




## The Bulgarian Media System after 1989: Restructuring in Three Directions

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*The article diagnoses the macro processes in the post-communist transformation of the Bulgarian media system. Three major directions of media restructuring are presented. The first main course of development refers to the adoption of new democratic standards. Both the positive achievements and the flaws of democratization are discussed; attention is paid to the relationship between media and civil society. The second important direction of restructuring is presented as acceptance of foreign influences. The text illustrates the role of international capital for the building up of the local media market. The third macro phenomenon in the post-1989 media transformation is structural expansion with new media channels and technologies. The spread of the Internet is viewed as part of the unprecedented change in the media system. In a next step, the article comments on the intersections between these three directions with a focus on the democratization factor. It is argued that the transformation has been an uneven process with serious challenges still to be overcome.*



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### **The First Direction: Towards the Values of Democracy**

The logic of the post-1989 events established the pursuit of democracy as the highest socio-political priority in the country. The ambition was declared in the *National Agreement on Guaranteeing the Peaceful Development of the Transition Toward a Democratic Political System* (signed at the Bulgaria's National Roundtable Talks, March 1990) and legitimized in the new Constitution (July 1991). The media system in the country faced the necessity of an overall restructuring in accordance with the newly postulated social values paradigm.

Since then, the adoption of democratic standards in the media sector has covered a set of key markers, such as:

- ◆ validation of freedom of the media as a constitutional principle (“The press and the other media for mass information are free and are not subject to censorship”, article 40, paragraph 1, Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria);
- ◆ obliteration of the centralized political control over media contents;
- ◆ spread of private media ownership;
- ◆ formal building up of an environment of pluralism and competition on the basis of the dramatic proliferation of the number of media outlets.

Along with these primary and unquestionable indications of change, one can also find examples in the twenty-year-long history of media transformation of media-related civic structures and practices which are, more or less, symptomatic of the democratization of the public sphere in the country. Thus




the media are no longer an inevitable extension of an unarguable state ideology but have instead become a target for criticism in scientific and public discourses. Other exemplary cases are to be found in the formation and consolidation of the NGO sector, in media fights for autonomy, and in the emergence of civic activities by the media themselves.

The newly founded NGOs, dealing with professional, legal and ethical problems in the media sector, have played a significant role in the promotion of democratic and civil society ideals. The appearance of specialized non-governmental institutions dates back to the second half of the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> At the core of their mission statements lay the belief that media and journalism should work for the development of civil society in the country, ‘democracy’ and ‘civil society’ being understood as synonymous goals. The first media-related NGOs were centred upon values and goals such as defence of freedom of speech, promotion of media independence and pluralism, introduction of high professional and ethical standards in journalism. Correspondingly, projects focused on seminars and training courses for journalists, discussions on media legislation, campaigns for ethnic tolerance in media discourse, translation and publishing of democracy-and-media-related literature. A specific feature of the Bulgarian NGOs in the realm of media and journalism is their close relationship with the academic field. A major part of the non-governmental centres were set up and/or used as research environments by university professors. Another aspect of the NGO-sector is the prevalence of short-term initiatives rather than long-lasting projects. Sustainable programs could hardly be maintained due to the NGOs’ dependence on external financial support. However, despite the financial limits, these pioneering institutions had a specific long-term impact on the public realm. The very setting up of such organizations and the corresponding promotion of the rhetoric and apparatus of democracy and civil society is already a foundation for the development of a new civic culture.

In the post-1989 history one can also find examples of media professionals safeguarding their autonomy through the use of civil society instruments. In 2001, for instance, protests took place at the state-owned Bulgarian National Radio (BNR) against the newly appointed director of the institution. The appointment was conducted by the broadcasting regulator (National Council for Radio and Television) and was considered as a severe political interference in the work of BNR. The employees questioned the professional competence of the new director and relentlessly protested against having him in charge. Such

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<sup>1</sup> Among the most popular organizations are: Centre for Independent Journalism, founded in 1996; The Association of Bulgarian Broadcasters, set up in 1997; Bulgarian Media Coalition, which started in 1997-1998 as a pressure group campaigning for media legislation; Media Development Centre, established in 1998; Association Investigative Journalists, registered in 2000; The Union of Publishers on Bulgaria, founded in 2000. Significant projects aimed at the democratization of the media in the country have been initiated also by organizations with a wider area of activities, such as ACCESS-Sofia Foundation, Open Society Institute, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, Konrad Adenauer Foundation and others.



an act of resistance could not have happened in the previous authoritarian regime, thus being a sign for a structurally different environment.

