

Media Concentration: A Critical Political Economy Perspective

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Translation from German: Christian Fuchs

Abstract

This article presents foundations of the analysis of media concentration from the perspective of the approach the critique of the political economy of the media and communication. It outlines the dangers and problems of media concentration, discusses the question of how to measure media concentration, identifies different types of media concentration, and gives a systematic overview of empirical studies of media concentration. As a result of the country comparison on a theoretical (macro) level with an analytically required high level of abstraction, first and foremost *identities, commonalities and similarities* with regard to the development of media concentration including its causes and consequences can be recognised. The author argues that media concentration also needs to be theorised. The paper distinguishes and discusses two such theoretical approaches: apologetic-normative competition theories of media concentration and critical-empirical theories of media concentration. Critical-empirical theories of media concentration situate media concentration in the context of the development of capitalism, which requires to use the critique of the political economy as theoretical foundation.

Keywords: media concentration, critique of the political economy of the media and communication, transformation, international comparison

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Preface: Manfred Knoche's Critique of the Political Economy of the Media and Communication

Christian Fuchs

Without Manfred Knoche, there would be no critique of the political economy of the media and communication in the German-speaking world. Comparable to the work of Graham Murdock and Peter Golding in the Anglo-Saxon world, Knoche, who was born on 24 September 1941 and recently celebrated his 80th birthday, has conducted pioneering work that helped laying foundations of the approach of the critique of the political economy of the media. He made an important contribution to the development of media and communication studies and its sub-discipline of media economics.

I have held Manfred Knoche in high esteem as an academic colleague since a time together at the University of Salzburg, where he held the Chair of Journalism and Communication Studies with a special focus on media economics from 1994 to 2009. Manfred Knoche began his studies and academic career in 1967 at the University of Mainz. The time of the student movement left a lasting political and academic mark on him. He says: “I consider it my personal good fortune that I was able to become part of the student movement”, whose spirit of optimism and social criticism “shaped my thinking, but also my attitude to life”. In 1973, he moved to the Free University of Berlin, where he successfully completed his master's degree in the same year, his doctorate in 1978 and his habilitation in 1981. In general, he says: “The Berlin period was very formative for me. Master's degree, doctorate, habilitation, assistant, assistant professorship, everything was at the Berlin Institute” for Journalism (Institut für Publizistik). From 1983 to 1994, he was professor of communication studies at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

Manfred Knoche stands for the development of an analysis of media and communication in capitalism that is empirically based and grounded in critical social theory, especially the critique of political economy. On this basis, he has covered a wide range of important topics: the capitalisation and restructuring of the media industry; media concentration research; non-commercial open access, decapitalisation of scholarly publishing as a critique of the political economy of scholarly communication; ideology; advertising; the nexus of state, capital and media; media technologies and digitalisation; media content analysis; non-commercial alternative media; the long-term analysis of the representation of the Greens in the daily press; electronic mass media in Europe; the youth press; the local press; the postal newspaper service; the coverage of strikes in the media industry; etc.

Manfred Knoche's work shows how significant critical theory and social criticism are for media and communication studies and how the capitalist social formation shapes, distorts and damages our everyday life and everyday communication. Characteristic of Manfred Knoche's work are, on the one hand, empirically based studies and, on the other, fundamental theoretical analyses of communication and the media in capitalist society. His work on the critique of the political economy of communication and the media is of great importance today for the critical analysis of the dynamics and contradictions of digital capitalism.

I wish Manfred Knoche many more years of creative critical work and thus possibilities and opportunities to continue to contribute to the development of the field of the critique of the political economy of the media and communication together with companions and young academics.

Translations of Manfred Knoche's works published in tripleC:

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- Manfred Knoche. 2019. The Crisis-Ridden Capitalist Mode of Production as Driving Force for Restructurations and Transformations in and of the Media Industry: Explanatory Theoretical Elements of a Critique of the Political Economy of the Media. *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 17 (2): 287-307. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v17i2.1137>
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Media Concentration: A Critical Political Economy Perspective

Manfred Knoche

1. Theoretical-Methodological Foundations of the International Comparison of Media Concentration

Since global media concentration, like concentration in the economy as a whole, is a defining feature of capitalist economic formations and capitalist formations of society, it is appropriate to undertake an international comparison of media concentration on the basis of a critical political economy approach. A suitable starting point is Karl Marx's fundamental analysis of the connection between accumulation, concentration and centralisation of capital as an *essential feature of capitalism* (Marx 1867; Altvater, Hecker, Heinrich and Schaper-Rinkel 1999; Heinrich 2005).

