



The role of the media as an instrument of cultural policy, an inter-level facilitator and image promoter: mapping out key issues to be addressed in South East Europe

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Introduction

Before discussing the role of the media as an instrument of cultural policy, it should be noted that, broadly speaking, the relationship between culture and the media is one of inclusion. Culture, defined in the widest sense, incorporates all ‘articulated symbolic practices’ (hence a culture of dressing or a culture of everyday life). Contemporary theory (primarily in the field of cultural studies) puts forward a *social* definition of culture, as the ‘description of a separate way of life in which specific meanings and values are not only expressed in the arts and education, but also in institutions and everyday behaviour’ (Williams, 1965:58). In this sense, culture also incorporates the media: the media are a particular form of cultural practice, which have experienced a remarkable development in contemporary society, assuming an increasingly large number of active social roles.

On the other hand, when speaking of cultural policy that focuses on specific areas of culture (among them basic cultural heritage, cultural activity, the culture industry), the media become a *mediator* between—to use the traditional terms—culture and society, meaning that they mediate in a process of conveying cultural products from the producers to the consumers. In this capacity, the media are always, even implicitly, instruments of cultural policy. The task of formulating cultural policy would then involve a clarification of the role of the media in promoting the objectives of that cultural policy.

Media and Cultural Policy: Central Issues

The first set of problems stems from the general relationship between policy—and thus cultural policy as well—and the media. Although it is impossible to provide a uniform description of the status of the media in transition countries, certain common features become apparent. There are two key issues in this field: the issue of media ownership (private or public/state) and, in the case of state ownership, the official management structures and the practical ways in which political forces influence the media.

* This study is part of a series of methodological research on current issues of cultural policy in South East Europe which the *Policies for Culture* programme (managed by European Cultural Foundation, Amsterdam & ECUMEST Association, Bucharest) has been commissioning to various experts of its regional network between 2002 and 2003. The papers aim to identify critical areas and key topics of cultural policy that need to be addressed by research, education and other ways of involvement and support in the region.

In all cases, governments must:

- a) aspire to protect ‘democratic society from excessive concentrations of private media ownership’ (Mundy, 2000:89);
- b) secure programming standards and diversity of opinion in the public media (state-owned radio and television, state-owned press);
- c) safeguard the ‘right of public access’ to national, cultural and linguistic minorities;
- d) resist pressures for the exclusive commercialisation of cultural products.

The majority of these tasks (b, and in particular, c and d) are normally the direct responsibility of the national Ministry of Culture. As a specific example, I note the new law on public-owned radio and television, drafted by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Croatia in 2002, as well as a series of successful measures it launched with the purpose of protecting non-profit cultural activities (e.g. publishing).

The second set of problems stems from the types of media and their diverse roles. When cultural policy is used to set down measures in relation to the media, it must be done on the basis of an analysis (however simple) of the media situation in a given country (or region). Such an analysis of types of media includes the following elements:

- a) question of ownership (private, public, mixed);
- b) range and audience (national, regional, local levels); percentage of viewers, listeners, readers;
- c) type of media (broadcasting: television, radio; the press; new technologies);
- d) degree of specialisation (news and general media; media specialising in culture or specific fields of culture).

