

The Evolution of the Media System and the Media Studies: the Case of Croatia

La evolución del sistema mediático y los estudios sobre medios de comunicación: el caso de Croacia

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Abstract

A journalistic culture is referred to the identity traits of media professionals within the collective where they belong. In the case of Croatia, this context fits within the polarized pluralist model, which is common among Mediterranean countries. But apart of this general characteristic, this is a country with some unique factors that determine the media system according to political, cultural, economic and professional matters. In this article, and through a systematic revision, we aim to analyze the attributes of Croatian media system from an evolutionary approach. Our results suggest five factors that determine the evolution and the contemporary media working practices and organizations in Croatia. The diverse conceptualizations of communism and the previous context of Croatia before communism, the transition to democracy, the normative context and the working conditions can contextualize the Croatian's media system. We also describe both the historical background of the Croatian field in mass communication, and the context of the research within the field detected by the previous specialized literature.

Keywords: Croatia; media system; media studies; journalistic cultures.

Resumen

La cultura periodística se refiere a los rasgos de identidad de los profesionales de los medios de comunicación dentro del colectivo al que pertenecen. En el caso de Croacia, este contexto se enmarca dentro del modelo pluralista polarizado, común entre los países mediterráneos. Pero, además de esta característica general, se trata de un país con algunos factores singulares que determinan el sistema de medios de comunicación en función de cuestiones políticas, culturales, económicas y profesionales. En este artículo, y a través de una revisión sistemática, pretendemos analizar los atributos del sistema de medios de comunicación croata desde un enfoque evolutivo. Nuestros resultados sugieren cinco factores que determinan la evolución y las prácticas y organizaciones de trabajo de los medios de comunicación contemporáneos en Croacia. Las diversas conceptualizaciones del comunismo y el contexto previo de Croacia antes del comunismo, la transición a la democracia, el contexto normativo y las condiciones de trabajo pueden contextualizar el sistema de medios de comunicación croata. También describimos tanto el contexto histórico del campo croata en la comunicación de masas como el contexto de la investigación dentro del campo detectado por la literatura especializada previa.

Palabras clave: Croacia; sistema mediático; estudios de medios; culturas periodísticas.

1. INTRODUCTION

A journalistic culture is a set of identity traits of media professionals within the collective where they belong (Hanitzsch, 2007), and those traits are visible both in the assumptions and attitudes, and within the practices and works. According to the classical definition by Hallin and Mancini (2004: 62), Croatia's journalistic culture fits within the polarized pluralist model, which is common among Mediterranean countries. This model is characterized by features such as a small media market, lower levels of professionalization, a higher degree of state intervention, and a predominance of interpretative journalism.

However, these authors did not extensively describe the characteristics of Eastern European countries, including Croatia (Grbeša & Volarević, 2021). While some characteristics may overlap, as Peruško (2013: 721) notes, “the Croatian pattern is specific”. Significant differences create a unique context for Eastern European media systems compared to their Western Mediterranean counterparts. Other definitions have emerged: Andresen et al. (2017) indicates that Croatia is defined by the “transitional journalism”. This transition entails the need for new democratic empowerment, while certain old values remain adhered to from the previous political system. Dobek-Ostrowska (2015; 2019) classifies Croatia, along with Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania, within the European Union (EU), under a politicized media model. Countries in this model tend to exhibit lower levels of democratic governance, political control over public media, and moderate transparency.

With this article, we propose, as a main objective, to analyze the attributes of Croatian media system from an evolutionary approach. To do that, as secondary objectives we have established: 1) To examine the factors that determine the Croatian media system according to political, cultural, economic and professional matters; 2) To describe the historical background of the Croatian field in mass communication; and 3) To describe the context of the research within the field detected by the previous specialized literature.