The concentration analyses carried out on the basis of these theoretical-methodological foundations have the advantage of analytical explanatory and predictive power (Baran and Sweezy 1966; Bischoff et al. 2000; Huffs Schmid 1969, 2000; Kisker 1999; 2000; Mandel 1978; Sweezy 1970). Even established competition theorists sometimes recognise – albeit without consequences for their own theory development – “how realistically KARL MARX (capital letters in the original, MK) saw the capitalist competition process as a process of selection, displacement and concentration in the context of society as a whole. [...] from the point of view of competition theory, his analysis of the competitive process and the restrictions of competition is very significant, but has remained largely unnoticed by bourgeois economics” (Olten 1998, 41).

International comparisons of media concentration are therefore made in this article in the context of approaches to a critical political economy of media and communication (Fuchs and Mosco 2012; Herman and Chomsky 2002; Holzer 1994; McChesney 2000, 2008; McChesney, Wood and Foster 1998; Meier 1996/1997, 2003; Mosco 2009; Murdock and Golding 1973; Wasko, Murdock and Sousa 2011; Winseck and Jin 2011). The basis of the international comparison of the development of media concentration is a theory of concentration that is critical of capitalism (Knoche 2005a, b) within the framework of a critique of the political economy of the media (Knoche 2001, 2002, 2005c; Fuchs 2009). Since the comparison thus refers to a *uniform type of capitalist societies*, the method of agreement is primarily used, following John Stuart Mill's classic distinction between the method of difference and the method of agreement (Berg-Schlosser and Müller-Rommel 1992; Esser and Hanitzsch 2012; Kleinsteuber 2003;

Melischek, Seethaler and Wilke 2008; Thomaß and Kleinsteuber 2011)¹. As a result of the country comparison on a theoretical (macro) level with an analytically required high level of abstraction, first and foremost *identities, commonalities and similarities* with regard to the development of media concentration including its causes and consequences can be recognised. Differences, discordances and dissimilarities can at best be observed at a lower level of abstraction, at the empirical (micro) level, with regard to the degrees of concentration currently achieved and the temporal course of the media concentration processes.

2. Relevance: Journalistic Diversity, Problems of Power and Legitimacy, Democracy

The problem of media concentration is generally of *relevance for society* because it calls into question the democratic foundations of capitalist economic and social systems in practical and legitimising terms. In the media sector, this “systemic question” arises in two ways beyond the rest of the economy: economically with regard to the private economy, market and competition, which are also propagated as ideal control mechanisms for the media sector, and politically with regard to the ideals of media freedom and journalistic diversity as prerequisites for a democratic public sphere. The problem of concentration is generally, not only in the media sector (Jin 2008), of high *political relevance*, especially since the market and competition have been enforced as the sole means of controlling the economy and society in the course of worldwide neoliberal privatisation policies. Due to the real concentration processes, “the basis of legitimacy of the entire system is disappearing” (Huffschnid 1969, 67), as these concentration processes recognisably stand in considerable contradiction to the still widespread theories of competition and the state competition policy oriented towards them.

Note 1:

Concentration processes endanger the democratic foundations of capitalist economic and societal systems because they actually contradict the propagated ideals of competition and journalistic diversity.

In this respect, the concentration problem is also of considerable *academic relevance*, since concentration is promoted instead of controlled on the basis of neoliberal policy concepts (Knoche 1996b, 1997). At the same time, regularly adapted economic theories of competition shift the legitimacy framework in such a way that the degree of concentration achieved in the economy is legitimised (Oltén 1998, Rittner and Kulka 2008, Schmidt 2012, Sjurts 2005). Competition theory thus fulfils an apologetic-ideological function of legitimising or concealing the concentration of economic-political rule and power by “abolishing competition without also abolishing the theory of competition” (Huffschnid 1969, 67).

Finally, the connection between media concentration and economic, journalistic and political *power* is relevant (Chomsky 2004; Knoche 1997; Leidinger 2003; McChesney and Nichols 2004; Meier 2007; Trappel, Meier, Schrape and Wölk 2002; Murdock

¹ Von Beyme (2000, 154f) also sees the dominance of a “capitalist world system” and an increasing “uniformisation of the world”, the consequences of which for the comparative method “cannot yet be fully assessed”. From this, however, he concludes with a reference to postmodern thinking “as the finisher and not the overcomer of modernity”, which has “placed the primacy of the difference method above the search for similarities”: “Precisely because the world is converging, the *difference method* can be applied all the more radically for the remaining differences”.