A sticking-point in formulating a cultural policy of conduct towards the media is the obvious gaping chasm between the two ‘types’ of media: those which have high-circulation (a large number of viewers/listeners) but are not primarily interested in culture, and those which have low-circulation (a small audience/readership) but higher standards and more exacting criteria in portraying cultural themes. The principal characteristic of high-circulation media is their treatment of culture as a separate field, as something of a ‘ghetto’, dedicating separate broadcasts or special sections to it. These contributions (broadcasts or printed features) are regularly placed at the periphery of central topics (with precedence over sport and weather reports, but second to local crime, tabloidesque news and ‘human interest’ pieces), and according to surveys of viewers/readers they have a much lower priority than central news broadcasts. Specialised broadcasts on television dealing with culture and the arts (fine arts, literature, and so forth) are normally at the bottom of the viewer ratings and are scheduled in unattractive time-slots: either early in the afternoon, combined with educational broadcasts, or late at night. In my opinion, the fundamental reason for this in transition countries is that, lacking a comprehensive cultural policy and cultural development strategy during the 1990s, these countries inherited the practice of treating culture as something ‘separate’ from the social context, and ‘above’ it. Although this separation is often explained as ‘elitism’, as a sign of ‘high culture’, I believe that it brought about a series of negative consequences, the most fundamental of which, bases cultural practice on the principle of exclusion (‘cultural is for the above average’) rather than inclusion (‘let’s secure the conditions for transmitting culture to the largest possible number of people’). The political heritage of transitional countries, as typically centralised states, includes the notion of culture as an activity representing the state. In media practice, this means that the major media promote for the most part those cultural activities which directly represent the state, most often on the back of

the idea of national cultural identity: staging historical themes in which the national and cultural are unified, representative exhibitions, neo-conservatism, favouring a concern for heritage over the promotion of contemporary cultural products.

Objectives of Cultural Policy Toward the Media

When considering the relationship between cultural policy and the media, the following primary themes should be taken into account:

- a) bridging the gap between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, between elite and pop culture;
- b) creating a strategy of media openness to new segments of the public rather than closing in to narrow specialist groups (which, according to available data, means small groups of 300 to 500 readers of arts journals in transition countries);
- c) creating a strategy of improved criteria and raised standards in promoting cultural content in high-circulation media and news broadcasts which include culture reports;
- d) supporting cultural projects which have no recognisable commercial value; refusing to engage in futile competitions with the commercial market;
- e) promoting a *dimension of the new* in culture in relation to existing culture.

Cultural Administration and Cultural Institutions in relation to the Media

Administration in the field of culture in transition countries (at national and local levels and in individual cultural institutions) does not make use of professionally trained staff, qualified to communicate with the media. While a feature of political structures is that they are, in principle, still closed to the media, showing a certain apprehension and passivity towards them, cultural institutions generally employ inadequately trained staff who simultaneously perform marketing, advertising and public relations functions. Cultural policy vis-à-vis the media should be based primarily on the perception that the media are *allies* in the promotion of cultural values and objectives, and that those working in the cultural field should have a proactive stance toward the media—in short that they should *offer* content to the media on a continual basis for promotion, in a form which the media can *understand*, and in which they can *convey* the message as mediators. Cultural administration charged with the task of communicating with the media must learn the language of the media (media discourse) and their rules of behaviour, rather than remain closed to the media on the feeble pretext that the media are ‘politicised’, ‘scandalous’ or ‘kitschy’. Whatever the character of the media in a given area, cultural administration at the municipal, regional or national level cannot directly influence their change (the idea of so-called ‘fixing the media’). It can only accept the rules of the game as they are presented on the media scene and transmit its own, high-quality media-suited messages.

Promotion of Cultural Objectives

Every cultural administration or cultural institution needs to have a strategy for media actions. Such a strategy should include:

- a) regular information on the routine cultural activities of individual institutions (press conferences, bulletins, websites);

- b) formulation of media strategies for each individual cultural event, from advanced promotional activities to concluding assessments;
- c) selecting and maintaining links with permanent media patrons who also assist in sponsorship initiatives;
- d) varied means of contact with reporters: press screenings and productions, informal communications.

The promotion of cultural events and cultural products is most effective through the promotion of persons—those, that is, who produce culture. The personalization of culture and cultural events, rather like the notion of ‘individualised reception’ (creating the feeling in the consumer that a cultural product is intended specifically for him/her), are the fundamental principles of cultural strategy towards the media.

