

Media in Post-Communist Mongolia

Challenges and Opportunities in the Democratization Process

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Abstract

The introduction of a liberal media model built on freedom of expression, non-regulation, and free market in Post-Communist Mongolia has led to a plethora of new media outlets. In a context of external pluralism, the media are key players in dramatic political, social, and cultural changes in Mongolian society. However, due to violations of media freedom, lack of ethical standards as well as market failures in a media market marred with clientelism, the Mongolian media have neither lived up to the ideals of liberal media theory nor been driving forces in the ongoing democratization process. Instead, private and public media, in an unholy alliance, appear more like a lapdog in the service of the political and financial establishment than like a watchdog.

Keywords: Mongolia, post-communism, liberal media theory, democratization, media freedom, and media institutions

Introduction

In many Post-Communist countries, as is the case in Mongolia, the media systems have changed dramatically from a totalitarian media system rigorously controlled by the state and the party to different forms of more or less liberal media systems supplemented with public broadcasting. These changes in the media landscapes are an integrated part of fundamental political, social, and cultural changes in the transition countries. The media's role in the transition processes and specifically their role in the ongoing democratization processes are both theoretically and empirically complex issues that can only be understood in a historical context. The main aim of the present article is to analyze the introduction of a Western-inspired liberal media model in Mongolia, focusing on both an analysis of the media system in respect to media supply, ownership, and market situation and an analysis of violations of freedom of expression and challenges to journalistic integrity. Secondly, the aim is more generally to shed some light on central aspects of the media's role in democratization processes in Post-Communist countries.

Media and Society in Post-Communist Countries

Ever since the appearance of mass media, the relation between media and society has been contested. In 1956, Siebert et al., in *Four Theories of the Press*, presented the thesis "that

the press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates” (p. 1-2). From an overall perspective, this thesis might to some extent be correct – totalitarian media systems dominated in most Communist countries as did different forms of liberal media systems in Western democracies – but if we take a closer look at the former Communist media systems in Yugoslavia, Romania, and Mongolia, it is striking that despite the similarities they were quite different, just as the media systems in Germany, Holland and Denmark always have had similarities and differences. In general, the relation between media and society is dynamic and takes place in a complex interplay of political, financial, social, and cultural factors operating on local, national, and international levels. This is not least the case in relation to media in many Post-Communist countries, where first an often tumultuous transition process has been followed by a consolidation phase in which the media have been a battlefield between different political and financial interests, resulting in widely different media systems in widely different Post-Communist societies with respect to democratization and modernization.

In Mongolia, like in many other Post-Communist countries, the media system has been headed toward a Western liberal model fundamentally inspired by liberal media theory and built on freedom of expression, non-regulation, and the free market. The primary idea behind liberal media theory is that the free market and freedom of expression almost by default will create free and independent media, and the media will fulfill their principal democratic role to act as a watchdog over the state. Taking its point of departure in an analysis of the introduction of a liberal media model in Post-Communist Mongolia, the aim of the present article is to discuss the complex relation between media and society in Post-Communist countries, focusing on the media’s democratic role.

Mongolia has been chosen as the case study for several reasons: First of all, Mongolia is in the midst of a comprehensive and partly successful democratization process. The Mongolian constitution adopted in 1992 introduced a representative democracy with a market economy. Mongolia has conducted regular, fairly free multi-party national and local elections since 1990. The elections have resulted in alterations in governing power, which from a theoretical point of view is considered a healthy sign in a consolidating democracy. Secondly, Mongolian media legislation guarantees freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and freedom to seek and receive information. The media legislation supports a liberal media system with a plurality of private print and electronic media supplemented with public broadcasting. Thirdly, the Mongolian media landscape is quite well documented with respect to media supply and to some extent with respect to media use, content and ownership¹.

Finally, many of the typical political, professional, and financial problems related to the introduction of free media appear to be present in the Mongolian context and therefore accessible for analysis and theoretical reflections.

It is important to stress that the media in Mongolia do not only play a role from a democratization perspective. The media have a profound impact on the radical social and cultural changes that Mongolia is experiencing as part of the thorough modernization process. However, the modernizations process will only briefly be addressed here, although it is closely related to the democratization process.

Further, the article focuses primarily on the current media development in Mongolia. The pre-transition and transition phase will only be presented briefly to better understand the current development².

