

Media Research in Socialist Slovenia/Yugoslavia: Some After-thoughts

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Abstract: This afterword to “A Marxist Approach to Communication Freedom” reveals some features of the development of communication theories and empirical research in socialist Slovenia and Yugoslavia. The field started to develop in 1960s in the framework of other academic disciplines, mainly political sciences and partly sociology, but soon became the target of ideological criticism for “the lack of Marxist foundations” in the social sciences in general, and journalism education and communication research in particular, which was part of a more general conflict between party-state bureaucracy and “liberal intellectuals.” By the 1980s, communication and journalism education and research programmes became a regular component of universities in all the republics of the former Yugoslavia. The development of the new discipline was largely marked by “productive inclusivism” or eclecticism, a kind of “cohabitation” of different communication schools and theoretical paradigms that contributed to its definition, development and institutionalisation at universities.

Keywords: communication theory, empirical research, critical vs. administrative research, journalism education, socialism, bureaucracy, Slovenia, Yugoslavia

The article “A Marxist Approach to Communication Freedom” is an abridged translation of the section “Produkcija in komuniciranje: nujnost in svoboda” (Production and communication: necessity and freedom, pp. 123–138) of Slavko Splichal’s book *Množično komuniciranje med svobodo in odtujitvijo* (Mass Communication between Freedom and Alienation), published in Slovene in 1981 after it was defended as a doctoral thesis in 1979. The English translation of the section – including the amended title, “A Marxist Approach to Communication Freedom” – was initiated in 1982 by the editor of the *Journal of Communication*, George Gerbner, and intended for publication in the symposium on “Marx and Communication”, which Gerbner planned to publish after the journal’s high-profile “Ferment in the Field” symposium in 1983.

However, the symposium on “Marx and Communication” planned by Gerbner did never materialise. At least partly, the cancellation echoed the United States’ withdrawal from UNESCO following strong criticism of its actions promoting the New World Communication and Information Order (NWICO). In 1983, UNESCO established the medium-term plan for the establishment of NWICO from 1985 to 1989, which won broad support within the United Nations, but the U.S. administration has severely criticised it arguing that UNESCO was a “dog-whistle” for the use of government propaganda in the guise of international information flow balance, hostile toward the basic institutions of a free society, especially a free market and a free press, and promoting Soviet-inspired programmes, which finally led the U.S. administration to withdraw from UNESCO. Opening the journal under such circumstances to an international debate on communication and Marx(ism) that could not avoid NWICO would certainly not have any beneficial consequences for the journal and its publisher.

At that time, after Tito's death in 1980 and in the face of the impending fall of socialism, the situation in Yugoslavia was no less controversial. The Yugoslav self-management model differed from the socialist societies of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in significant respects, particularly in terms of the extent of popular support, the intensity, span, and effectiveness of central control in economy and politics, and personal ("liberal") rights and freedoms. Notwithstanding these differences, like the collapse of other communist regimes in Central-Eastern Europe, but even more directly, the decay of the Yugoslav self-management socialist project can be attributed to the digitally fostered global expansion of capital and the global rise of the neoliberal capitalism and politics, but also to the inadequate development and relatively underdeveloped productive forces, and controversial (neo)liberal decisions that opened Yugoslav socialist market economy to Western capital.

In fact, the ideal Yugoslav self-management model has never been materialised in historical praxis. One of the major controversies in Slovenia (Yugoslavia) from the 1950s onwards was the conflict between bureaucracy and intellectuals. The formal aim of the bureaucratic party and state apparatus was to build a socialist society, and most of its members were probably sincere in pursuing that goal, but in practice they would not allow the workers any form of genuine self-organisation, not even independent trade unions. This is not a problem specific to socialism alone. As Dewey wrote a hundred years ago, "No government by experts in which the masses do not have the chance to inform the experts as to their needs can be anything but an oligarchy managed in the interest of the few. And the enlightenment must proceed in ways which force the administrative specialists to take account of the needs" (Dewey 1927/1946, 208). However, owing to the proclaimed "people's power", bureaucratic oligarchisation in socialism directly threatened the foundations of socialist democracy.