Another aspect of the development of civil society initiatives relates to the media attempting to raise public awareness of civic causes. Media have supported charity campaigns in favour of disadvantaged children, as well as the 'No to the Road War' campaign for safe driving (which however has not cured local drivers of their dangerous habits). A particularly important national campaign was the 'You are not alone' initiative which took place in 2007 and insisted on freedom for the Bulgarian nurses who had been imprisoned in Libya for eight years (accused for deliberately infecting children with HIV) and sentenced to death by a Libyan court. The campaign was launched by a couple of media outlets (*Darik* Radio, *Standard Daily*, and *bTV*) but was additionally supported by public institutions and easily gained national and international recognition. Along with the positive aspects though, such media-initiated campaigns have entailed certain 'side effects'. The new social role of the media has been played on a strongly commercialized basis. It is hardly a coincidence that campaigns of the above-mentioned kind started to gain popularity and increased visibility in the years after 2000 when media competition intensified. The commercialization factor has often resulted in the use of populism, entertainment of questionable quality and emphasized depiction of catastrophic scenes as a means of attracting public attention. In their efforts to reach the audience, the media have relied mostly on emotional appeals rather than on stimulating social discussions on the issues addressed. Needless to say, such a strategy can hardly foster long-lasting civic habits of identifying the roots of social problems.

As a whole, along with the positive new structural acquisitions, the transformation developments have been accompanied by a number of deficiencies. The very character of the processes can be evaluated as highly contradictory. On the one hand, there is the popular notion that among all institutions in the country the media system has been most adequately inscribed in the democratization processes (Petev & Raycheva 1999). Together with this assessment, though, there are important negative phenomena that have shaped the contours of the period. The reforms in the broadcasting sector, for instance, took place at a very slow pace resulting in almost ten-year-long media deregulation process. In addition, the state-owned public service broadcasters have been openly criticized for being pro-governmental and thus for not adhering to public service standards. Another problem relates to the functioning of the media market. Ever since the first half of the 1990s, transparency in media funding has not been fully achieved. The appearance of the first private media was largely accompanied by a lack of lucidity regarding the sources of invested capital. Thus an unhealthy situation of pseudo-market economy was created (Spasov 2000: 34). A most recent example refers to the currently emerging local media giant New Bulgarian Media Group which is buying up print and broadcast media with enviable ease. However, the origin of



the money spent by company owner Irena Krasteva remains uncertain and inspires various speculations about possible business and political influences (cf. Dichev 2009). Media pluralism is another significant issue when it comes to assessment of democratic developments. There has been a sharp discrepancy between the quantitative media diversity indicators and the actual level of media pluralism. During the years immediately after 1989 there was a remarkable proliferation in the number of newly founded media entities. At the same time, however, whole social groups were deprived of information offers (cf. Alfandari 1995) and the overall media landscape was dominated by 'low' quality contents (cf. Spassov 2005). As a result, instead of effective diversity of content on a large scale, there are structural gaps and structural polarization that characterize the media in the country. After all, the market demand excessively dominates over the social one, the media being much more successful in satisfying the average consumer tastes rather than nurturing civil consciousness.


An important aspect of the course of democratization in Bulgaria is the exclusion of civil society from the media regulation process. Civil organizations have taken part neither in regulatory bodies nor in policy making. The nine members of the Council for Electronic Media (the main regulators, formerly National Council for Radio and Television) are appointed by the parliament and the president only. There are no quotas for any social organizations, and although this has long been debated as a deficiency, no legislation amendments have been implemented. Dimitrov explains the failure of those advocating for a new public regulator with the general lack of trust towards social institutions<sup>2</sup>, with the result that the state's position as the only legitimate mediator is being strengthened (2000: 40). In the other zone of exclusion, the media legislation, there have been efforts of civic pressure particularly by one of the most active actors, the Bulgarian Media Coalition. In 2004 the coalition drafted a new media law bill with the involvement of experts and media professionals. The bill implied the ambition of introducing the civil sector into the regulation process. Eventually, however, the efforts proved unfruitful and even led to heavy conflicts within the organization and to the disaffiliation of one of the members, the Union of Bulgarian Journalists.