1990; Prokop 2005). The journalistic power resulting from the economic power of the media companies, or more precisely the (capital) owners of these companies, refers to journalists and programme makers who have the power to enforce of information, opinion, legitimation and ideology that conform to the interests of those in power. The resulting political power extends to citizens, organisations, parties and the state. This concentration of power is of considerable social relevance because the autonomous power of the media owners to dispose of and shape the media, which is secured by property rights and additionally by guarantees of freedom of the press under the Basic Law, is essentially uncontrollable and fundamentally irreversible.

3. Questions and Systematisation of Media Concentration's Measurement

Questions for the international comparison of media concentration can be oriented towards a *theoretical systematisation* of the object of investigation (Knoche 1978, 1996a, 1997), which should be the basis for measurements and presentations of the development and status of media concentration in the different countries on a *descriptive* level. First of all, it is a matter of the fundamental question of what is regarded or evaluated as concentration at all. This question needs clarification not only from an academic point of view, but also from a socio-political and economic point of view, especially in connection with state regulation or concentration control.

Based on the systematisation of *market-related* concentration measurement (figure 1), a distinction must be drawn between different media sectors (press, radio, television, film, etc.) as concentration sectors. The differentiation according to concentration levels – international, national, regional, local – is important. In order to arrive at meaningful concentration analyses, a delimitation according to *relevant markets* is necessary within each of these concentration sectors and levels, which is carried out *factually according to* homogeneous product types, *spatially* according to distribution areas and *temporally* according to modes of publication/broadcast times. Since these distinctions are rarely made in the available country descriptions of media concentration, there is usually a systematic underestimation of the degrees of concentration.