While critical intellectuals, who mostly were not "anti-communists" but rather (considered) supporters of "liberal revisionism", advocated free labour and more effective self-management because their very existence depended essentially on their own work, the party-state bureaucracy proclaimed itself to be the sole and genuine representative of ideological, ethical and social interests of the "direct producer", with the exclusive right to act on behalf of all direct producers (Rus 1962). Moreover, bureaucracy insisted that only material production was socially productive and thus the "true" production, whereas mental (intellectual) production was considered to be social consumption. Intellectuals, in contrast, did not see their work as "non-productive", but rather as "the most damned seriousness, the most intense exertion", to use Marx's words. The intellectuals' commitment to the independence of social enterprises ("organisations of associated labour") from the bureaucratic apparatus was (also) based on the desire to eliminate their own position of wage-labourers, and thereby free themselves from the permanent interference with their work by the bureaucracy presenting itself as representing the "true producers".

This pressure of bureaucracy on intellectuals was only temporarily relieved by the rise of "national liberalism" in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which was soon suppressed by the state-party bureaucracy, and then by the (global) rise of the neoliberal politics in the 1980s, which also destroyed the entire project of socialist self-management after Tito's death.

The clash between bureaucracy and intellectuals had a major impact particularly on the work of critical "non-Marxist" and "non-orthodox Marxist" sociologists and philosophers in some former Yugoslav republics, including Slovenia, where some of them were even sentenced to prison in the early 1960s, but "only" banned from university lecturing in the mid-1970s. Both theoretical (philosophical) studies (rejecting Marxism

as the only valid scientific paradigm or criticising the “administrative Marxism”) and empirical (sociological) studies (analysing data collected in surveys and by content analysis methods to reveal prevailing values, interests and opinions in society) could have been quickly blamed for “functionalism”, when the findings did not conform to the governing ideology.

The field of communication theory and research was not in the centre of that conflict, although it could not completely avoid the party criticism of the 1970s aimed at “the lack of Marxist foundations” in journalism education and communication research. The new discipline started to develop after the founding in 1962 of the Department of Journalism at the Institute of Sociology and Philosophy in Ljubljana, which in 1963 moved to the School of Political Science that had been newly established by the Communist Party. The School was later transformed into the Faculty of Social Sciences and anchored to the University of Ljubljana. The Department of Journalism only offered a few journalism courses until 1966, when a comprehensive undergraduate journalism programme was launched. By employing new lecturers and assistants, the Department became the major institutional framework for communication and media theory in Slovenia. France Vreg (1920-2007), a former journalist with a degree in comparative literature, was a driving force and the first head of the Department.

In 1964, the first Yugoslav professional (not rigorously scientific) journal in the field, *Novinarstvo* (Journalism), was established in Belgrade. Shortly after the first beginnings of the new discipline, the period of political and ideological pressures upon universities in Belgrade, Ljubljana and Zagreb (1972-5) stopped the development for a while. The next specialised journal *RTV Teorija i Praksa* (1975) founded by the Belgrade Public Service Broadcasting Corporation announced the recuperation of the discipline, shortly after the new federal Constitution passed the Yugoslav federal assembly (1974); it was followed by the adoption of constitutions in all republics, indicating the process of political and economic decentralisation in the country.

The significantly amended constitutions strengthened the federal nature of the state and opened new although still limited ways for democratisation of society by protecting the self-management system from state interference and expanding representation of republics and provinces in all electoral and policy forums, but at the same time the process of democratisation did not really encroach on the privileges of the power elites. As a consequence, one of the central, institutionally supported research subjects during the 1970s became “information for decision making”, by which a part of communication science legitimated itself as a “productive” science. However, such an orientation may also be considered a socialist version of administrative research in that the aims and objects of research were to a great extent determined, and the findings evaluated, by political bureaucracy.