After Bulgaria joined the European Union in 2007 new NGOs came to existence with the goal to stimulate positive reforms in the media sector. An example of such a second-wave organization is Foundation Media Democracy.<sup>3</sup> Within its

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<sup>2</sup> One of the post-1989 phenomena points to the fights for authenticity among identical organizations. The problem has been especially acute in the sphere of religion, the synod being split into two rival fractions.

<sup>3</sup> It was established in 2007 and its present focus of interest is the realization of an in-depth media monitoring project. Another recently launched initiative is Media Program South East Europe by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation - the program started in 2007, its office is located in Sofia.



Media Monitoring Lab<sup>4</sup> the foundation is implementing an independent analysis of the current public sphere developments in the context of the 2009 National and European Parliament elections. According to the findings, the state of media democratization in the country is rather discouraging: still non-transparent structures of media ownership; extreme levels of populism in the interconnected media and political discourses; blurred boundaries between journalistic and PR practices; marginalization of quality journalism; general tabloidization of the public sphere; immature watchdog functions of the mainstream media; the media giving publicity to criminal voices, etc.<sup>5</sup> The ultimate goal of the project is to draw wide public attention to the diagnosed problems and to use the findings as an instrument for civic pressure on the media sector. Applied mechanisms involve analysis production and public presentations of expert assessments on a monthly basis for a period of one year. The principles that underlie the philosophy of this endeavour are above all transparency and effective use of expert knowledge for triggering the critical self-reflexivity of the media. The project continues the tradition of solid academic involvement in such kind of NGOs, its members being university professors, doctoral and undergraduate students in the fields of sociology, media and cultural studies. But what is more important is the reality that motivates such an initiative - namely a public sphere rich in negative phenomena.

The ambiguous character of the transformation's achievements implies that the adoption of democratic standards has been done selectively, some values being prioritized over others. The main choice, says Dimitrov (2000), has been between freedom, on the one hand, and equality, on the other. The democratic paradigm of freedom (of communication) has played a greater role than the principle of equality (of access to information; adequate media coverage of the various groups within society; inclusion of alternative viewpoints). Respectively, liberalization of the market has been a more explicit goal than public regulation, commercialization being the most undeniable result of the developments.

On evaluating the degree of the adoption of democratic values one should not forget that democratization itself is an infinite process. The very notion of democracy does not impose a final horizon or perfect models. As John Keane puts it, '[the] fight for democratic media is an ongoing project without ultimate solutions' (1999: 11). In this sense, is it appropriate to interpret the flaws within the media field as an inevitable aspect of the democratic state? The answer is rather pessimistic - the Bulgarian structural media imperfections can hardly fit into such an interpretative frame. After all, basic principles of

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<sup>4</sup> The project is financially supported by the Trust for Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe as well as by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

<sup>5</sup> A growing archive of expert writings is available in Bulgarian on the website of Foundation Media Democracy ([www.fmd.bg](http://www.fmd.bg)).




democracy such as transparency and pluralism remain undeveloped. This means that an effectively functioning democratic media system is still to be reached.

### **The Second Direction: Opening the Boundaries**

A second, yet related, course in the media sector development is manifested as acceptance of foreign influences and standards. Democratization itself is understood as introduction and adoption of western models and practices. An indicative example refers back to 1990 when the first legislative efforts for the new state broadcasting regulation rules were made. At that time support was mainly searched for among European legislative practices (Nikolova 2006: 369). The first private radio stations to be licensed were the foreign *The Voice of America*, *BBC*, *Free Europe*, *Deutsche Welle* (Petev & Raycheva 1999: 190).

The direct influx of foreign investments has been a key factor in the post-communist media system restructuring. The end of the Cold War together with the subsequent global transfer of capital put the Central and East European countries, including Bulgaria, in a situation of a complex mixture of tendencies - consolidation of democracy and at the same time exposure to the processes of globalization. This situation has turned out to be profitable in two ways - the foreign investors have expanded their business while the local markets have enjoyed real revival due to the flow of investments. The brightest examples of such penetration of foreign resources into the Bulgarian media realm are the companies of WAZ and News Corporation which proved to be players of major importance with permanent leading positions in the press and the television sector respectively.