The Transition from Communism

Mongolia was the second state in the World that turned to Communism back in 1921, and although formally independent, Mongolia was a Soviet vassal state geopolitically sandwiched between the Soviet Union and China. During Communism, the totalitarian regime controlled all national and local media rigorously, and after 1970, the only foreign television available in Mongolia was a retransmission of the Soviet television station *Orbit*. Censorship was common, and journalists who challenged the official policy were punished severely. Owing to a Mongolian version of ‘Perestroika’, the regime loosened its grip and gave state- and party-run media more editorial freedom in the late 1980s. In any event, the Mongolian media were loyal to the regime and did not play any significant role in creating an environment for the non-violent Mongolian transition in 1990. The transition was non-dramatic and primarily spurred by the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s; the slightly reformed Communist party, *Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party (MPRP)*, stayed in power after the first two multi-party elections in 1990 and 1992.

The independent newspaper *Shine Toly* broke the government monopoly in February 1990, and within two years a wide variety of mainly weekly political newspapers mushroomed. Many Mongolians exploited enthusiastically the newfound freedom to express themselves, but despite this enthusiasm and the constitutional rights ensured in 1992, the new print publications had to overcome a series of severe obstacles, including an economic crisis from 1992 to 1994, and unfair competition from the government with regard to access to newsprint, printing, and distribution. Many newly established newspapers were published irregularly, and the state-run newspapers managed to maintain a dominant position in terms of circulation throughout the 1990s. Further, *MPRP* controlled all electronic media until 1994, when *AMONG*, a Christian American-Mongolian foundation, launched *Eagle TV* in Ulaanbataar. In 1996 and 1997, two more stations were launched in the capital.

Despite the dominant control of the media, *MPRP* was not able to stay in power. The party lost the presidential election in 1993 as well as the parliamentary election in 1996, partly due to the above-mentioned economic crisis. It would seem, then, that controlling the media does not necessarily ensure political control: The relation between the media and politics is more complex.

Since the transition, Mongolian society has undergone dramatic political, social, and cultural changes. During communism, a beginning urbanization of the predominantly nomadic Mongolian society took place, and this process has intensified after the transition. The current Mongolian society is socially and culturally divided between the capital and the sparsely populated vast rural areas (1.6 million square kilometers). The Mongolian population is around 2.5 million: one third lives in the capital, one third lives in aimag and soum center³, and the final one third consists of herders.

The capital has undergone a significant modernization process with financial prosperity, where a newly affluent upper-middle class has access to new modern apartments, cars, and other kinds of expensive consumer goods. However, there are huge social inequalities, and the majority of people in the capital only have access to cheap, often second class, imported consumer goods from China, and many people live on bare minimum in traditional gers and shacks in the outskirts of Ulaanbataar. In Ulaanbataar, there is widespread access to television, radio and print media, mobile phones are common, and Internet access has increased.

The stagnant rural areas are likewise culturally and socially divided between herders living a traditional nomadic lifestyle in gers and people living in the often, dreary towns and villages with a mixture of Soviet style apartment buildings, shacks and gers. The herders are highly dependent on their livestock. In 2000 and 2001, devastating cold winters caused heavy losses of livestock, but since then most herders have regained their losses and many herders now have huge livestock of sheep, goats, horses, camels and yaks. Except for a few mining areas and slowly developing tourism, the towns are dependent on husbandry and trade, and there is little prosperity in these towns. The infrastructure in the rural areas is dismal, concerning both roads and power (most villages only have diesel power a few hours per day) and health care and education. In fact health care and education have deteriorated significantly since the fall of Communism, although the literacy rate is still very high at around 97%. The towns have access to redistributed national television, national radio, local radio and television, and print media. The herders have access to terrestrial national radio and irregularly distributed print media. Further, it is estimated that between one third and half of herders have access to satellite television, often using solar panels or windmills as their source of power.

Politically, the elections have resulted in dramatic shifts in the governing power, and after the election in 2004, an unforeseen coalition government between the *MPRP* and the *Democratic Party (DP)* was formed. Although alterations in governing power and a plurality of media can be seen as healthy signs in a consolidating democracy, the democratic process in Mongolia is prone to serious problems such as corruption, violations of human rights, no distinct differentiation between legislative, executive, and judicial powers, and confusion between political and business interests.