While the beginnings of communication science in Yugoslavia were based on complementary approaches from different perspectives, although mainly on communication theories developed in the USA, the renewed development was much closer related to (administrative) Marxism and the dominant Yugoslav political ideology. From the theoretical (and, in general, scientific) point of view, this political intervention certainly hampered the development of the discipline.

Yugoslav official ideology and politics became explicitly unfavourable towards processes of the internationalisation of social sciences during the mid-1970s. Changes in the political system after 1971 were intended to confirm the uniqueness and incomparability of the Yugoslav social and political system, including the media and communication systems (Mlinar and Splichal 1988). Any insistence on principles of comparative

research and universal concepts based on the wealth of diversity in social relationships, was not tolerated by political authorities. Social sciences were expected to investigate Yugoslav society as the authentic materialisation of Marx's conceptualisation of the transition from capitalism to socialism. This political and ideological pressure was rather calamitous for communication science, because the discipline's development was stunted in the delicate period of its adolescence – that of its early academic institutionalisation.

Although several monographs and extended reviews were published in the 1960s (e.g., by Igor Leandrov, Bogdan Osolnik, Fran Vatovec, France Vreg), we may consider the first Yugoslav scientific monograph in the field Vreg's (1973) book on *Social Communication*, which was followed by Todorović's (1974) *Sociology of Mass Communication*, Djordjević's (1975) *Political Public Opinion*, Novosel's (1977) *Information in the Delegate System*, and Džinić's (1978) *Communication Science*. The common denominator of these books was (not always productive) eclecticism. The authors did not succeed in developing a specific theoretic orientation, but rather used a range of different approaches and theoretical streams without a clear conceptual validation (the book by Vreg may be considered one of the rare early exceptions). His book *Social Communication* (Vreg 1973) was designed in a similar way – focusing on communication models – as McQuail's famous *Mass Communication Theory*, first published ten years later (McQuail 1983) and followed by almost forty reprints, new editions and translations. Vreg's book also became very popular in Yugoslavia, especially after it was translated into Serbo-Croatian and Macedonian.

As the formation of the Department of Journalism in Ljubljana was pretty much inspired, in organisational terms at least, by American schools of journalism which Vreg had visited, his doctoral thesis (in sociology) on "Theoretical models of opinion and communication processes in the social system" (1972; published in 1973 as *Social Communication*, Vreg 1973) was largely based on his study of American literature. In the same year, a graduate programme in communication has been established at the Faculty of Social Sciences, and a doctoral programme four years later.

Splichal was the first to graduate from the MA communication programme in 1975 and the first to earn a PhD in 1979. In addition, Vreg also made a significant contribution to the formation of journalism departments at universities in Belgrade, Zagreb, Skopje and Sarajevo, where he frequently lectured at the undergraduate and later postgraduate levels.

From the very beginning, efforts to establish communication research and journalism education programmes had a highly international character. Ljubljana hosted many prominent media theorists of the time, including Dallas Smythe and Alex Edelstein, among others. In 1968, the Department of Journalism organised an international conference titled "Mass Media and International Understanding" with over a hundred foreign participants (Vreg 1969). Two other members of the Department, Bogdan Osolnik and Tomo Martelanc, played an important role in the earliest period of the formation of the International Association for Mass Communication Research (AIERI/IAMCR). Bogdan Osolnik was also member of the famed UNESCO's International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems (The MacBride Commission) and co-author of its report *Many Voices, One World*, more commonly known as "The MacBride Report".

In 1972, Tomo Martelanc acquired a UNESCO research grant for the project External Radio Broadcasting and International Understanding. In 1971, UNESCO adopted an international programme for communication research, and within that programme, "research into international communication structures" was one of the priori-