Since 2000 there has been a boost in foreign investments. The broadcast industry has been largely shaped by the impact of a few international media groups - News Corporation, Antena Group, Emmis Communications, Communicorp Group, Apace Media, SBS Broadcasting Group (the latter acquired by ProSieben in 2008 with the ambition for a pan-European media company). They have all caused dynamics in the market resulting in significant mergers. Indicatively, in the capital city of Sofia twenty radio stations are the property of four international companies. In the summer of 2008 there were two dramatic changes in the TV sector, both of them caused namely by foreign corporations. First, the American-based Central European Media Enterprises (CME) entered the local market by acquiring two television channels (*Ring TV* and *TV2*) and a radio station (*Mila*). Also, the second leading national television broadcaster, *Nova television*, was sold by the Greek Antena to the Swedish Modern Times Group (MTG), the latter being also the owner of several cable TV channels. In addition, the leading television station in the country, *bTV*, owned by News Corporation, is expected to be sold, most probably to another giant of foreign origin. International capital is not simply playing a role on the local scene but is conducting the most impressive upheavals in the market.



The rise of foreign participation in the Bulgarian media sector has been provoked by the rise of local advertising revenues. The new companies in the market have sought profits through the acquisition of working stations or through the development of new brands.<sup>6</sup> Along with the obvious economic aspects, the presence of foreign investors in the country has entailed expectations they will bring up beneficial quality models and expand the diversity within the local media sphere. As regards the introduction of better professional standards, the evaluations are usually positive (Cheshmedzhieva 2007; Antonova 2006).<sup>7</sup> The offered variety, however, remains concentrated in the frames of entertainment formats. The situation in the radio sector is quite emblematic. Let us name just two indicative examples of foreign actors' contribution to the monotony on air: the transformation of the only one sports radio station (*Radio Gong*) into a music format station after it was sold to Communicorp Group and Emmis' decision to turn the news format *Info Radio* into a classical rock station. At present there is a dramatic domination of music format radio offers.

In the past few years the inflow of foreign capital has touched the press market as well. Investments have been concentrated in the magazines segment because of the boost in advertising revenues in the sector. The newly emerging titles, again, gravitate predominantly towards entertainment contents and popular genres.

### **The Third Direction: Expanding the Field**


The third main direction is the structural expansion with new media channels and technologies. In the early 1990s the appearance of the first cable operators broadened the sub-system of television. Due to the lack of precise legislative rules and adequate reforms in terrestrial broadcasting, cable television networks were quickly built up as an alternative field for private enterprise. This resulted in the de-monopolization of the state broadcaster.

On a macro level, the major expansion of the media sphere is above all connected with the spread of the Internet. The infrastructural development of computer mediated communication in the country started before the emblematic 1989 (Spasov 2004), but the core activities leading to the popularization of the Internet took place in the 1990s. The first commercial

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<sup>6</sup> An intriguing example of the latter is the launching of the only all-Bulgarian-music radio station namely by a foreign company: BG Radio established in 2001 by Metromedia, and sold to Communicorp Group in 2004. According to the station's self-presentation, its leading goal is 'to support the contemporary development of culture and music in Bulgaria' (see [http://www.bgradio.net/about\\_us.html](http://www.bgradio.net/about_us.html)).

<sup>7</sup> The best example is *bTV*, the first private national television operator. It developed an American-like television model which subsequently turned out to be the most successful enterprise in the Bulgarian television sector.



provision of Internet services was realized in 1991. The mid-1990s marked a visible growth in the number of providers. Till the end of the decade the ‘face’ of the Internet in Bulgaria attained greater substance: the first specialized non-governmental structures were launched (BAIT, BAI, Internet Society); the first professional exhibitions (BAIT Expo, Internet Expo), seminars, conferences, and competitions (BG Site) were organized. At the same time the process of content generation accelerated - the first web portals were launched (*Gyuvetch* in 1997, *Dir.bg* in 1998) as well as the first online versions of print media (*Pari* in 1995).

