

# Stefan Firnhammer

## Media Systems of Japan and South Korea: A Comparative Approach

### Topic and Research Question

Today, only 1 in 7 people in the world live in a country with a free press (Freedom House, 2014, p.1). This begs the question to the reasons of why some media are freer than others. This is an old question that has been asked by many scholars in communication, or more specifically, political communication, before, "Why is the media as it is?" (Siebert et al., 1956, p.1; Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p.2).

It has been commonly accepted that a free, diverse, and independent press, which promotes an informed and engaged citizenry, is critical to the political health of a nation. Therefore, it appears imperative to understand why the media systems around the world are so different from each other. However, one of the greatest challenges in the literature on media that remains to this day is that they are, to a very large extent, highly ethnocentric, meaning, they are referring to one particular country case—or world region—while being written in very broad and general terms, as if it were universally applicable. Additionally, countries with less developed literature on media—often outside of the Western world—tend to borrow it from other countries, most generally from the Anglo-American literature, which they then try to apply to their own situation (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p.2), while neglecting its own historical, cultural, social, and political influences.

In order to address and overcome these limitations, comparative studies of the media systems have been introduced. Thus, the sole purpose of this paper is also to go beyond the Western world, following in the footsteps of those who have long been supporting and advocating the internationalization (Downing, 1996) and the de-Westernization (Curran & Park, 2000) of the study of the media. To accomplish this, it compares the cases of two media systems in East Asia, namely that of Japan and Korea, analyzing and evaluating the similarities and differences between these two systems. From this, the following main research question is derived: *What are the similarities and differences between the media systems of Japan and Korea?*

### State of the Art

The *Four Theories of the Press* proposed by Siebert et al. (1956) was the first attempt to provide a broad framework for comparing and classifying media systems around the world. Siebert et al. developed a typology that separated the media systems based on

two opposing political philosophies, namely, liberalism and authoritarianism. It has been heavily influenced by the historical conflict of its time between the two superpowers that emerged after the Second World War, the United States and the Soviet Union. Thus, their work has been heavily criticized in later years, as it was solely based on philosophical and ideological perspectives. Additionally, their normative approach lacked any explanatory power, as it was merely based on how things should be, rather than how things actually are. Despite its limitations, it put forth a key argument that is the basis of comparative analysis of media systems to this day. Namely, Siebert et al. (1956, pp.1-2) argued that the "[...] press always takes on the form and colorations of the social and political structures within which it operates" and that it will reflect the "[...] basic beliefs and assumptions, which the society holds [...]."

Almost half a century later, Hallin and Mancini (2004) published a book titled *Three Models of Media and Politics*, which used the *Four Theories* as its analytical point of departure. In contrast, Hallin and Mancini moved away from this normative model and instead proposed a new typology based on empirical comparative analysis of the media systems in the Western world. But as their study was solely based on the media systems of Western Europe and North America, it is necessary, for the purpose of this paper, to find a different approach, one that would go beyond the Western world. Roger Blum, the Head of the Institute of Mass Communication Studies at the University of Bern in Switzerland, put forth such an approach, called the *Extended Comparative Approach*, which is an extension to the model developed by Hallin and Mancini.

### Methodology and Approach

The *Extended Comparative Approach* developed by Roger Blum is used to analyze and interpret the empirical findings of the similarities and differences of the media systems of Japan and Korea. It is based on nine dimensions, namely, political system, political culture, media freedom, media ownership, media financing, political parallelism, state control over the media, media culture, and media orientation. Each individual dimension is additionally based on one of three distinct lines, namely, a liberal line, a middle line, and a regulated line (Blum, 2005, p.8). And based on the particular composition of these dimensions, Blum (2005, pp.9-10) conceptualized six models. However, this approach also has some significant limitations,

such as the fact that Roger Blum has not shown how he has actually developed these different models, nor did he explain why no other combination of these different dimensions is possible. Moreover, his framework has not been thoroughly discussed and debated in the literature and it also seems to be little known outside of the German-speaking academic world. Thus, most comparative analyses of media systems still rely on the work done by Hallin and Mancini.

As Blum did not explain or indicate how to measure the individual dimensions and also did not clarify what these dimensions mean and how they relate to each other, the paper tries to supplement and fill the gaps by examining what other scholars have stated regarding these specific dimensions. Furthermore, this paper combines some of these dimensions, which appear to be largely overlapping and interrelated, in order to minimize repetition and to provide a more coherent analysis later.

### Main Facts

The first dimension, political system, clearly showed that both countries are following the liberal line, meaning they are democratic. The most interesting difference between the two countries, however, lies in its political parties, whereas in Japan the LDP has governed for all but three years since 1958, in Korea there has been a more consistent change of government since its beginning of the democratization in 1987. To determine the second dimension, political culture, the paper solely consulted the World Value Survey, which measures the political attitudes of the people towards its political institutions, such as the government, parliament, courts, political parties, and so on. It showed that Japan is leaning towards both directions, a conflict- as well as consensus-oriented culture, while Korea's culture is mostly consensus-oriented.

Japan has a strong media freedom and weak state control over the media. However, the *Special Intelligence Protection Bill*, adopted in late 2014, after the earthquake and tsunami in early 2011, also appears to be threatening the transparency of Japan's government. In Korea, on the other hand, it can be considered to be moderate in both cases, mainly due to laws such as the vaguely worded *National Security Act*, enacted in 1948. Yet, in recent years, Korea has started to loosen up several restrictions on its media.

The media is privately and publicly owned in both countries, while the terrestrial television market,

specifically, is mainly publicly owned in Korea. Thus, the media is also financed through the market as well as the state in Japan and Korea. The relationship between the media and politics can also be considered moderate in both cases. In Japan there is a strong tie between the media and political parties due to its press club system, while in Korea, there are stronger ties between the media and large conglomerates. In terms of media orientation, in Japan it is more commercially oriented. In Korea, on the other hand, only the daily newspapers are mainly focused on commercial activity, while three out of the four largest television networks are mostly concerned with public service.

### Results

Both countries are from the same world region, and thus, there appear only a few minor differences, which also corresponds with the observation that media systems within the same world region tend to be remarkably similar (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Blum, 2005). Unfortunately, the *Extended Comparative Approach* does not provide any insight of why these two systems are so similar, while other systems within the same region, namely that of China and North Korea, appear to be lying directly on the opposite side of the spectrum, and which of the nine dimensions is mainly responsible for such a divergence. In the case of Japan and Korea, only two of the seven dimensions examined showed any significant difference, namely, media freedom and state control over the media as well as media orientation. Thus, the similarities in both systems, broadly speaking, clearly outweigh their differences.

### References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <http://othes.univie.ac.at/>.

### About the Author



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