Corruption

Corruption is a huge problem for Mongolian society on the whole. In 2005, the *United States Agency for International Development (USAID)* published a report on corruption that concluded:

The major finding of the report, consistent with other quantitative and qualitative studies conducted previously, is that opportunities for corruption are increasing in Mongolia at both the “petty” or administrative and “grand” or elite levels. Both types of corruption should be of concern to Mongolians, but grand corruption should be considered a more serious one because it solidifies linkages between economic and political power that can negatively impact or ultimately derail democracy and development, as it has in other post-Communist countries. (Casals & Associates 2005 p. 1)

The ‘grand’ corruption is related to many different areas: natural resources, privatization, development aid, customs duties, taxation, the legal sector, and allocation of land use licenses. In many cases, the stakes are high and there are often conflicts of interest between political and financial interests. “The team heard over and over again that economic and political elites are, if not one and the same, then certainly operating in close cooperation with each other for mutual benefit. *The line between public and private spheres is almost non-existent, and COI [Conflict Of Interest] is rampant, particularly at the highest levels of the economy and polity.*” (op. cit. p. 4). The grand

corruption establishes a system of comprehensive clientelism, in which the political and financial establishment rule through personal connections instead of by following formal regulations.

‘Petty’ corruption is rampant, from traffic police taking bribes instead of handing out speeding tickets to tax authorities favoring relatives. ‘Petty’ corruption is widely accepted and is often excused by the low salary of government employees or seen as part of tight family ties.

A contributing factor to the increasing corruption is “A lack of transparency and access to information that surrounds many government functions and undermines nearly all aspects of accountability by contributing to an ineffective media and hindering citizen participation in policy discussions and government oversight” (op. cit. p. 1). Despite the guarantees in the Mongolian constitution regarding the freedom to seek and receive information, the main legal infringement on free media is related to lack of access to information. The state secrecy law allows comprehensive secrecy classifications to be applied to government records, so in this respect the current legislation does not fulfill international standards for freedom of information, the result being that government officials at all levels make frequent use of these restrictions to keep information secret.

Media Market with Market Failures

The Mongolian media system is guided by liberal media theory based on freedom of the press and free market. There are no restrictions on ownership or regulations on competition besides the general competition law, and thus far the competition law has not been used in relation to the media. Anyhow, the free media market has revealed some serious shortcomings in respect to free and independent media.

The current number of print and electronic media outlets in Mongolia is impressive, especially considering the relatively small population.

Figure 1. Mongolian Media 2006⁴

Newspapers	147
Dailies	10
Biweeklies	5
Weeklies	24
Bimonthly	70
Others	38
Of which local newspapers	36
Magazines	84
Television stations	50
National	1 ⁵
Ulaanbataar	16
Local	33
Radio stations	63
National	1
Ulaanbataar	20
Local	42

In 2006, 147 newspapers were published, of which 10 were dailies. This impressive number indicates a thriving print market with respect to pluralism and freedom of the press, but with respect to circulation and the quality of the print media, it is a different story. The total circulation of the ten daily newspapers is estimated to be around 52,000, and the three largest newspapers in terms of circulation *Udriin Sonin* (13,700), *Zuunye Medee* (8,500) and *Unuudur* (8,000 in 2005) take the lion's share. Four recently established newspapers in 2005 and 2006 only have circulation figures between 1,000 and 5,300. Some of the weekly tabloids have significant circulation, with *Seuruleg* being the largest with 47,500, followed by *Khumuus* with 42,000, and three others between 10,000 and 20,000. The rest of the newspapers and all the magazines have limited circulation.

There is no transparency regarding revenue in the print media. The moderate circulation indicates that, with a few exceptions, revenue from sales and advertisement is quite low. Although the newspapers in some cases have significant revenue from 'paid for' stories, only a few of the daily newspapers and some weeklies could be profitable and run as media businesses on their own. In general, the print media are supported financially by business and/or political interests, and the print media are not determined by market principles, but governed by the economic and political interests of the owners and beneficiaries. The aim is less to inform the public and more to influence political and financial decision-makers.

If we look at the electronic media, the plethora of stations is amazing, but again only a few stations are financially viable. After the introduction of four private television stations in the mid- and late 1990s, the television market in Ulaanbataar was quite stable for some years, until two new high-profile stations were established in 2003, and ever since that time, the television sector has been in the midst of dynamic changes both in the capital and locally. During the past three years, additionally 6 terrestrial and 10 cable-fed Mongolian channels have been launched in Ulaanbataar. The initial private stations and some of the new terrestrial channels are high-profile and well-funded stations, while most of the cable-fed channels are low-budget stations operated by some of the Cable TV systems available in Ulaanbaatar⁶. Besides the many television stations, there are 20 private FM stations in Ulaanbataar.