2. METHODOLOGY

This is a non-experimental study with a descriptive scope, based on a systematic review. The primary documents consulted were works of specialized literature. To guide the analysis, we employed the recommendations of Codina (2022), about the importance of methodological rigor in the inclusion and organization of sources, and Xiao and Watson (2019) to provide a framework for integrating and discussing the literature. Concretely, we have followed these steps:

a) Inclusion of Documents: To locate the documents to be examined, we used the keywords: “Croatian communication research” and “Croatian journalism research” in the Scopus and JCR catalogues. We were particularly interested in works that provided a description of Croatian media research, or those that studied the evolution of media from 2010 to 2024. By focusing on the specified period, we aimed to capture the most recent developments and transformations in the Croatian media landscape. This timeframe is particularly significant due to the advancements in digital media and the ongoing political and economic changes influencing media practices and policies. In total, we found 30 relevant documents that met these requirements.

b) Organization of Sources: We established three axes to structure the results: factors that determine the Croatian media system; a history of Croatian media studies; and the media research.

c) Relationship with the Literature: Once all sources were located, we prepared the first draft, structuring it according to the mentioned sections. The article was then improved through discussion and further interconnected with the general literature on these topics.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Factors that determine the Croatian media system

The first factor that determines the Croatian media system is related to the diverse historical trajectories shaped by communism in Eastern European countries. Croatia was not part of the Soviet Union but was a member of the former Yugoslavia, where media independence was more pronounced (Malović, 2021; Kõuts-Klemm et al., 2024). This independence was linked to the “destalinization” led by Josip Broz Tito from 1953 to 1980, beginning in 1948, as described by Dobek-Ostrowska (2015: 16).

During Tito’s authoritarian regime, both in Croatia and Slovenia there was a major tolerance with counter-narratives, and a deeper linkage with the Western sphere. In that sense, the 1970s, Yugoslavia secured a trade status with the United States (US), which was previously only held by NATO members, Switzerland, and Austria (Škrubej, 2013). As Brautović (2023) points out, the US authorized the export of computers to the former Yugoslavia, and since the 1970s, the country was part of various academic and technical networks aimed at establishing deeper communication with Western countries.

At the same time, Western cultural products—such as music, movies, and media works—, were disseminated in Croatia (Malović, 2021), in contrast to other countries with similar political scenarios, like those within the Soviet Union. In those countries, Western representations were viewed as propaganda artifacts, rendering them inaccessible or distorted.

However, for the media organizations, independence from the Soviet Union did not equate to independence from the Yugoslav state. In fact, “Agitprop” (agitation propaganda work) was implemented through public ownership of the media (Popović, 2018: 29), which helped disseminate the official version of the Yugoslav government and silence other narratives.

Authors like Andresen et al. (2017: 2) describe the “negative freedom of expression”, noting that in communist countries, journalists faced censorship to comply with state guidelines. And, when a context is determined by direct censorship prevails, self-censorship is often the most common response (Pórtoles Lázaro, 2009). In fact, journalists were regarded as “socio-political workers” within the state (Pjesivac & Imre, 2019: 1867), rather than independent observers. Consequently, media organizations within communist cultures did not implement a thorough accountability strategy (Malović, 2017). This lack of accountability was deemed unnecessary, as journalism was considered part of the state's diffusion methods.

Despite some Western simplifications that portray these journalists as mere instruments serving the state, they also played roles with economic, technical, and cultural foundations. For instance, a “commercial role” or “advocacy” (Vozab & Majstorović, 2021: 23) were also adopted by media workers to explore sustainable funding initiatives for media organizations

and to enhance public knowledge and transform perceptions through the discussion of new norms.

The communist past helped create the structural conditions of the imaginaries, and characteristics from that period are still present in the contemporary media system (Šimunjak, 2018). However, this past is often reexamined in Croatia (Goulding & Domic, 2009: 94) to compare the present with a tumultuous period. As explained in the cited work, some leaders and events, such as Tito's leadership, have been tabooed or "cleansed". A recent study (Klauški, 2024, June 4) showed that Croatian political journalists positioned themselves significantly to the left and liberal, which could be linked to the communist legacy but also general trend in journalism.

Interestingly, there are certain historical attributes predating communism that shape identity and imaginaries, constituting a second characteristic of the Croatian media system. Those attributes were so relevant that, for Peruško (2013: 725), after communism, the Croatian media system reverted to the preconditions established before the introduction of this political sphere. The principal patterns of Croatian modernity were configured during the 19th century and can be described as follows:

"[...] belated modernization, long-lasting authoritarian regime, and a late and brief experience of a multiparty system with a delayed development of liberal institutions, weak industrial and technological development, low literacy rate, slow urbanization, small population, political instability, or rapid changes of states and regimes, and the political role of the national language [...]" (Peruško, 2013: 733).

Some of these attributes have been already surpassed, as the political instability, since the country is part of the EU in 2013. But some symbolic residues have become ingrained in the experience of journalists, while others are undergoing transformation. Croatian system still faces a lack of democratic experience (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019) and although there is no established censorship apparatus, media professionals in Croatia often self-censor (Pjesivac et al., 2016).