ties. The first three-year project of this programme (1973-76) was conducted in Slovenia, analysing 15 news programmes of foreign radio stations from 14 countries that broadcast in the Yugoslav languages to audiences in socialist Yugoslavia. The project identified common traits of radio propaganda and differences between capitalist and socialist countries. It was completed in 1977 by publishing the monograph *External Radio Broadcasting and International Understanding: Broadcasting to Yugoslavia* in the "Reports and papers in mass communication" series of UNESCO (Martelanc et al. 1977). Despite the use of "functionalist research methods" of content analysis of radio programmes and computer-assisted multivariate statistical analysis (in 1974!), revealing conflicting ideologies in foreign radio news programmes broadcast to Yugoslavia was not considered ideologically controversial by political "reviewers". Moreover, the successful completion of the internationally praised project finally gave the green light to create the Social Communication Research Centre at the Faculty of Social Sciences, which was previously averted by objections that communication research should not be a separate field of research and that the research group did not have enough qualified researchers. But already the next research project on the Yugoslav press agency Tanjug and the Non-Aligned News Agencies Pool (NANAP, established in 1975), also funded by UNESCO as part of its international communication research programme, triggered ideological attacks from Belgrade in particular, claiming that the research team provided (ideological) enemies with confidential information about the work of Tanjug and other non-aligned news agencies.

Similarly to other socialist societies which originated in the revolutions of the twentieth century, political bureaucracies in Slovenia and Yugoslavia were particularly reluctant to conducting empirical research. For a long time, sociology was considered a "bourgeois science" and restrictively included in the academic life, in contrast to the ideologically preferred political sciences. Later, this anti-Marxist "class character" was attributed mainly to empirical research, particularly surveys. But in fact, empirical research in the former socialist societies often acted as a critical impulse against ideologised abstract social sciences, against formalism, and simplified generalisations, and was aimed at investigating differences in interests and social contradictions in the processes of the development of socialism. The role of empirical research in (state) socialism was almost the same as it has had against feudalism and for capitalism during the revolutionary social changes two centuries ago, and quite the opposite to the predominantly administrative type of empirical research in the developed capitalist countries of the 20th century.

So it should come as no surprise that not only books but also the vast majority of communication-related journal articles published in that period did not emerge as a result of empirical research. In the period between 1964 and 1986, only 18.7 percent of 311 articles related to (mass) communication, which have been published by 181 authors in 32 Yugoslav social science journals, had an empirical character, an additional 7.7 percent were both theoretical and empirical, but only 7.1 percent of them included statistical data analysis (Splichal 1994). The first media related empirical studies in Yugoslavia were published as late as 1969, and they dominated the scene during the short period of democratisation until 1974 (particularly reporting social survey and audience research results), but after 1975 they almost disappeared.

Generally, under socialism in Yugoslavia, theoretical, often intuitive-speculative approaches combined with normative idealism dominated in scholarly books and journal articles on communications. The prevalence of an intuitive-speculative approach over robust theoretical approaches was reflected in the fact that of all 311 articles included in the 23-year analysis, only 2.9 percent comprised a critical assessment of the theory

applied or elaborated on. The most often cited authors in that period were members of diverse schools of thought, such as Critical Theory (Adorno, Habermas, Enzensberger, Bourdieu), Functionalism (Katz, Lasswell, Lazarsfeld, Merton, Schramm, Riley) and “productive inclusivism” (McLuhan, McQuail, Kayser, Cazeneuve, Weiss). Despite bureaucratic pressures, a kind of “cohabitation” of communication paradigms existed, although they were not equally widespread. On the other hand, and similarly to sociology¹, one could hardly claim Marx(ist) theory – despite the significance of Marx’s early debates on freedom of the press and his later writings on ideology and political economy – to outweigh all other contributions to the communication field, and thus to become the main or even only theoretical foundation for the *definition, development* and *institutionalisation* of the new discipline.

Nevertheless, the authors most frequently referred to were “classical Marxists” (Marx, Engels, Lenin) and top Yugoslav politicians (Tito, Kardelj, Šetinc, Vlahović). Particularly in the late 1970s, citations reflecting the “arguments” of authorities predominated: in addition to Marx, Edvard Kardelj, the leading Yugoslav party ideologue, became the most often cited author in that period, which partly “explains” the absence of “the critical” in theoretical essays. Papers referring to Marx and Critical Theory hardly represented a systematic “critique of bourgeois mass communication research”, as conceptualised, for example, by Lothar Bisky in the German Democratic Republic (Bisky 1976). Citations of Marxist authors indicated no evidence of an intellectual commitment to their works. They were often cited in order to “legitimise” political correctness, rather than substantiating the theoretical relevance of a contribution.