The lack of financial transparency makes it impossible to acquire any detailed knowledge about the financial situation in the electronic media. In any case, the limited, although increasing, advertisement market cannot sustain 16 television stations and 20 radio stations in the capital. Even the most popular and high-profile television stations seem to rely on financial subsidies from political and business interests, and it is symptomatic that the stations do not follow professional standards to optimize advertisement revenue, although some stations are slowly focusing more on market opportunities, and audience research has recently gained momentum. While the print media narrowly address decision-makers, the main aim of the politically biased high-profile television stations is to influence the general public.

In local media in the provinces the financial situation is even worse, advertisement revenue is minimal and there are no signs of an emerging, local advertising market. The circulation of local weekly or biweekly newspapers is usually around 200 and rarely exceeds 500, so revenue is limited. Easy access to licenses and inexpensive hardware have made it possible to launch local radio stations for US\$ 5000, and in 2006, the output of local electronic media had increased to 33 radio and 44 television stations. A

few low-budget youth-oriented ‘bedroom’ FM stations dominated by music and phone-in announcements have temporarily been able to do reasonable business, but in general local media are strongly dependent on subsidies from local government or political and business interests.

In theory, the Mongolian media market is non-regulated and follows market principles, but in reality the media market has market failures, because the media system has detached itself from market principles. These market failures are caused by the size of the market, an immature market, limited advertisement revenue, and first and foremost vested financial and political interests in a society based on corruption and clientelism. The market failures reveal shortcomings in liberal media theory, because the theory has strong faith in the robustness of market principles and takes for granted that the media will act as rational media businesses and by default play by market principles. Private Mongolian media are not determined by market principles, because the Mongolian media provide a commodity that is different from other commodities. The private media provide political and financial influence for their owners and beneficiaries.

It can be argued that small fragments of the Mongolian media market operate as media businesses following market principles. The mushrooming of private low-budget local FM stations reveals that there are local entrepreneurs that want to run stations as businesses, but despite sincere aspirations to provide a variety of quality programs including local news, in reality the stations cannot afford to invest in genuine local programming and they end up mainly providing pirated popular music and announcements anchored by high school youth. Further, a few of the weekly tabloids make a profit, because they have been able to expand the popularity of the tabloids to social groups that rarely read the traditional political newspapers and even reach people living in the countryside. However, the tabloids are known for inaccurate and slanderous reporting, which demonstrates that popularity does not necessarily promote relevant information and journalistic quality. Not even these fragments of the media market governed by market principles fulfill the normative role of liberal media theory.

Media Ownership

Regarding media ownership, access to reliable information is limited, and it is often impossible to identify the actual owners of the media outlets. However, it is possible to identify political parallelism with close connections between media outlets and political parties, just as politicians and big businesses often jointly invest in media outlets.

The largest daily newspaper, *Udryn Sonin*, is owned by a company supporting the *Democratic Party*. The ownership of the second largest, *Zunie Medee*, is not disclosed, but consistent rumors maintain that the wife of the President is one of the owners. The third largest, *Unuudor*, is owned by *Mongol News* – one of the most powerful media groups in Mongolia. The group also owns three minor weekly newspapers, the television station *MN Channel 25*, and a distribution company. The group is thought to be aligned toward a faction of *MPRP*. *MPRP* also runs a party newspaper, *Unen*. The Municipality of Ulaanbaatar owns *Ulaanbaatar Times*, two television stations, and a radio station, although the media law of 1998 prohibits government-run media. With respect to the four newly established minor daily newspapers, one is privately owned and supports the President, another is privately owned and affiliated with *MPRP*, while the last two

are said to be backed by business interests. The private company *Tayankhan* owns the tabloid *Seruuleg* as well as the television station, *TV8*, a radio station, and a minor newspaper. Most of the many small weekly and bimonthly newspapers are politically motivated and often owned by the editor.

The privately owned television stations are operated with various degrees of political and business interests behind the stations. The programming policies of *TV5* and *TV9* indicate clearly that the stations are aligned with *MPRP*. Formally, *Media Holding* owns *TV9*, but persistent reports maintain that the President owns the channel. Formally, private investors own *TV5*, but reports are that the station maintains close relationships with top politicians in *MPRP* and a mining company. A newly established and heavily funded TV station, *CI*, belongs to the private company *Genco Group*, whose president is a member of parliament for the *DP*. The American religious *Among Foundation* owns *Eagle TV*. Besides promoting Christian values, *Among Foundation* is aligned with the far right in American policy. *Eagle TV* is heavily supported from the US. The Chinese cable operator *Sansar CATV* owns three of the newly established cable-fed channels.