This situation points to the third characteristic to consider, related to the transition from communism to democracy. As Popović (2018) explains, all Eastern European countries are undergoing a simultaneous democratic transition, shifting from concentrated power to a more open, globalized state. There are ongoing struggles that highlight an incomplete process in fostering democratic development. And media organizations play a key role to boost civic participation and a major public transparency. But that social responsibility cannot be fulfilled adequately if there is a link between political leaders and media proprietors, as some leaders directly or indirectly own media organizations (Andresen et al., 2017; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015; 2019). According to Klauški (2024, June 4), Croatian political journalists acknowledge the dominance of leftist and liberal views in Croatian media. Instead of a 'watchdog' approach, Croatian journalists tend to adopt an "adversarial" role (Grbeša & Volarević, 2021: 634), bonding the media to those people who fights against corruption. A cynical and a negative tone are indicators, for those authors, of that modality.

The results of this connection between journalists and political elites can be traced in the way that media organizations cover topics related to public authorities. In that sense, Reporters Without Borders (2024) warns that "the government itself represents a threat to press freedom", indicating that media professionals are often vulnerable when investigating topics related to "organized crime, war crimes", or corruption. But other works have highlighted a possible evolution of media frames related to politicians. During Tito's regime the informative treatment around politics were associated with a major personalization around Tito (Šimunjak, 2018). But in the last presidential periods, the same author

indicates that she has perceived two combined processes: “centralized depersonalization” and “decentralized personalization” (Šimunjak, 2018: 1512), with greater prominence of other political leaders rather than national ones.

The transition, for the media, was not only linked to the political treatment, but also economic and cultural. From an economic perspective, since the 1990s, when media began to be privatized, two major foreign companies acquired most media organizations in Croatia: WAZ from Germany and Styria from Austria (Malović, 2021: 99). In terms of ownership of Croatian media, the Austrian Styria Media Group controls approximately two-thirds of the top newspapers (Grbeša & Volarević, 2021: 625). And even if they are EU companies, some of these foreign organizations do not uphold the same journalistic principles as in their home countries (Malović, 2017), especially concerning ethics.

Additionally, some media products developed under this democracy have been lowering their quality towards infotainment or sensationalist approaches (Pjesivac & Imre, 2019). Meanwhile, private ownership coexists with public ownership within local institutions (Pjesivac et al., 2017), only 1/5 of local television stations and 1/3 of local radio stations are majority-owned by local government units (Vozab & Čuvalo, 2024). Any potential control occurs through funding from local government public funds, as these local structures are often resistant to opposing viewpoints. Furthermore, in media not controlled by public authorities, organizations sometimes face pressure through “state advertising” (Šimunjak, 2020: 70), an informal method to enforce self-censorship and promote a positive image.

It is obvious that democratic transitions require a cultural shift. In Croatia, before the country was part of the EU, this transition imposed a sense of nostalgia as part of the common imaginaries (Goulding & Domic, 2009). In that moment, these authors point out that most people believe they lived better as part of the former Yugoslavia, with higher salaries (Goulding & Domic, 2009: 97). The nostalgia is also emerging from an “unconsolidated state-nation conception” (Bojinović et al., 2023: 149), with a support of EU, but an interference with Bosnia in order to protect the Bosnian Croat collective.

Media regulation is a topic that boosts media transformation (Seijas et al., 2024). However, some journalistic processes are too complex to be dismantled within a decade, as they are adhered to the imaginaries. This is the fourth characteristic of the media system in Croatia—the normative context as a transformative context.

In that sense, during the communist decades it is not only that there were no media rights, but also, there was a lack of certain basic rights, such as the right to privacy, which was not legally established until the 1960s (Šimunjak, 2014). As it was indicated before, journalists were considered as amplifiers of state’ ideals. So, to intervene and to enhance a cultural transformation, new norms were needed. At the beginning of the 2000s, a new legal framework was being approved to provoke a transition from state dominance to a more diverse media ecosystem.