Measurement of Media Concentration

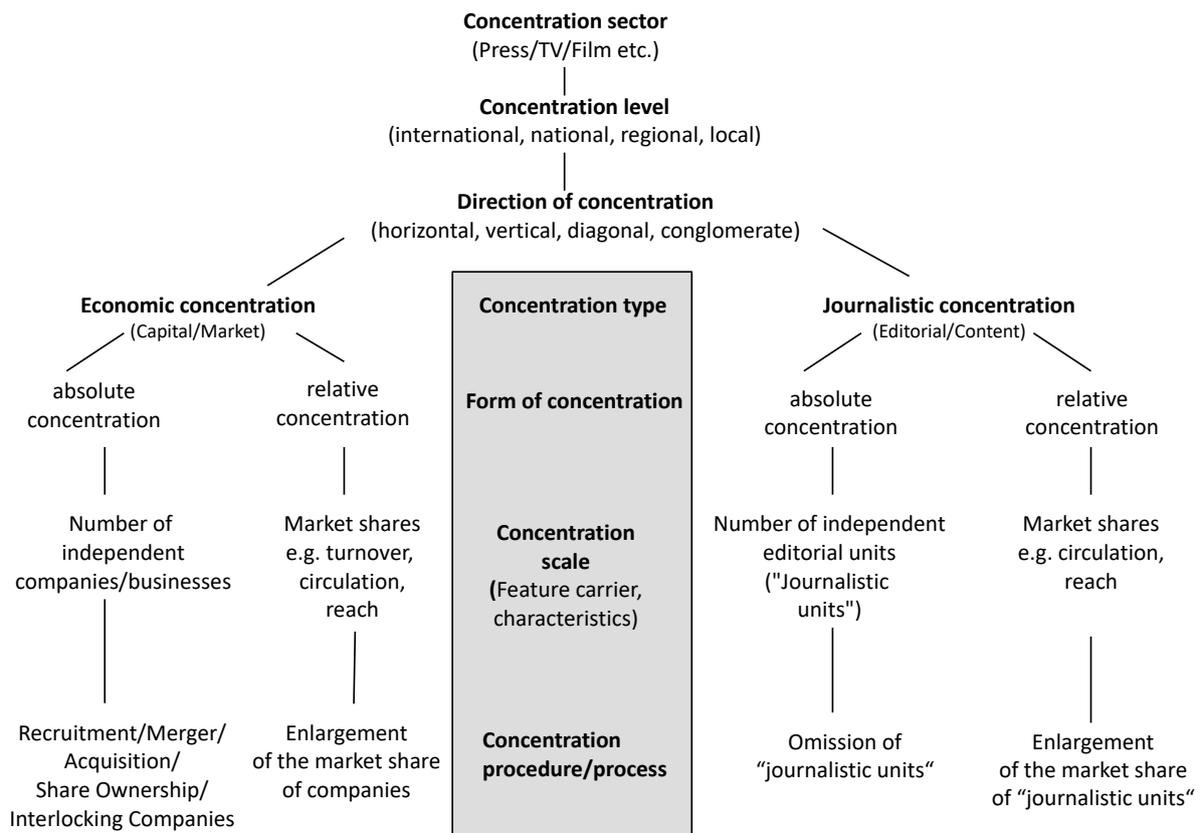


Figure 1 (own representation)

The regularity of national and international media concentration processes is differentiated according to four directions of concentration – horizontal, vertical, (media) diagonal and conglomerate – each according to media sectors (press, television, film etc.) and relevant markets. In this context, we find a process of market and capital concentration across all media sectors, which manifests itself primarily in the development of press groups into multi-media and communication corporations. Following common economic terminology, a distinction according to the following directions of concentration is relevant (Knoche 1996a: 109):

- *horizontal* concentration designates concentration phenomena at the same production level within an economic sector, an industry, a media sector or a relevant market;
- *vertical* concentration designates concentration phenomena at successive production levels such as procurement, production, and distribution;
- *(media) diagonal* concentration designates cross-media sector concentration phenomena such as interconnections between media sectors
- *conglomerates* mean cross-sectoral concentration phenomena such as interconnections between the media industry and other industries.

For measuring media concentration in media and communication studies, the distinction between two interrelated types of concentration, *economic* and *journalistic* concentration, is of fundamental importance. *Economic* concentration is usually measured in two ways: on the one hand as *market concentration*, on the other hand as *capital*

concentration, which are, however, strongly interrelated. In competition theory – in analogy to Marx's concepts of the *accumulation* and *centralisation* of capital – a distinction is made between *internal* and *external* corporate concentration. *Journalistic* concentration is usually only formally represented as *editorial* concentration, rarely as concentration of information and opinions that are *homogeneous in content*.

Note 2:

Concentration in the media sector includes economic concentration, which appears as market concentration and as capital concentration, as well as journalistic concentration, which refers to the concentration of editorial units as well as to the homogenisation of content.

In this context, it is important to analyse to what extent economic concentration is the cause, trigger or precondition of journalistic concentration. Research should also be directed towards investigating to what extent there is journalistic concentration on a considerable scale in the face of a possibly low degree of economic concentration, in the form of homogeneous ideology production for the legitimisation and stabilisation of the capitalist formation of society.

Within these two types of concentration, a distinction must be made between two forms of concentration, *absolute* and *relative concentration*. In each case, the yardsticks of concentration are different economic or journalistic *characteristics* (independent companies, businesses, editorial units, “journalistic units”) as well as economic or journalistic *characteristics* (e.g. turnover, circulation, reach). The usual limitation to the representation of *absolute* concentration, i.e. to the number of independent economic or journalistic units and possibly their reduction over time, is not very meaningful in relation to the representation of *relative* concentration based on the unequal distribution (*disparity*) of economic or journalistic features among the feature carriers within media sectors or relevant media markets.

4. Problems and Perspectives

The usual measurements are related to the states of concentration (*degrees* of concentration) reached at certain points in time. From the point of view of the development of concentration *processes*, however, various concentration processes are also of interest, such as capital holdings, interlocking relationships, mergers, takeovers/acquisitions, joint ventures; the formation of cartels, corporations, trusts and holding companies; strategic alliances, increases in market shares, etc. The consideration of concentration processes implies an analytical *diagnosis* of concentration phenomena (going beyond descriptive data documentation) as well as their *explanation* and *prognosis* as a *cause-and-effect-impact analysis* (Leidinger 2003; McChesney 2000; Siegert, Meier and Trappel 2010; Trappel, Meier, Schrape and Wölk 2002; fundamental for analysis of the entire economy is e.g. Working Group Alternative Economic Policy 1988).