As reported by Milić (1988), another bibliometric study has revealed that out of twenty classic sociological thinkers, including Durkheim, Habermas, Lorenz, Mills, Parsons, Sorokin and Weber, 30 percent of all citations in Yugoslav sociological articles in the period between 1966 and 1985 referred to Marx.

While there was an obvious lack of critical scholarly discourse, “revisionist theories,” “technocratic liberalism”, and “abstract humanism” – similarly to “positivistic and functionalist methods” used in empirical research – have often been subject to bureaucratic party criticism. As the founder of the new communication discipline in Slovenia, France Vreg recalled, the critical period in the development of the new discipline revealed old conflicts between political oligarchies and social scientists:

Communication has always been the domain of ideology, the church and/or the state. [...] Thus, it did not come as a surprise to me when the party ‘censorial committee’ carefully scrutinised every line of my book *Social Communication*, underlined the ‘suspicious’ sentences with a red pencil and characterised them as ‘adoption of Western ideology’ in its report (Vreg 1991, 1021).

The official ideological critique also endangered the university journalism programme in Ljubljana, as it was said to be imbued with “positivism and bourgeois theories”. The Director of the Yugoslav Institute of Journalism in Belgrade wrote a letter to Slovenian authorities “denouncing Vreg’s communication theory as non-Marxist and proposing that Slovenian journalists should be trained in Belgrade” (Ibid.).

The political allegations against the Faculty, including Vreg and the Department of Journalism, were very serious and could easily be fatal. The Bureau of the Central Committee of the Slovenian League of Communists criticised the absence of “a clear Marxist and self-governing socialist orientation at the Faculty” and decided that “we must discuss, with all the necessary arguments, the ideological, moral and political qualities of some lecturers, such as Rus, Arzenšek, Jerovšek, Hribar, Vreg, and decide

who could stay in in the Faculty. [...] We do not need a sociologist or a political scientist who merely or primarily masters the profession as a science, rather the profession should be used as a weapon in pursuing the revolutionary goals of the working class” (Bureau 1974). Of the five professors under scrutiny, only Vreg survived party criticism without political consequences (which also helped the Department of Journalism survive), while the other four professors of sociology and philosophy were temporarily barred from lecturing.

Like the efforts for academic institutionalisation of journalism education and communication studies, professional and academic empirical research in the field of mass communication did not receive political support, but neither it was truly obstructed. The idea of self-management in the economy implied a more independent role of companies (“organisations of associated labour”) in planning and performing economic activities. So it was no coincidence that quantitative methods for collection of information from a pool of respondents by asking multiple survey questions first gained a homeland right in the field of market research (in Zagreb in the 1950s). The beginnings of the institutionalisation of self-management in the early 1950s also introduced some elements of commodity production intended to dismantle state socialism and facilitate the development of socialist relations.

In 1970, Radio-Television Ljubljana, the Slovenian national public broadcaster, established the Program Study Department (PSD). Lado Pohar, the initiator and first head of PSD, former journalist and correspondent from the U.S., conducted some audience research with external collaborators even prior to the formal establishment of the Department (Šrot 2008). From 1973 to 1982, PSD continuously monitored weekly ratings of radio and television programmes. Similar research units conducting audience and readers surveys and content analysis of newspapers, radio, and television programs were also set up by public broadcast corporations and major newspapers in other Yugoslav republics. Following the initial orientation of these departments to enhance the quality of programmes, however, their operations were increasingly focused on supporting advertising or were discontinued altogether, as it was the case at the PSD in Ljubljana.