In the countryside, several of the old local media are either formally owned or indirectly controlled by the local governments. Many recently established television stations are owned by local businessmen, often with connections to a politician or a political party. Before the election in 2004, *MPRP* launched many local FM stations as political vehicles, but after the elections *MPRP* often suspended the financial support and the stations were left to sink or swim with new self-declared independent managers. However, the original owner still holds the license, and only the next elections will show the true level of independence.

There is no legislation on ownership concentration, neither regarding control of one market, e.g. print, nor regarding cross-ownership and foreign ownership. However, concentration of media ownership is not an issue in respect to media conglomerates. *Monitoring Mongolian Media 2006* identified 31 media owners that own more than one media outlet, but none of these multiple media owners are really dominant players, so from a financial point of view, current media ownership is not a threat to media pluralism. Neither is foreign ownership an issue, although foreign ownership of media exists in practice as exemplified through *Eagle TV* and *Sansar CATV*. However, there are tendencies toward increased ownership concentration around a few key political figures closely related to large businesses. This problem is less a question of media concentration and lack of pluralism, and more a question of conflicts of interest and a system governed by clientelism.

Violations of Media Freedom

As pointed out, the overall Mongolian legal framework is quite progressive with respect to freedom of expression and freedom of the press⁷. However, in the Mongolian media experience, continuously different forms of violations of media freedom and political and financial pressure on the media are prevalent.

In October 2005, a local NGO, *Globe International*, in association with the *International Free Expression eXchange (IFEX)* and Moscow-based *Center for Journalists for Extreme Situation* began the project *Monitoring free expression violations and Supporting the rights of independent media* in Mongolia. The goal of the project is to

monitor violations of media freedom and to campaign for the rights of independent media. Within the first year, 35 violations have been reported to *Globe International*⁸. The monitoring project has identified violations of freedom of expression in many different forms ranging from physical harassment and death threats, extensive use of libel cases, to denial of information and unjustified obstructions. The violations take place in national as well as local media.

The alerts include a television journalist beaten by unidentified perpetrators. In June 2006, she reported in *Forbidden to watch* on a local Erdenet television station “on the fate of privatization vouchers for 9,000 employees of the Erdenet mining industry. After the television program, unknown people threatened Tsevegmid over the phone. The director of the Erdenet brokerage company, which held the vouchers, also warned the journalist, “It is a very complicated issue, you could be killed.” (<http://www.ifex.org/fr/content/view/full/75661/>).

In 2005, an editor of a local newspaper was threatened on the phone after a critical article. Later on, unidentified people demolished her yard. The incident was reported to the police, but the police did not apprehend the perpetrators. The editor stressed that the newspaper has repeatedly received threats and been insulted by businessmen.

In several situations, the police have violated the journalists’ right to cover demonstrations. In October 2006, two reporters were detained for 2 hours when they covered a civil society demonstration for two of the daily newspapers. One of the journalists was beaten by policemen, and her face and body were severely injured.

These alerts are the tip of the iceberg. Interviews with media professionals all over the country have proved, in accordance with the alerts reported to *Globe International*, that many of the interviewed journalists, editors, and people in civil society have been exposed to harassment. Many of them did not report the incidents to the police or to *Globe International*. In many cases, the perpetrators were part of the governing political elite, powerful businessmen or even the police. Often the interviewees expressed distrust in the executive power of the police and the judicial power of the court. In fact, they feared that reporting harassment to the police would make things even worse, and they feared that further attention to and publicity on the incidents could easily spark more tension and animosity, especially in rural areas.

These violations of media freedom cause great concern and make it extremely difficult for the Mongolian media to fulfill their role as watchdog and the fourth estate. Censorship is formally abolished, but self-censorship is prevalent.

Political and Financial Pressure

Political and financial pressure on the media occurs to a varying extent in any media system, no matter how hard journalists, media owners and politicians claim the opposite, and investigative journalism will always encounter difficulties, because the core of investigative journalism is to disclose information that some people or institutions want to keep secret. However, in Mongolia, political and financial dependency is critical, because the pressure comes in many different forms and the malpractices are deeply rooted in the daily routines and generally accepted by journalists and editors.

The Mongolian media are saturated with different forms of ‘paid for’ stories that are presented as independent reporting. The ‘paid for’ stories are prevalent even among the

most serious daily newspapers and the national television stations. Most media outlets and journalists fully accept making these kinds of stories paid for by companies, politicians, NGO's or whoever is willing to pay for publicity or setting the agenda. Usually the media outlet receives the money for the 'paid for' stories and the journalist receives a commission in addition to his or her normal salary. At the leading daily newspapers, first-year journalists receive a monthly salary of around US\$ 50 to 60, while the salary can be doubled or tripled through procurement of 'paid for' stories. A popular and experienced journalist often makes around US\$ 400 a month from 'paid for' stories alone.

