses on defining PSM, redefining

public objectives, placing public broadcasters within the framework of technological and thus market changes (p. 16). The parallels drawn with Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries are also included in this section of the book. The second half of the book dives into the issues of public television in Poland, tracing the evolution of Polish PSM from the Polish People's Republic (PRL) era onwards and includes the empirical analyses which form the basis of her research findings.

In Chapter 1, Węglińska introduces readers to basic concepts which are helpful for framing the discussion about PSM. Terms such as “public broadcaster”, “PSM” and “public interest” are reviewed and defined. She argues that paternalism *was* a key element of PSM, whereby media enlightened and shaped the recipient in the interests of the nation (p. 21). The emphasis here is placed in the past tense *was*, as this paternalistic approach to PSM, according to Węglińska, is no longer defensible after the dramatic political transformations and social changes in the 1980s which have redefined national interests and the needs of society. While European media of the past may be described as more pro-nationalist, and guardians of cultural, religious and national values, the situation today has become more complex with minority, pan-European, and even global interests coming to the fore (p. 22). She further discusses the motivations of PSM in different countries and cites Hallin and Mancini's (2004) typology of media systems, of which there are three: polarised pluralism, democratic corporatism, and the liberal model.<sup>1</sup> The chapter also addresses the issues of new media, new broadcasters and new audiences, emphasising that state control of public media has become impossible and undesirable for at least two reasons, the first being that technological advances far outpace the rate at which legislation and regulations can be passed and the second being the number of interest groups in modern societies indicate that no single group has the ability to influence public media monopolistically (pp. 27–28). She highlights other important issues in this chapter such as commercialisation, tabloidization and the mediatisation of politics (pp. 30–31). With the emergence of such contemporary media issues and others in recent years, I find it hard to disagree with Węglińska's call for redefinition of PSM as a concept.

The second chapter addresses the media model in post-communist countries. Even though the countries that make up the CEE bloc are culturally, religiously, economically and socially diverse, they share a common experience of communism (p. 48). In particular, the accession into the European Union (EU) for Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, has brought about varying outcomes for media reform in these countries. Distinctions are described in terms of a variety of factors, including model of journalism, political culture, freedom of speech, and more (p. 49). Węglińska contributes to a lengthy but important discussion about the development of PSM in the Czech Republic and Hungary in this chapter. Despite having common roots in post-communism, the media systems in these two countries have developed into very distinct national PSM systems (p. 72). This is a chapter that

1 D.C. Hallin, P. Mancini (2004). *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

I highly recommend for closer reading if you are interested in the media landscapes of CEE countries. Węglińska herself emphasises the importance of examining the experiences of other CEE countries to understand the context of Poland's media landscape evolution.

In Chapter 3, Węglińska begins with tracing the history of Poland from 1945 onwards vis-à-vis the media landscape. From the beginnings of the PRL era, mass media's goal was to build and consolidate socialist society, shaped according to the assumptions of Marxist-Leninism (p. 76). Media in the PRL belonged to the state and private media did not exist, at least on paper, with censorship being a characteristic element in this system (p. 77). Here, she points out that television was the most influential medium of real socialism and a powerful propagandistic tool during the 37 years PRL was in existence. She also describes the changes that occurred in the 1980s, with martial law enacted in 1981, the emergence of independent radio stations jamming television frequencies in defiance of the state, the growing popularity of satellite television, and the 1987 Cinematography Act which afforded increased freedoms for private companies to create and distribute films. When communism ended in 1989, the media landscape in Poland went through profound changes in tandem with political, economic and social change. The fascinating discussion in this chapter also includes amendments to the Broadcasting Act made in the nineties, the noughties and into the 2010s, which reflect the deepening politicisation and instrumentalization of TVP (p. 108). Closing this chapter, she opines that the decentralisation of public media in Poland into regional entities as well as the digitalisation of media may prove to be disadvantageous for older audiences, a problem that I have seen also recurs in other sectors of public services.

The fourth chapter finally addresses the main goal of Węglińska's book, that is, her qualitative research involving in-depth interviews with 44 TVP journalists. The methodology is outlined in great detail, which is incredibly useful for students and researchers wishing to carry out similar studies (p. 113–116). In reporting her findings, Węglińska generates ten thematic categories using grounded theory and quotes a good number of respondents under each of these categories. These categories have lifted the curtain on what happens on the inside of TVP and some of the quotes read like a political thriller, e.g.:

I had prepared some material in which some local officials, connected to the opposition, appeared. They cut this fragment and told me I wasn't allowed to show it. It was a neutral news report about Easter breakfast tables, and we are being closely monitored on social media by the TVP authorities. I had such a case. I removed all content on my private Facebook account, as it was politically unacceptable for the TVP authorities. It was nothing controversial; some discussion with friends, jokes (p. 156).

By the end, she sympathises with her respondents, who despite their thoughtfulness and creative spirit, are hindered by deep structural problems at the expense of the public good.

In summary, “Public Television in Poland: Political Pressure and Public Service Media in a Post-communist Country” serves as an excellent starting point for media studies students and scholars who wish to obtain a deep understanding of PSM in a post-communist country like Poland. The chapters flow smoothly into each other, building tight arguments along the way and culminating with a gripping insight into the perspectives of TVP journalists, who are not a monolithic group of subservient workers in service of the state, despite what it may seem to an outsider like myself. The themes and chapters covered in this volume, while forming a great, coherent picture of Polish media, can also be enjoyed in smaller doses as the individual chapters hold their ground well on their own. As an occasional viewer of TVP programmes, I would have appreciated a more detailed discussion about TVP programming and editorial choices. However, I recognise that the goal of this book is to address the evolving media landscape in Poland as well as the myriad of structural challenges faced by the journalists working in TVP. This opportune and through-provoking volume will nonetheless prove itself valuable to both academic and non-academic readers in the challenging times that we live in.

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