In the past few years the access to the Web has been significantly improved. The initially popular low-quality dial-up has been replaced by cable and LAN networks, and by ADSL. At the same time the price for the services has been reduced. As a result, the number of users is constantly growing. In August 2000 the usage equalled 7.8% of the adult population, and in January 2009 it was 38%.<sup>8</sup> A parallel tendency is the domestication of the usage. In 2000 the most widespread access points were Internet cafés and clubs (47.4%), while today the Internet is accessed mostly from home (75%).<sup>9</sup>

Another aspect of the deepening importance of the Internet is its impact on traditional media. A direct example of this influence is the wide presence of conventional media online. According to the *Gyuvetch* portal statistics, there are 154 websites of newspapers and 134 of magazines. An interesting observation is that the largest-circulation titles do not provide the best availability on the Web. The most popular dailies, *Dnevna Troud* and *24 Chassa*, went online comparatively late (in 2004), while the most read weeklies have not launched online versions to date. In contrast, the online editions of the dailies *Dnevnik* and *Sega* (with only 4.5% and 3.6% readership share respectively) and the weekly *Capital* (with a national readership share of 3.3%)<sup>10</sup> have been enjoying a steady popularity online for years. The lack of reciprocity between online and offline positions is not applicable as regards the most important broadcasters, all of them providing effective availability online. *bTV* was the first television channel (2008) to maintain a video archive and real time video streaming on its website and thus to actually expand its audience reach.


The growing use of Internet-like interactive practices by the traditional media is an additional characteristic phenomenon. Illustrations can be found in entertainment genres (a typical example being the growing number of reality programs), but also in attempts to trigger ‘citizen journalism’ - for instance the

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<sup>8</sup> See *Alpha Research* survey, available at <http://www.aresearch.org/internet/1135.html>, <http://www.aresearch.org/internet.html> [Accessed 20 April 2009].

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> *Alpha Research* survey, April 2008, available at: [http://www.aresearch.org/print\\_media.html](http://www.aresearch.org/print_media.html) [Accessed 20 April 2009].



‘Six Million Reporters’ initiative of the national *Nova television*<sup>11</sup> or the ‘I, Reporter’ feature of *bTV*. Of course, the spread of new media technologies, the process of media convergence, the use of new hybrid formats and the overall media interactivity are not exclusively local but global trends. What complicates the situation in East European Bulgaria though is the multi-layeredness of the transformation the media system in the country has been going through.

## Intersections


The herein outlined key directions in the coordinate system of the Bulgarian media in transition are to serve as a comprehensible first-step overview of what is in fact a complicated fusion of processes taking place during a dynamic period of twenty years. Framing the macro dimensions of the media system transformation allows, in a next step, the raising of further research questions about the crossing points between these general tendencies. The central perspective on which the present text accentuates is the democratization factor.

## Democratization and foreign influences

In the Cold War era before 1989, the ‘West’ circulated as an image of great significance for the Bulgarians - it was either given excessively negative attributes in official propaganda or was idealized in ‘dissident’ discourse as a reference point for what democracy, civic liberties and human rights are (Daskalov 1998: 48). After 1989, it was the positive image which gained greater popularity, the West being conceived as the socio-political system Bulgaria needed to catch up with. This conviction was widespread in political, media and everyday discourses. As regards the transformation of the media environment, the understanding that the progress to democracy means westernization or Europeanization is particularly evident in the case of the media-related NGOs acting as civil society agents. ‘Harmonization with democratic/European/Western European standards’ is a most recurrent argumentation one can distinguish in NGOs’ statements. What is more, the relevant non-governmental centres in the country have intensively cooperated with and relied on financial support from foreign partners. The USA, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden are among the countries where donors of media projects originate from, Germany and the USA forming the two major spheres of influence. Logically enough, the sources of financial aid act also as disseminators of values, practices and norms.

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<sup>11</sup> Through the call „Six million reporters... You are one of them! Send your piece of news to Nova TV and let us see the world through your eyes” the broadcaster offers the audience the chance to generate news in a user-friendly procedure, available at the station’s website. See [http://ntv.bg/call\\_back/subscribe.php](http://ntv.bg/call_back/subscribe.php) [Accessed 20 April 2009].



The mimetic approach to democracy entails important questions and inevitable comparisons. It is intriguing, for example, whether the acceptance of western norms result in a susceptibility to the weaknesses of western public spheres. As the metaphor of ontogenesis introduced by Jakubowicz suggest, the transplantation of institutions copied from Western patterns in Central and Eastern European countries leads to the repetition of experiences and mistakes the Western European countries have already gone through (Jakubowicz 2008). Furthermore, the recurrence of common phenomena is accelerated by the globalization processes which take place simultaneously with the transformation ones. In fact, one can easily point to symptomatic problems relevant both for Bulgaria and the developed western democracies. Let us just name a few of them: tension between the market principles and the public functions of the media; over-commercialization and prevalence of entertainment and infotainment contents; mediatisation of politics; political communication reduced to show practices. Such parallels actually suggest that the building up of a democratic media system in Bulgaria comprises a double set of problems. The hardships of the transition itself are accompanied by destabilization in the exemplary democratic systems.<sup>12</sup>


When speaking of media commercialization and foreign influences, it should be highlighted that the penetration of foreign capital into the local scene is explicitly in favour of the market demand for media development. It is clearly visible in what was already observed as the prevalent launching of profitable entertainment formats in recent years when a speeded up liberalization of the Bulgarian media sector took place.