Just as with petty corruption, low salaries for journalists, as low as US\$ 40-50 per month, are used as an excuse by many journalists who willingly choose to be part of the vicious cycle of accepting financial benefits for writing 'paid for' stories. However, the practice comes with a price tag: The 'paid for' reporting on social, economic, and political issues is rarely fair and unbiased, as many media outlets and journalists are willing to give up ethical standards to accommodate political and financial agendas for their own financial gain. The 'paid for' stories also make it difficult for the journalists to write critically about the same issue the next day, and sometimes journalists are paid for not writing about controversial issues.

The local media are even more prone to accepting 'paid for' stories in order to make ends meet, because advertisement and subscriptions rarely provide sufficient revenue for the survival of local media. The majority of local media and journalists accept 'paid for' official news from the governor's office and 'paid for' stories from politicians and businessmen, as they see little other choice owing to the lack of other viable revenue models. Hence there are few local media that scrutinize local government beyond the point of complaining about potholes in the pavement and broken light bulbs in street-lights, and local media rarely investigate the local political and business establishment unless it is part of a partisan political agenda. The bottom line is that the media in many local communities are distorted, small-scale reflections of the national media.

In general, the complexity and severity of the violations of media freedom and the political and financial dependency are crucial. The media work in an extremely politicized environment with mistrust in the police and the court system, heavily vested political and financial interests, and lack of journalistic professionalism and ethical standards. In many ways, the Mongolian media situation reflects fundamental problems in Mongolian society – problems that can be ascribed to corruption, prevalent clientelism, the legacy of the Communist regime, and the lack of a democratic tradition.

Having said this, it has to be stressed that there are significant developments pointing in the opposite direction. First of all, the totalitarian control of the media that existed during Communism has disappeared, and the plethora of media outlets has created pluralism. The daily and weekly political newspapers thrive on the newly gained freedom of expression and reflect different points of view. The fact that the newspapers are instrumental to political (and financial) interests is in line with a long publicist tradition and similar to the party press in Western countries in the early Twentieth Century. In this sense, it could be argued that the Mongolian media system as a whole fulfils the criteria for external pluralism in Hallin and Mancini's definition: a "range of media outlets or organizations reflecting the points of view of different groups or tendencies in society" (Hallin and Mancini, 2004 p. 29). However, not all opinions are heard. Some opinions, critical of the political establishment, have been silenced through violations

of freedom of expression, and it is probably more problematic that huge disadvantaged groups (herders, migrants, and poor people in general) have limited access and ability to express themselves in the media and are generally excluded from the public sphere. The newspaper market is an exclusive domain, where the political and financial establishment exchange views and opinions among themselves.

Secondly, the electronic media, not least television, is another ball game. Television is the main source of news and information for the broader population. Thus, television news and political programming are the main battlefields, and the owners of dominant television stations unscrupulously exploit their dominant position in an attempt to control news coverage and political debates and to exclude oppositional views. Paradoxically, the American owned *Eagle TV* has played a key role in news coverage on television. *Eagle TV* has developed an all-news format⁹ based on Western journalistic standards and extensive live coverage. *Eagle TV* has in many ways set new standards for news coverage in Mongolia and challenged biased and politically controlled news on the other media outlets. *Eagle TV*'s ratings have improved continuously, and in 2006 the station was one of the leading providers of news to the Ulaanbaatar audience. At first, the competitors reacted within their traditional mindset by contesting the numbers, but this was obviously a short-lived strategy, because it did not address the problem of decreasing audiences and in the end of less political influence. Hence, viewers' preferences for more fact-based and balanced news coverage have gradually spurred changes in the news coverage from the competitors.

Interestingly, *Eagle TV* – similar to most media outlets in Mongolia – is instrumental to other interests. The station is not run as a media business in itself, but instead as a heavily subsidized missionary station strongly advocating the virtues of Western journalism and the free market, and secondarily preaching religious beliefs. Further, *Eagle TV* would probably have been squeezed out of the market in one way or another if it were not for extremely good connections to the American Embassy and even to political leaders in Washington. For (geo)political reasons, the Mongolian political elite has been forced to accept the challenge from *Eagle TV*.