During this period, the Croatian News Agency Act (2001), the Electronic Media Act (2003), the Croatian Radio Television Act (2003), and the Media Act (2004) were approved (Malović, 2021). All these regulatory bodies aimed to reconfigure the media system towards a liberal contemporary conceptualization, establishing standards of accountability and greater citizen responsibility. For instance, the Media Act enhanced the possibility of correcting news (Brautović, 2021). As Brautović (2021) explains, the Media Act was amended in 2013 with modifications focusing on greater responsibility for the injuries caused by the news. Additionally, other norms were also improved through various and successive political discussions.

But there are still traces of the cultural residues. For instance, when reporting on EU themes, Croatian journalists are the ones who inform the least, according to a study that compared Belgium, Germany, Croatia, and Greece (Gioltzidou et al., 2023). When they do report on the EU, they mainly cover topics related to politics or economics (Gioltzidou et al., 2023: 8), rather than scientific or humanitarian news.

As a fifth characteristic, working conditions also influence the media system. Overall, the Croatian ecosystem is impacted by digital transformation and the establishment of new practices and business models. In this context, Popović (2018: 35) suggests that Croatian journalists face “a precarious working position”, with a prevalence of short-term positions (Bilić & Primorac, 2018). The scarcity of resources is mainly due to foreign ownership, the absence of policies, and a lack of competitive practices among Croatian media organizations, many of which remained part of state management until the 1990s (Plenković & Mustić, 2014; Malović, 2021). As it is also happening in other global contexts (Barredo, 2021), digitalization in Croatia has increased pressures on journalistic practices and led to a more fragmented availability of resources for media funding (Vesnic-Alujevic et al., 2024).

3.2 A brief history of the Croatian media system

In the previous section, we discussed the general factors that determine the Croatian media system. These factors are the result of a broad history encompassing professional practices, political affairs, and epistemological reflection, which we will summarize in the following pages. The first newspaper in Europe appeared in the 15th century—it was the Nuremberg Zeitung (1457) (Barredo, 2021). However, in the case of Croatia, Peruško (2013: 727) mentions that the first newspapers emerged around two centuries later, in the mid-18th century. Interestingly, these early newspapers were written in Latin, then in German, and one century later in Croatian.

Both Christianity and the Enlightenment, as discussed by Peruško & Vozab (2015), are integral to the history of both Eastern and Western Europe. Besides these influences, different political and economic evolutions have determined the specific characteristics of the countries included in each context. Along with Slovenia and, partially, Serbia, Croatia shares common roots with Western European countries through the Habsburg Monarchy (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015). Croatia became independent from the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1868 (Bojinović et al., 2023).

Following what happened in other contexts, epistemological reflection first emerged in Croatia, followed by specialized training for journalists. From this perspective, the origins of Croatian mass communication research are linked to the University of Zagreb and the 19th century (Peruško & Vozab, 2015). This field slowly developed as a subfield within sociological studies.

In 1900, the Croatian Literary Association was established (Popović, 2018), which also served as a platform for journalists. However, the Croatian Journalists' Association (CJA) was created a decade later, in 1910 (Novak, 2005). The CJA was responsible for the first journalism course in the 1950s (Car & Bukvić, 2016: 66), but this initiative only lasted until 1952. From 1962 onwards, some Croatian journalists were enrolled in a 12-week program organized by the Yugoslav Journalism Institute to develop professional skills.

In 1940, the newspaper Hrvatska Straža advocated for the need for journalistic education at the university level (Popović, 2018). In the 1950s, the Press Company and Institute Act described journalism as a “socio-political profession” (Novak, 2005: 529), linking it

with public orientation. About a decade later, in the 1960s, there was an accumulation of specialized scientific works (Peruško & Vozab, 2015: 228). Furthermore, in the 1960s, the first initiatives for specific journalism education in Croatia were carried out in Ljubljana, Belgrade, and Zagreb, as described by Vozab & Majstorović (2021). These initiatives were originally taught as part of political science faculties (Vozab & Majstorović, 2021: 9).

The most important specialized centers for educating journalists from around 1964 until 1970 were the Vjesnik Publishing House and Radio Television Zagreb (Malović, 2021: 116). Car & Bukvić (2016) explain that the School of Journalism at the Vjesnik Publishing House educated some of the most prominent Croatian professionals.