Another comparison between the Bulgarian and the western public realms can be derived from the crash of the political euphoria in the country combined with the intensified embracing of commercial media formats. The similarity lies in the potential of popular media genres to provoke interest, participation and exchange of opinions on a greater scale than political parties' potency to trigger citizens' engagement as voting and interest in rational debates. The example that is most often referred to is the Big Brother show.<sup>13</sup> In the current context of the Bulgarian media, political communication is associated with phenomena such as show-populism (a political leader does not need to motivate his/her followers through traditional argumentation techniques but through the demonstrations of ordinary-people-like characteristics, i.e. the 'I am like you, I am one of you' message), soap-opera-like contests among the leading politicians (diversity of intrigues and plots included), mobile-phones-stimulated fan democracy (participation through text messaging) (Kabakchieva 2009). Campaigning for the July 2009 National Parliament elections has reached the highest climax so far in the adoption of image making and political

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<sup>12</sup> An indication for the latter are the existing debates about the stagnation of western democracies (cf. Dahlgren, 2004: 13).

<sup>13</sup> See Liesbet van Zoonen's reflections (2004) on fan communities and fan democracy.




marketing practices dressed up in entertainment genres and in local versions of global reality formats - at the peak of the campaign we watched the prime minister and his main rival (the mayor of the capital) answering questions in *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* and we had already watched the former supporting his girlfriend in *Dancing Stars* while the latter was a guest star in a TV series, the minister of education singing in *Music Idol*, an ex-prime minister and current opposition leader demonstrating yoga postures in a TV weekly show, another party leader participating in *VIP Big Brother*, etc. As a most striking trend in current media coverage of politics, show representations prevail over discursive debates in an attractive confrontation of images but not of ideas. It is the symbiosis of political populism and tabloid media that takes advantage of the situation.

### **Democratization meets an expanding media system**

A different intersection of tendencies affects the structural expansion of the media field and the problem of rights and freedoms as derivatives of democratic values. In this respect, the increase of mass communication channels on the basis of the unregulated arrival of private broadcasters in the 1990s stands as a crucial period in contemporary media history in Bulgaria. In that time of spontaneous entrepreneurship, de-monopolization of state media was carried out in a situation of essential legislative gaps and breaches of existing legislative rules, such as the Intellectual Property Act. Piracy was motivated and even excused on the basis of the ever-pervasive proclamation of freedom of speech and access to information rights as an indispensable part of the democratic platform. Indicatively, every attempt at imposing sanctions on the violators has been interpreted as a threat to freedom of the media and to democracy in general (Dimitrova 2000).

The Internet and its democratic potential constitute another key zone of intersections. It is nowadays clear that its democratic potential does not fulfil the initial techno utopian dream of new communication technologies acting as a magic remedy against all flaws of democracy and consumerism. Instead, the positive sides of computer mediated communication should better be associated with a more moderate conception that the Internet does provide enlarged possibilities for access to knowledge and information, for self-expression and exchange of opinions, for transfer of critical comments and ideas, for participation in debates, for improved visibility of marginal voices and social groups.

In this context, a significant democratic potential can be sought especially in the sub-sphere of political blogging as a platform for uncensored, self-institutionalized and non-hierarchical citizen 'journalism' acting as an alternative of the widely discredited traditional mainstream media. As examined in recent analyses on the topic, the most popular Bulgarian bloggers develop stronger and stronger self-confidence for being a new generation of



active and engaged citizens (Neykova 2009). Most commonly, blogging practices are oriented towards anti-governmental oppositional rhetoric through the means of criticism, grotesque and sarcasm.