Finally, Western standards of free and independent media and professional journalism are well-known in the Mongolian media community, because Western donors have provided comprehensive mid-career training programs often at the *Press Institute of Mongolia*, and several new journalism schools promote Western journalistic ideas. Despite all odds, many well-trained and skilful journalists have committed themselves to providing independent and fact-based journalism and sometimes even investigative journalism, and there are some media outlets committed to independent and balanced news, *Eagle TV* being the most prominent and influential example.

Public Broadcasting

In the following section, the focus will be shifted from private media to the establishment of public broadcasting. In 2006, the former state-run broadcaster was transformed into a public broadcaster

Throughout the years, neither *MPRP* nor *DP* had been ready to give up control of state-run broadcasting during their time in power, because both parties considered the station to be instrumental for their political interests. Finally, 15 years after the transi-

tion, the governing coalition gave in to political pressure from civil society and donors in 2005 and adopted a public broadcasting law modeled on Western standards, although a few key issues such as funding and political independence remained unresolved. The continuation of state-run broadcasting did not send the right signals of a successful ongoing democratization process.

Although *MPRP* and *DP* in the meantime had established well-subsidized private radio and television in Ulaanbaatar as well as the two parties controlled many local radio and television stations, it can be argued that the politicians only pretended to give in to the pressure to comply with demands for public broadcasting. The politicians have not yet been ready to give up control of public broadcasting, instead the regulatory body, the National Council, has been a political battlefield for indirect political influence. Consequently, the first General Director was fired after only a few months, because he did not serve the dominant political interests, and leadership at the helm of the new public broadcaster has changed repeatedly. Furthermore, the station has been established without proper funding for programming, equipment upgrades, and obligations toward long-time employees. The lack of proper funding makes the public broadcaster vulnerable to external pressure and makes genuine changes extremely difficult. Obviously the political establishment is not fully committed to politically independent public broadcasting.

Since the transformation in 2006, the public broadcaster has been in the midst of an extremely complex and dynamic transition process. While the station is undergoing internal institutional changes, it also has to adjust to new competitive environments for radio and television. The State-run broadcaster had a privileged position even after the political transition in 1990, because the national radio channel was and still is the only radio station with national coverage, and the television channel is the most widely distributed terrestrial channel, and since 2004 it has been distributed by satellite.

The strong nationwide presence gives the public broadcaster a competitive advantage as the main source of information for the rural population, and therefore the public broadcaster is still a key political player. But this national advantage comes with a built-in disadvantage, especially in relation to television. The new booming television market in the capital is creating dramatic changes in the pattern of television viewing, and the public broadcaster has to develop a strategy to address the needs of the increasingly modern viewers in the capital, and at the same time cater to the needs of the more homogeneous and less modern rural population. It is a tremendous challenge to establish a successful strategy, within the public broadcasting obligations, that can bridge this gap. So far, the public broadcaster has not presented proper strategies to address these challenges.

For better and worse, the public broadcaster has inherited the old (Communist) state-run institution in terms of its buildings, outdated equipment, most of its management, and all the aging employees, but worst of all the public broadcaster is caught in a web of firmly established expectations related to the past – expectations held by viewers and politicians alike. Thus far, the broadcaster has not been able to reform itself from within, the transition has only resulted in minor changes, and public broadcasting has not established itself as a substantial socially responsible supplement to the private media.

Conclusion

The constitutional rights to freedom of expression and freedom of the press have established the foundation for free and independent media in Mongolia, and societal and technological developments have resulted in dramatic changes in the Mongolian media landscape, with an impressive increase in media outlets and external pluralism. However, the Mongolian media as an institution have far to go to live up to the ideals of liberal media theory.

From a theoretical point of view, it can be argued that the main problems in the Mongolian media are related to a paradox in liberal media theory between indispensable individual rights to freedom of expression and normative expectations on the press as a whole. Freedom of the press is mainly an individual right all media outlets have, but the relation between the sum of all the individual rights and the press as a whole remains unresolved. Liberal media theory's strong confidence in market forces as the main regulating mechanism has proved to be seriously wrong in Mongolia, as is the case in many minor transition countries such as Albania, Montenegro and Slovakia (Petkovic 2004). This is partly due to the fact that the media are not only a commodity like other commodities, the media have a privileged position, such that their political and financial influence in some cases suspends market forces and leaves the field open for stronger political, financial, and cultural forces in society.