Cultural policy must additionally be tailored to the needs of its various fields. The cultural heritage, contemporary cultural activities and the culture industry all require different media strategies. The cultural heritage is an exceptionally difficult challenge for media promotion, as certain procedures need to be in place for its actualisation—to render itself contemporary. Promotion of the cultural heritage can be conducted with the help of the third sector—with links to tourism promotion, and of the public media in the field of educational broadcasting. On the other hand, the culture industry (motion pictures, music, and, to a certain extent, publishing) has its own media promotion mechanisms—in the sense of promotion in the culture market. Here cultural policy measures must be reduced to a minimum. Finally, the real challenge for cultural policy in relation to the media is the production of contemporary art, which demands proactive, contextualized activity at the local level. The local media, with their more focused outreach can be most effective in the promotion of contemporary artists and their products.

Providing information through the media implies first and foremost an awareness of communication through the media. This means institutions must obtain feedback on the effect of their media messages as well as on the forms of direct communication with the public (open mailboxes, open telephone lines, open office hours).

Formation of Media Identities and Roles

In the last quarter-century, the idea of cultural identity has been replaced with that of national identity. In my opinion, cultural identity is not based on national identity in the sense of ethnicity. Media promotion of the idea of cultural identity must not portray it as the result of unification processes nor of reduction of differences. On the contrary, cultural identity must be promoted in the plural, as a *network of cultural identities* which emerge through the blend of linguistic, poetic, aesthetic and cultural differences which interact and coexist. The idea of multiculturalism must also be promoted as a means of cultural communication in the broadest sense of the word, outside the national borders of culture. Multiculturalism preserved within the borders of one nationally and culturally dominant region (e.g. concern for the local customs of minorities in a limited area) is not productive; what should instead be supported is multiculturalism as a form of intra-regional communication and cooperation. Cultural and sub-cultural identities, local, national and regional identities, should be promoted as simultaneously existing identities, which are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. In this vein, I believe that it is exceptionally important to promote intra-regional projects that bring countries together based on the logic of cultural rather than ethnic identity. Good

examples of this are cultural projects associated with the courses of individual rivers, such as the Danube or the Sava, which create a common cultural sphere regardless of geopolitical borders.

Taken as a whole, the region of South-east Europe does not have a currently formulated cultural identity: even today's image of South-east Europe is based on nineteenth century notions that Western Europe has created of the 'other', personified in the stereotype of the barbaric Balkans. The question of the possibility of forming a cultural identity for the region through media promotion immediately confronts the problem of a deficit in the common media scene. Whether in broadcasting or the press, the South-eastern European region lacks media mechanisms that could function to form a cultural identity and to ensure its media promotion, both within the region or outside of it. In the promotion of their own cultural values, countries in the region must insist on internal diversity and individuality, on images of themselves as new and culturally productive communities that transform over time, to replace the foreign media promotion of Balkan countries as fossilized by the preservation of their traditionally and nationally grounded heritage, as has generally been the case so far. The nature of the media as the scene of communication must contribute to mutual knowledge and recognition, the exchange of programmes and content, and the sharing of experiences and links in similar cultural and social contexts.

Conclusions

Having identified the central issues to be addressed, further action needs to be developed and pursued in two main areas:

Education and Training

Two types of programmes should be considered in the formulation of cultural policy in relation to the media, with the objective of finding concrete mechanisms for promotion in individual fields and through different types of media, based on an awareness of the media's role in the promotion of cultural values and goods.

1. Educational programmes concerned with the training of administrative and management staff in culture, in the field of public relations and media communication, promotion and marketing;
2. Educational programmes aimed at specialised supplementary training for reporters and other media professionals who are involved in specific cultural fields.

Research and Projects

Special research should trace the relationship between culture and the media by analysing the results of media actions, promotional programmes and media sponsorships. This means it should monitor the effects of the role of media promotion in the formation of public perceptions of individual cultural products or events. The monitoring of the results of media actions and cultural activities should become an ongoing commitment, in statistical analysis of the numbers of visitors, as well as analysis of the financial impact of individual cultural events.

In a theoretical way, cultural studies should also deal with the general role of the media in the formation of ideas on culture in contemporary society, particularly the complex relations that emerge in the 'confrontation' between the traditionally imposed elitist representative culture and various forms of sub-cultures and pop culture. ●

Literature

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