Social networking is another trendy web-based instrument for the stimulation of civic activities. Although traditional politicians in Bulgaria hardly use online social networks as a political tool, such platforms turn out to be an appealing arena for the grass-root dissemination of social and political ideas and for young activists' communication manoeuvres in search of reputation for new political movements (cf. for example the analysis on the local usage of Facebook by Aleksandrova 2009). In the particular case of video social networks, these are the most recent Bulgarian examples of how such sites can get ahead of leading broadcasters and turn into primary media - both in terms of promptness and pluralism - when it comes to information on social protests. In this context however, there is also evidence of how civic energy can be dissolved into technology itself - when reporting on protests is prioritized over the very act of protesting (Rone 2009). A typical illustration in this sense is the January 2009 protest of young people in the country - there were more people protesting online than in front of the Parliament.


On referring to the democratic potential of the Internet, it should not be neglected though that the actual utilization of the new media strengths requires the construction of a corresponding (legislative and technological) infrastructure. In this sense, positive macro developments in Bulgaria include the adoption of a governmental Strategy for the Development of Information Society (1999), the E-document and E-signature Law (2001), the National Strategy for The Adoption of ICTs in Bulgarian Schools (2005), and the E-Government platform (2007). However, the basic element - access to the Internet - remains underdeveloped. Even though the acceleration in the spread of the Internet is undeniable, at present not even half of the population is online. There are still many villages deprived of access at affordable cost.<sup>14</sup> The structural aspects of Internet usage are up till now indicative of certain limitations. The dominating user profile is one of elitist characteristics: university graduates, with incomes above the average for the country, in the liberal professions, of young age (18-30), with the Internet being accessed mostly in the capital and the big cities.<sup>15</sup>

A newly occurring meeting point of democratization and media system enlargement relates to the digital future of broadcasting. The transformation from the old analogue infrastructure to the digital one proves to be a project with political implications. The merging of computing, telecommunications and

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<sup>14</sup> Access to the Internet via mobile phones is virtually available at every point within the mobile operators' networks. However, the service is still comparatively expensive and not widely used.

<sup>15</sup> See *Alpha Research* survey, January 2009, available at: <http://www.aresearch.org/internet.html> [Accessed 20 April 2009].



broadcasting into new infrastructural multiplexes involves the preparation of a set of regulatory tools. The currently introduced legislative amendments are surrounded by suspicions that the regulations are in favour of certain media groups close to the ex-government of socialist Sergey Stanishev and that the future license holders are already presupposed. There are experts and journalists calling the process a severe violation of democratic and competition principles and sceptically questioning the final achievements of the past twenty years of transition (cf. Antonova 2009). The digitalization process will however be finalized by the newly formed government (July 2009) of the centre-right GERB party which entails expectations for new legislative amendments and new evaluations to come.


## Conclusion

The restructuring of the post-communist Bulgarian media system is neither a simple process, nor a single one. Even though the present study does not focus on all details of the transformation period, the presented three-pillar research scheme is by itself an analytical assessment of the period and an extraction of its core meanings. What can be generalized from the latter is the unevenness of the transformation. The media system today differs significantly from its state in the early 1990s, but, on a macro level, the pace of reforms has been comparatively slow.

A key challenge has been the lack of balance in the pursued transformation goals. The market demand has greatly dominated over the social one, commercialization of the media being the most obvious achievement of the transition. Regardless of the problems of the media market, namely its deficit of transparency, media content is largely treated as a commodity and rarely as a public service. To describe this situation in other words, the ideological media of the previous communist regime are now replaced by profit seeking media outlets. The transformation of the media into a business has been considerably accelerated by the active role of transnational investments.

As it turns out, foreign investments travel faster than democratic values through the open boundaries of the media system. This, too, can be interpreted as a matter of priorities. The adopted mimetic approach in the transformation process implies the principle of market competition as well as many other core principles of democracy and civil society. The formation of an effective media-supported civic culture nevertheless lacks far behind the establishment of a media market. This negative tendency is at the same time a generator of hopes - civil society agents have important missions to eventually achieve.

Finally, a source of positive expectations is the spread of new media technologies. The evolution of the Internet is usually examined separately and not as part of the post-communist media restructuring. The two processes,



however, are not simply parallel in terms of time but interrelated in the larger scale process of media system change. The new media technologies have undoubtedly contributed to the expansion of communication channels and, when it comes to democratization, to the creation of new areas for debate and mobilization for civic actions. To function as an alternative to the increasingly commercialized mainstream media is perhaps the most serious potential of the new information technologies. There remains the hope that there will be adequate public determination to realize this potential.

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