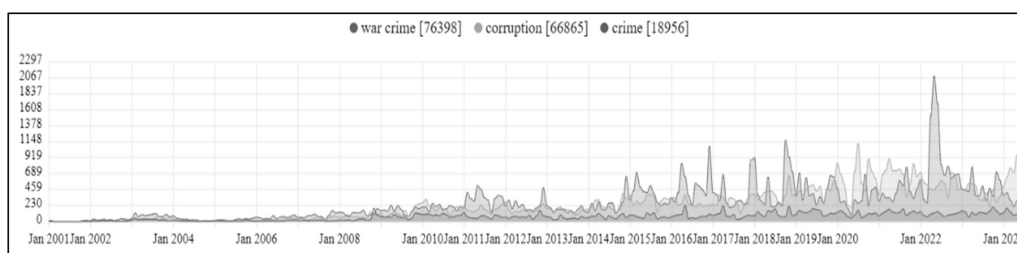
During the communist regime, which lasted until the 1990s, Croatian journalists learned to navigate the limits established by the authoritarian regime (Malović, 2021). The “official state ideology” (Popović, 2018: 28) influenced media editorial variations. It is important to note that communism was not considered a monolithic ideological framework. There were different types of communist appropriation, but in the case of Croatia, there was a significant level of media independence (Kõuts-Klemm et al., 2024), although all journalists were Communist party members. For instance, in the 1970s, the Inter-University Center was established in Dubrovnik to host postgraduate courses and national or international events (Peruško & Vozab, 2015). According to these authors, Yugoslavia became a unique model of a communist country within the Eastern republics. Yugoslavians could travel to the West, and Western intellectuals could visit academic environments to share thoughts and results.

In 1971, the Faculty of Political Sciences in Zagreb launched the first systematic study of journalism (Vozab & Majstorović, 2021), but it was a program mainly integrated with other fields, such as sociology and political science. This program lacked specialization in journalism studies. From the Zagreb School, many scientific disciplines, including communication and documentation, were developed slowly (Aparac & Pehar, 2010).

In 1986, the University of Zagreb improved the program, extending it to four years with a major specialization in journalism (Car & Bukvić, 2016), although political science remained dominant among the subjects taught. From that year onwards, other universities included communication as a specialized subject. The 1980s, in general, is often considered as a golden decade (Bakotin, 2017, April, 30th), this was the period of the best and worst journalism in Croatia. Communists were losing power, and new elites were not taking over.

In 1991, Croatia declared independence from Yugoslavia (Bojinović et al., 2023), marking the beginning of the Homeland War, which lasted from 1991 to 1995 (Grbeša & Volarević, 2021). These authors, following the original classification of Segvic (2003: 622-623), describe three specific subperiods determined by the war: the “Tumultuous Media” (1990-1994), characterized by content restrictions; the “Veil of Censorship” (1995-1998), marked by state censorship; and the “Recovery Period” (1999-2000), which saw state transformation towards a freer right of information. Before and during the war, the spread of propaganda and violence in online spaces led Brautović (2023: 195) to describe the digital arena as a “virtual battlefield”, primarily between Croatians, Slovenians, and Serbians. Media outlets were turned into mediators to spread propaganda. While during the former Yugoslavia regime, media outlets were fundamental in maintaining the “unity and brotherhood” anthem, during the war, they were employed as an “active tool of ethnic hatred and war” (Andresen et al., 2017: 6).

The war period derived in certain informative red lines, even after the war. For instance, some sources still consider war crimes as a taboo for journalists nowadays (Reporters Without Borders, 2024), while there are other sources that show a major publication of news related to that topic in the last years:

Figure 1. Publication of news on war crimes, corruption and crimes in Croatia

Source: Ćurković et al. (2022, November 8)

During the 1990s, the Croatian Democratic Union and Franjo Tuđman, as the leader and president of the country, instrumentalized media organizations as propaganda tools (Goulding & Domic, 2009; Pjesivac et al., 2016). The transition to democracy was marked by what Šimunjak (2020: 67 - 72) describes as a “quite illiberal” period. For this author, illiberalism refers to an extreme accumulation of power within a central government.

In the 2000s, a shift to a liberal government led to the introduction of new audiovisual channels (Pjesivac et al., 2016). The liberalization of media created the current scenario, where most organizations belong to private companies, and those under public control have close ties to political agendas (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015; 2019). However, liberalization also boosted the education of journalists by other actors, such as non-governmental organizations and professional associations (Car & Bukvić, 2016). This process already started in the 1990s, as a high number of programs run by the Croatian Journalists' Association and international NGOs took place in that period.