Within the framework of a critical-empirical theory of media concentration, the cause-effect relationship shown in figure 2 is assumed (Knoche 2005a). Private ownership of the means of production as well as the application of the principles of profit maximisation and rivalry can be regarded as fundamental *structural* economic causes, immanent to the capitalist mode of production, of the concentration activities of media companies. In addition, deregulation and concentration promotion policies, which are pursued by the state and the media industry in a wide-ranging convergence of interests, also act as causes on the part of politics. Politically, it is not competition that is

promoted (contrary to the official proclamations of competition policy models), but the international *competitiveness* of capital-rich media companies. In reality, this policy promotes national concentration and, in turn, international *concentration* (Huffs Schmid 1992, Knoche 2004). The relevant consequences from the point of view of democratic public sphere of the state-sponsored, at least not prevented worldwide concentration activities of media companies are visible in a variety of areas (figure 2, right hand side).

Causes and Consequences of Media Corporations' Concentration Activities (Concentration Theory)

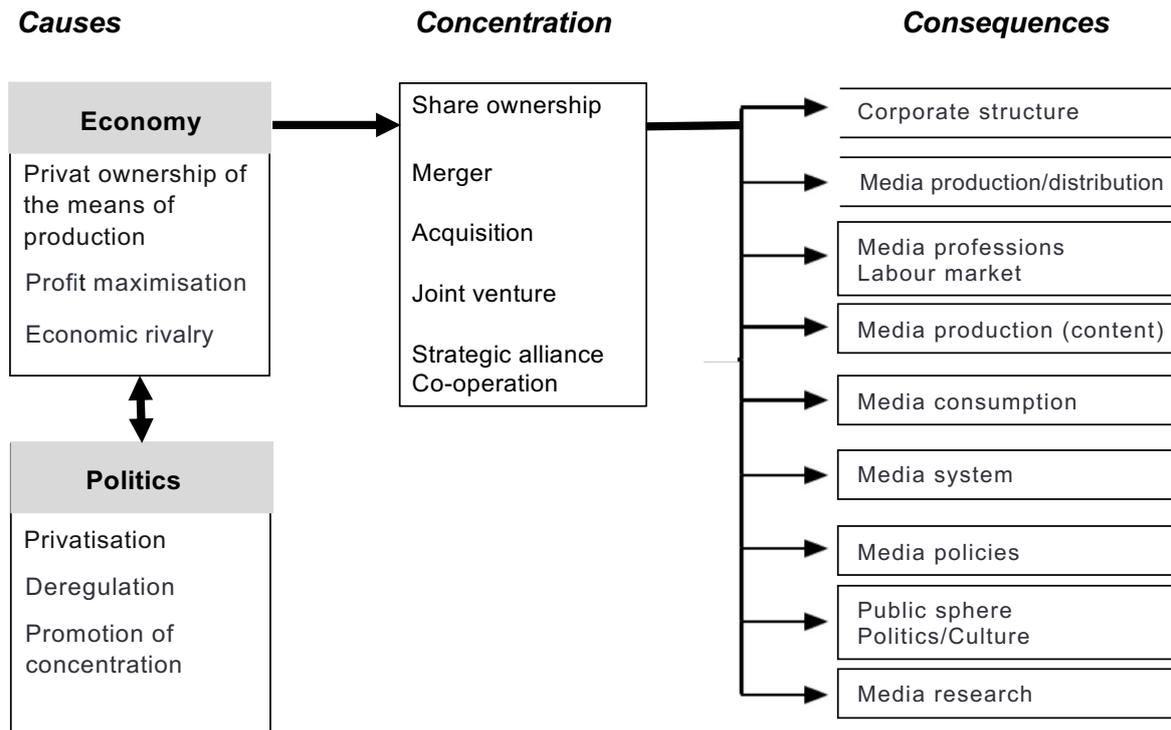


Figure 2 (Source: Knoche 2005a, 128)

The problems and perspectives of the international comparison of media concentration are thus not only determined by the problems and perspectives of media concentration research, but also by the explosive question of *competition policy*, *concentration control* and the *regulation* of the media industry. It is recognisable throughout the world that media concentration – in the same way as concentration in the entire economy – is increasingly facilitated or promoted by deregulation or re-regulation, especially in the USA, which often serves as a model for re-regulation in European countries. On the basis of an empirical comparison of countries (Germany, France, Great Britain, Italy, USA) on the antitrust regulations and their legal application for mergers in the area of the press (merger control), “a remarkable identity with regard to the legal regulations and the decision-making practices” (Knoche and Zerdick 2002, 185) can be found.