Liberal media theory has fundamentally been elaborated in relation to Western media, where the media systems have gone through long evolutionary historic processes, and where the media have been continuously, and still are, under public scrutiny and are regulated in different ways (anti-trust laws, restrictions on cross-ownership, self-regulatory bodies, code of ethics, etc.). Despite these modifying regulations, Western liberal media systems very often expose their serious shortcomings, also regarding fair and independent competition, pluralism and the quality of the press. Hence, it is problematic, some might say naive, to expect that in a revolutionary transition process the media will by default adopt a system of free and independent media supporting genuine democratization processes; the media may just as well turn into a monster and obstruct democratization.

The media will always be a battlefield for legitimate as well as illegitimate political and financial interests, but from a Western democratic point of view, it is impossible to accept limitations on freedom of the press. Freedom of expression is an indispensable necessity in democratic processes. On the other hand, in 'free' media systems it is important to build in checks and balances, some of which should be incorporated into media legislation (anti-trust laws, limitations on cross-ownership, and freedom of information), some of which should be self-regulatory bodies on codes of ethics, etc., while others should be a strong support to independent national and international civil society groups that can guide and support the media and act as watchdogs for violations of media freedom and misconduct in the media. Further, public broadcasting and community media with socially responsible remits can be very strong assets in establishing the media as the Fourth Estate in a well functioning free and independent media system. However, in Mongolia as in most transition countries, the transformation of state-run broadcasting into public broadcasting has been marred with problems, and the public broadcaster has not been able to break away from the past and set an alternative agenda.

Liberal media theory focuses on the media's role of monitoring the state, but in Mongolia the media do not fulfill this role, because the private media are largely an integrated

part of an unholy alliance between the state and the business sector, hence the media have no interest in exposing state misconduct or in exposing wrongdoings in the private sector. As a consequence, the media appear to be more like a lapdog than a watchdog. In the politicized media environment, the media sometimes look like snarling Rottweilers in the service of specific political and financial interests, but from an overall perspective, the media act as a lapdog in the service of the political and financial establishment. The lapdog is trained with sticks and carrots, the sticks being violation of media freedom and harassment, and the carrots being the benefits offered for loyalty.

In many ways, the media in the current situation reflect Mongolian society in general. The overall political and financial power structure in the society is mirrored in media ownership and control of the media. The defective separation of powers has a serious impact on the media, because violations of media freedom are rarely taken seriously by the police and the court system, this lack of protection quells journalists' urge to engage in investigative and critical reporting that discloses serious wrongdoings. The cultural acceptance of petty corruption and clientelism is mirrored in the 'paid for' stories in the media. This is not to argue that a simple causal relationship exists between media and society, the situation is much more complex and ambivalent than that. The media have freedom of action and opportunities for development. In some situations, like the impact of *Eagle TV*, the developments are unpredictable, while in others, like the transformation of state-run broadcasting, they are foreseeable, but the media do not function separate from the rest of society.

Notes

1. The present article is based on a comprehensive UNESCO media sector analysis of the Mongolian media landscape (Ziyasheva, Redl, and Nielsen 2007), systematic monitoring of the Mongolian media landscape since 1999 carried out by the *Press Institute of Mongolia*, and on several research and consultancy projects in Mongolia since 1999.
2. For a more elaborated analysis of the transition phase, see Myagmar and Nielsen 2001.
3. Mongolia is divided into 21 aimags (provinces) and 336 soums. Each aimag has an administrative center (town), and the soum centers are usually villages. The mining cities Erdenet and Darkhan with 70,000-80,000 inhabitants are more urbanized and modern than the other towns in the provinces.
4. Source: *Mongolian Media Monitoring 2006*.
5. Since 2004, the public broadcaster and four Ulaanbaatar-based stations have been distributed by satellite and rebroadcast locally by the local authorities in towns and a few villages.
6. The CATV systems offer up to 50 Mongolian and foreign channels. According to figures from *Monitoring Mongolian Media 2005*, cable penetration in the capital exceeds 50%. The high cable penetration is partly due to availability in the many apartment blocks.
7. The current legislation on media issues has some shortcomings in relation to access to information and defamation. The state secrecy law allows comprehensive secrecy classifications to be applied to government records. Government officials at all levels make frequent use of these restrictions to keep information secret. Contrary to international standards, the criminal law does have provisions on defamation.
8. All of the alerts are available in Mongolian at <http://www.monitoring.mn> and 12 of the alerts have been reported to IFEX available at <http://www.ifex.org>. The first annual report from the project is available at: www.globeinter.org.mn.
9. The news programs are supplemented by a few strategically placed Christian programs.

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