Self-management could not, of course, bring about political decentralisation on its own, but it did open up possibilities for greater autonomy of economic and other spheres. Nevertheless, during the 1950s, sporadic attempts to administer social surveys or opinion polls were held back. The first political public opinion polls were conducted as late as the mid-1960s. After confrontation with the political police, the then prime minister of Slovenia in the autumn of 1966 publicly acknowledged “the need to survey citizens’ opinions on political questions”. Among the main arguments for conducting “public opinion” surveys in a self-management society were – certainly not at that time dominant – the beliefs that (1) empirical opinion research is an expression or even evidence that democracy exists, and (2) that it is precisely empirical research of politically relevant opinions of citizens that can prevent social situations in which opinions are secretly surveyed only by the police.

Nevertheless, empirical research remained linked to political risks and conflicts. The pressure of party-state bureaucracy on intellectuals and, particularly, social research still persisted. Shortly after I was appointed head of the Research Centre for Self-Management, established by the Slovenian trade unions, the Centre published *Workers on Socio-Political Development and the Tasks of Trade Unions* (1982) intended for the delegates to the 10th Union Congress. However, the publication that summarised findings of several surveys conducted in Slovenia on social values, work-

ers' interests, participation in decision making, and attitudes toward the delegate system, was banned by the trade union bureaucracy as politically detrimental. This attempt to get research into the Trade Union Congress was not the only case of a (at that time?) naïve researcher's idea to communicate research to the public and politicians in order to inspire public engagement and help politicians make evidence-based decisions.

Enduring bureaucratic critique of social science theory and research in socialism – sometimes stronger, sometimes less intense, but rarely completely absent – opened a new perspective on the relationship between administrative and critical research. Although “the research methods used are commonly thought to be the basis for distinguishing” between administrative and critical research, in addition to the problems selected and the ideological orientation of researchers (Smythe and Van Dinh 1983, 117), it is clearly mistaken to operationalise “administrative research” by equating it with “quantitative research” and “survey research”, as suggested by Smythe and van Dinh (Ibid, 118-9). The status of (“quantitative”) empirical research in Slovenia and other former socialist countries, where – as in the case the banned publication – empirical research acted as a critical impulse against *ideologised abstract* “Marxist” theorisations, is perhaps the most convincing argument against such a simplistic conceptualisation of administrative vs. critical research (Splichal 1989).

Similarly to the beginnings of empirical research in capitalism, the more recent examples of opinion research in the former socialist countries clearly falsify the thesis of the innate conservative, administrative nature of empirical (quantitative) social research. As in the early beginnings in the 19th century capitalism, empirical research in the “late socialism” of the second half of the 20th century was a clear expression of the democratisation of society. During that period, there were frequently frictions and conflicts between politics and social sciences. Politicians – as those who directly or indirectly ordered and subsidised research – often tended to limit research autonomy and even suspended it completely because both the “bourgeois” theories and – even more importantly – results of empirical research were seen as falsifications of social reality while in fact social reality revealed by empirical research challenged, falsified and potentially delegitimised the ideologically frozen bureaucratic power.

During the last decade of socialism, in the 1980s, when communication and journalism education and research programmes became a regular component at many universities in all republics of the former Yugoslavia, Marxist/critical communication scholarship has gradually been marginalised in favour of more eclectic “main stream” approaches. Paradoxically, the more socialism was influenced by the model of capitalism and followed it, the less communication theory and research was inspired by a Marxist critique of capital and class relations, alienation of work and communication, domination of political and economic elites (see Džinić et al. 1984).

In the face of the impending decline of socialism and the breakup of Yugoslavia, critical communication thought in Slovenia (re)gained its place in the international Colloquia on Communication and Culture (1987) initially organised by the Social Communication Research Centre at the Faculty of Social Sciences and later transferred to the newly established European Institute for Communication and Culture (1990) based in Ljubljana. To enable a more systematic and continuous publication of ideas discussed at the colloquia and beyond, the colloquia were soon followed by the launch of the EURICOM journal *Javnost – The Public* (1994). With the 1990 conference of the International Association for Media and Communication Research in Bled, Slovenia, critical communication research was given a major impetus and a new venue for international cooperation.

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