Note 3:

Media concentration is increasingly facilitated or encouraged by deregulation or reregulation to a large extent because the international competitiveness of capital-rich media companies is sought.

Control of media concentration is practised as symbolic politics, as *non-decision politics* (Farda 2000) or as “undermining media diversity” through “inaction” (Doyle 2007), as has been demonstrated by the years of (partly deliberate) inconclusive discussions of the European Parliament, the European Union, and the Council of Europe. An important means of symbolic politics are also the continuous changes in the guiding principles of competition theory and policy (Gabler Verlag 2012) in the direction of legitimising the real development of concentration, in stark contrast to the predefined intention of promoting competition (Knoche 2004). Consequently, extensive and versatile corporate concentration strategies are propagated and legitimised as necessary in the interest of the concentration-active companies (Sjurts 2005).

5. Empirical Studies of Media Concentration

Existing publications on (empirical) primary or secondary data investigations and studies of media concentration in different countries, which usually focus on *peculiarities of individual countries* and consequently on *differences* between countries, can be characterised according to how concentration-specific and directly/indirectly internationally comparative they are designed. A scale of *five types of publications* can be distinguished (ordered in ascending order of quality for international comparison on media concentration):

- Publications focused on the collection of *additive single-country studies* of national media systems or media markets in general, mostly *not systematically strictly* oriented to a *uniform category system*, from which, as a rule, more or less information on media concentration can also be derived on the basis of secondary data (Hans Bredow Institute 2009, Thomaß and Tzankoff 2001, Wilke 1992/1994/1996; using a uniform category system: Schneider and Schütz 2004, Stürzebecher 2004).
- Publications focused *specifically* on individual countries’ media concentration, which were only carried out and published for *one* country, but can be used as a primary or secondary data source for independent international comparative studies if corresponding/similar studies have been published for other countries (e.g. Bagdikian 2004; Bonfadelli, Meier and Trappel 2006; Compaine and Gomery 2000; Doyle 2002; McChesney and Nichols 2004; Seethaler and Melischek 2006; Röper 2012; Vogel 2012).
- Publications focusing on the largest *transnational* media corporations in the world or in Europe or on *global* media companies, partly differentiated by media sectors, which allow *partial indirect* country comparisons dedicated *specifically* to media concentration (Hachmeister and Rager 2005, Herman and McChesney 1997, Kleinsteuber and Thomaß 2004).
- Publications focused on the collection of additive, but on a *uniform category system* oriented single country studies, which allow *indirect* country comparisons dedicated *specifically* to media concentration (European Federation of Journalists 2004, 2005; Media Diversity Institute/International Federation of Journalists/Internews Europe 2009; Nordicom 2009; on the *regulation of* media concentration: Knoche and Zerdick 2002; Kommission zur Ermittlung der Konzentration im Medienbereich (KEK) 2007, 2010; Schulz, Held and Arnold 2007).
- Publications with *direct country comparisons* according to a *uniform category system* dedicated *specifically* to media concentration (Sánchez-Taberner and Carvajal 2002, Ettl-Huber 2008).

Furthermore, the available publications can be differentiated according to the *geographical area to which*² they refer:

- Studies focused on *only one* country each in Western Europe/the European Union (Bonfadelli, Meier and Trappel 2006; Doyle 2002; Der Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Kultur und Medien 2008; Hans Bredow Institute 2008; Kommission zur Ermittlung der Konzentration im Medienbereich (KEK) 2010; Ofcom 2012; Seethaler and Melischek 2006; Röper 2012; Vogel 2012; on concentration control in Germany: Schulz and Held 2006; Schulz, Dreyer and Hagemeyer 2011).
- Studies focused on selected countries in Western Europe/the European Union (Council of Europe 2004, 2009; European Commission 2007, 2008/2009; European Parliament 2008; Thomaß and Kleinsteuber 2011; Kommission zur Ermittlung der Konzentration im Medienbereich (KEK) 2007; Nordicom 2009; Trappel, Meier, d'Haenens, Steemers and Thomaß 2011, Sánchez-Tabernerero and Carvajal 2002)
- Studies focused on selected countries in Eastern Europe (European Federation of Journalists 2004, Ettl-Huber 2008, Thomaß and Tzankoff 2001)
- Studies focused on selected countries in Western *and* Eastern Europe (Doyle 2006, European Federation of Journalists 2005, Schneider and Schütz 2004)
- Studies focused on the USA (Bagdikian 2004, Baker 2007, Compaine and Gomery 2000, Federal Communications Commission (FCC) 2010, McChesney and Nichols 2004, Noam 2009)
- Studies focused on selected countries in Europe/the USA (Knoche and Zerdick 2002; Schulz, Held and Arnold 2007)
- Studies focused on selected countries worldwide: USA, Central America, South America, Europe, Africa and the Middle East, (East) Asia and Australia (Hachmeister and Rager 2005, Hans Bredow Institute 2009, Herman and McChesney 1997, Kleinsteuber and Thomaß 2004, Wilke 1992/1994/1996).