Despite some sources indicate that, from the 2010s, the country experienced “democratic backsliding” (Šimunjak, 2020: 73), characterized by a deterioration of democratic conditions, since the evolution in the 90s toward a 'polarized pluralist media system' (Peruško, 2013: 721), the Croatian media landscape has experienced significant growth in both professional autonomy and internationalization (Grbeša & Volarević, 2021), but there are still problems related to a weaker professionalization and journalistic routines. For instance, in a work that examined the processes of news corrections, Brautović (2021: 800) explained that the analysed online media performed just “a few corrections a year”, in comparison with some Western media, that did so every day.

This development is closely linked to Croatia's integration into the European Union. Since 2001 and until 2005, all the programs related to media studies or journalism taught in the country had to meet the European Higher Education Standards and the Bologna Plan (Car & Bukvić, 2016).

In the 21st century, authors like Malović (2017) highlighted the poor working conditions of media workers in Croatia. This scarcity of resources led to instances of corruption, as admitted by journalists interviewed by Pjesivac et al. (2017). As of 2024, there are at least 8 programs in Croatia offering BA and MA education focused on media and journalism (Köuts-Klemm et al., 2024). Two of these are public institutions: the University of Zagreb and the University of Dubrovnik. These authors also note the existence of the Croatian Communication Association, which publishes two specialized journals, although detailed structural information (such as member associates and collaborative works) is not available (Köuts-Klemm et al., 2024: 10).

3.3 The on-going transition – the transitional science of media research

As described in the previous section, the professionalization of the media sector depends heavily on the quality of education and training provided to information professionals. A decade ago, [Plenković & Mustić \(2014: 42\)](#) observed that, in Croatia, there were traces of an education for journalists based on “unidirectional, monologue journalism and media discourse”. This prevalence of outdated characteristics restricted significant innovation in media practices.

At the same time, both professionalization and education depend on the quality of research. Communication and journalism in Croatia emerged linked to other fields, primarily political sciences, and were centered in the capital, Zagreb. Transitional journalism corresponds necessarily with transitional science, which involves the move from a non-existent field to an expanded and specialized field. Given the scarcity of sources to illustrate this transitional science in Croatia, we will use six studies published from 2010 to 2024 to create a profile of the country. All of these studies have analyzed scientific research in communication and journalism in Croatia.

In a pioneer study, before the entrance of Croatia into the EU, [Aparac & Pehar \(2010\)](#) conducted a longitudinal analysis of two Croatian journals. From the total volume of works published in these journals, the authors selected a sample of 1260 papers. The results of this study presented a profile of Croatian production in information sciences, at least according to the examined publications. They found that most papers were written in Croatian (between half and one-third of the evaluated works), primarily authored by single authors, and concentrated among authors from the capital, Zagreb (two-thirds to one-third of the total articles).

Three years later, [Schatten \(2013\)](#) analyzed 285,234 academic works from all areas published from 2000 to 2010. In the case of social sciences, the author found that around 7 out of 10 concepts emerged in Croatian rather than in English. Regarding communication and journalism, the main cluster was "Applied sciences", with keywords such as communication, media, transport, and technology.

[Peruško & Vozab \(2014\)](#) investigated the Croatian context of media studies and communication from 1969 to 2011. As their main method, these authors studied 481 articles published in top journals from this country through content analysis. Their conclusions indicated that the emergence of the discipline was considerably strengthened from the year 2000. This strengthening was attributed to the creation of new institutions of higher education, more specific associations, deeper internationalization, and more data-grounded projects.

[Peruško & Vozab \(2015\)](#) proposed two axes to understand Croatian research agendas: the first associated with democratic transformative studies of media systems, and the second referring to the heritage of communism within the field.

[Vozab & Majstorović \(2021\)](#) selected a sample of 24 scientific works from 1969 to 1990, 38 from 1991 to 1999, and 105 from 2000 to 2011. Through a mixed-methods approach, the authors examined the themes covered, treatments, and assumptions of journalistic work from academic perspectives. They observed an evolution of roles depending on state ideology and various considerations about the profession. For instance, during the communist era, "journalism in the political system" was a theme present in about one-third of the articles ([Vozab & Majstorović, 2021: 19 - 21](#)). During the transition to democracy, the principal topics studied were related to free informative advances, while in the democracy maturation period,

the focus shifted to the conceptualization of journalism and the challenges of journalistic professionalization. Another interesting aspect of this work is the observed evolution of journalistic roles through the analysis of articles published in specialized journals. For example, the “socio-political worker” dominant during communism was replaced by the “defender of democracy” during the transition and the “public sphere promoter” in the democracy maturation period (Vozab & Majstorović, 2021: 23).