Based on the research practised so far, the common approaches to concentration research can be roughly divided into two groups depending on the fields of concentration dealt with (Knoche 1978, 1996a; Kopper 1995):

- Studies of *market structures* as indicators of *market concentration*: market shares of media companies in diverse relevant markets in diverse media sectors (press, television radio, film etc.) at different levels of concentration (international, national, regional, local) according to different types of concentration (economic, journalistic); these studies correspond to the approaches of competition theory and competition policy and want to determine the degree of concentration on the basis of market power and market dominance.
- Studies of *ownership structures* (media ownership, cross-media ownership) as indicators of *capital concentration* and *corporate concentration*: capital shares of media owners in diverse media sectors as well as across sectors.

For an analytically sound characterisation of the development of concentration, *both* approaches have to be applied in a complementary way. However, studies of market

² As not all publications on all continents and countries could be processed for this article due to time and space constraints, the following list is only exemplary with a clear focus on Germany, Europe, and the USA.

concentration are dominant. These are inadequate and distract from the problem insofar as they ignore the real cross-market concentration of capital as the overriding market power and power of disposal.

6. Summary of Findings

As Seethaler (2004) also emphasises in his literature report on *Vergleichende Ansätze in der Erforschung der europäischen Pressemärkte* (“Comparative Approaches in the Study of European Press Markets”), there is a lack of studies that meet the methodological-systematic demands of comparative research. Complaints about a missing or inadequate data basis are justified on the one hand, but on the other hand they often have an alibi character in order to conceal the unwillingness to take political action in the form of regulation and concentration control. An illustrative example of this is the rudimentary self-critical remark by Jens Cavallin, the long-standing chairman of the Committee of Experts on Media Pluralism and Transparency of Media Ownership at the Council of Europe: “from one point of view there is a wealth of information available, even an *embarras de richesse* [italics in original]. From another perspective, however, our ignorance is desperate. [...] The Council of Europe has a wealth of documentation, as assembled for the most part in internal working documents” (Cavallin 1995, 14).

Strictly data-oriented media concentration research proves to be a kind of Sisyphean task, which has been aptly characterised as follows: “The difficulty consists above all in the fact that the share and ownership formations, especially in the case of large media companies, are often extremely convoluted and change many times, the documentalist [sic!] must consequently constantly aim at flying objects, so to speak” (Luyken 199, 621). For the mostly only *gradual* differences in the development of concentration in the various countries or the *minor* shifts within the rankings in a time comparison are hardly relevant in relation to the *commonality/sameness* that in each of these countries and across countries internationally, i.e. worldwide, there are multinational and multimedia global media corporations that are intertwined in the same way. This is reflected in almost all international comparative publications. Referring to research results of the Council of Europe (2004), for example, it is stated: “the majority of European countries are characterised by high and increasing levels of media and cross-media concentration [...] similar content is being recycled across different channels in different territories” (Doyle 2006, 122). This sameness of the status of concentration is expressed above all in the *domination* of these large national and transnational media corporations with a multitude of shareholdings and business areas in a large number of countries. However, the concentration problem is by no means limited to the “50 largest media corporations in the world” (Hachmeister and Rager 2005), but also includes a multitude of regional and local media monopolies in all countries.

Note 4:

Media concentration can be observed internationally as a continuous process in every country and across countries, whereby differences in the extent of concentration between countries take a back seat to the fundamental commonality and identity of this process.

This empirically proven realisation of a *fundamental* (structural and procedural) *identity* of the development of media concentration as well as its causes and consequences in *all capitalist* countries is the adequate basis for a critical theory of media concentration and critical political action based on it. It is a central finding of international comparative

media concentration research that in the course of the *regular* concentration processes immanent to capitalism, more and more capital and power of disposal is concentrated worldwide, cumulatively, almost exponentially growing, in the hands of a few media owners.