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

To understand the Croatian media system, we have proposed five factors that determine the evolution and the contemporary media working practices and organizations. Two of these factors have historical roots, such as the diverse conceptualizations of communism and the previous context of Croatia before communism. Within Eastern European countries, Croatia developed a unique media system (Peruško, 2013), a different communist appropriation, leaning towards a more Western-open-minded tolerance (Malović, 2021; Brautović, 2023; Kōuts-Klemm et al., 2024). Some attributes from the communist period still influence contemporary Croatia (Šimunjak, 2018).

The third proposed factor is the transition to democracy. After communism, the country entered a period of transformation (Šimunjak, 2014; Grbeša & Volarević, 2021), marked initially by the attributes and consequences of war, and later by a transition to democracy and the liberalization or commercialization of the media market. During these multiple transitions—political, cultural, and economic—the media system shifted towards a Mediterranean polarized pluralist media system or a politicized media model (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015; 2019), where politicians play a key role in pressuring media organizations both formally and informally (Šimunjak, 2020). The conceptualization of journalism as a social and working performance remains prevalent in society, despite the overall decline in the quality of media products in recent decades (Pjesivac & Imre, 2019), and the corruption characteristic of some professionals' practices (Pjesivac et al., 2017).

At the same time, many old values have been transferred to online media (Brautović, 2021). Journalists, as a collective, have been affected—in some cases—by outdated journalistic education (Plenković & Mustić, 2014). Controversial professional practices coincided with the control of Croatian media by public institutions (Pjesivac et al., 2017) or, more frequently, by foreign companies, whose applied standards are still not equal to those in other European contexts (Malović, 2017). Digitalization, instead of enhancing informative quality, has contributed to lowering the quality of media products (Vesnic-Alujevic et al., 2024).

The fourth proposed factor that identifies the Croatian media system is the normative context. Throughout the previous sections, we have observed that the Croatian field of communication and media studies has historically been dependent on professional advances, state ideology, and social imaginaries. Each Croatian period has been characterized by the establishment of different conceptualizations of media work and products (Vozab & Majstorović, 2021). However, the field has evolved since the 2000s thanks to the creation of new universities and departments (Peruško & Vozab, 2014), as well as the approval of new regulatory frameworks. From our point of view, the new regulations approved since the 2000s are helping to transform practices, most of which originate from the EU. Developing a parliamentary democracy after many decades of an illiberal government is complex. In other Mediterranean countries, such as Spain, the political transition still demands further thorough

democratic transformation. Spain began its transition from Francoism to democracy in 1975, while Croatia has been undergoing this transition since the 1990s, with a war in between.

The fifth factor indicates that the evolution still presents challenges to be resolved, particularly concerning working conditions. Despite Croatia's EU membership since 2013, there is perceived to be a lack of transparency in internet advertisements and the need for more comprehensive digital norms (Bilić & Primorac, 2018); political appropriation of public broadcasting (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015); precarious working conditions for journalists (Popović, 2018); lack of relative journalistic independence from political power (Grbeša & Volarević, 2021); and a lack of news related to the EU (Gioltzidou et al., 2023), suggesting a more local and nationalistic editorial approach, among other issues.

Regarding research in communication and journalism, understanding the proposed transitional science requires examining the roots of specialized education. With a relatively short history, primarily linked to the University of Zagreb in the 1980s (Car & Bukvić, 2016), the meta-literature highlights that, up until the early 2010s, there was a predominance of the Croatian language, scarce co-authorship, and themes centered around the capital, Zagreb (Aparac & Pehar, 2010). However, Croatia's EU membership in 2013 could be decisive in influencing transitional science. Recent works show a greater preference for the English language and a prevalence of new research topics (Köuts-Klemm et al., 2024).

Despite its aim to summarize the historical background of the Croatian field in mass communication and its research lines, this work faces some limitations. It is a thorough systematic review, but some studies may have been impossible to locate. Future research should test the five factors explained in the previous sections with empirical data. It would also be beneficial to examine the correlation between specialized education for journalists and specialized research, and to determine whether research in communication and journalism is still addressing topics related to foundational fields like political science. Additionally, interviewing key Croatian actors—scientists, media workers, among others—is considered fundamental for future research.

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