It is therefore a very abbreviated approach if – as is usually the case – the problem of media concentration is limited to the description of phenomena of market and corporate concentration. On the one hand, this systematically underestimates the extent of concentration because, for example, the significance of cross-market and cross-company concentration is lost from view or, for example, the diversification of media objects of a media corporation is even wrongly evaluated as a reduction of concentration. In answering the question “Who Owns the Media Companies?” (Compaine/Gomery 2000), it is less a question of knowing the *names of* media owners as “media moguls”. Rather, it should be noted that media companies *worldwide* are in *principle* (with the exception of some public service media organisations) “owned” by a few *individual* owners of capital³.

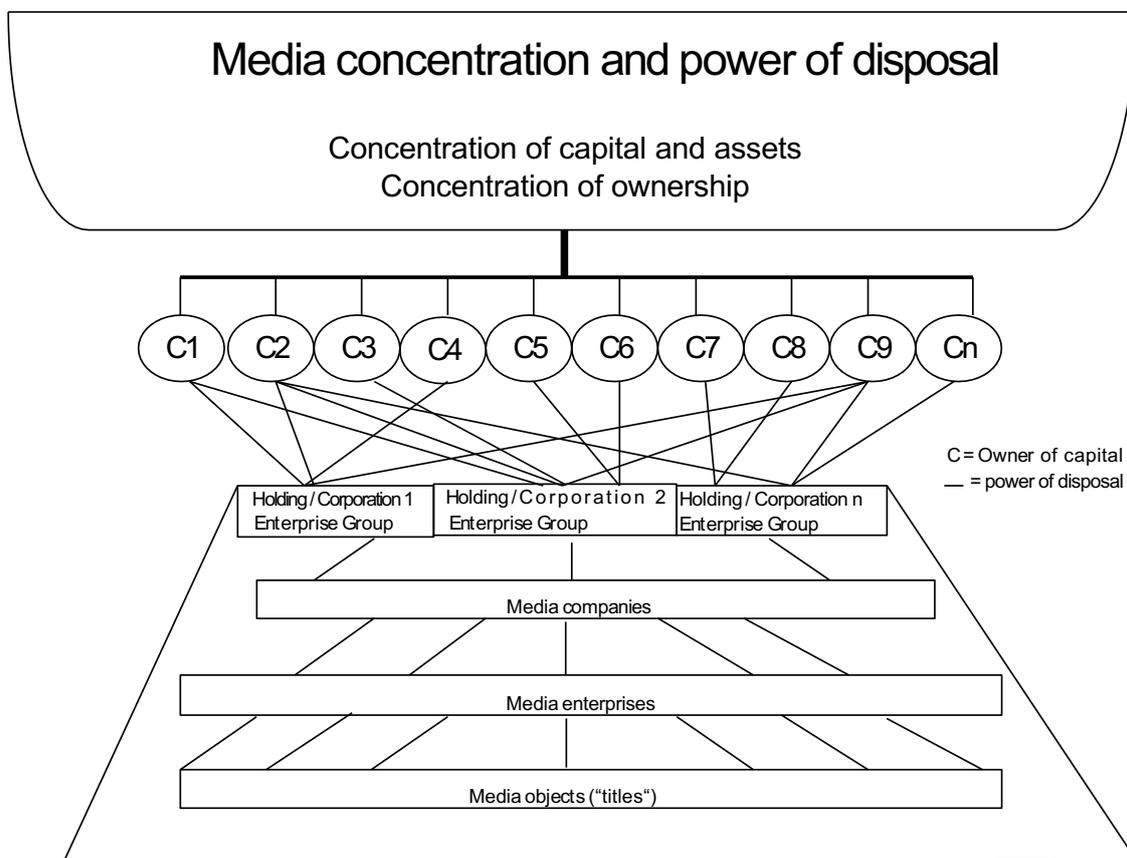


Figure 3 (own representation)

Thus, as shown schematically in figure 3, media concentration is a matter of a concentration of *individual* ownership of the means of production of media corporations, com-

³ The fact that *individual* capital owners join together to form companies does not change the basic fact that individual capital owners are the owners of the media companies (in contrast to public or social ownership, for example in the form of public service organisations). The legitimacy of individual owners to dispose of media production is based – very much in contradiction to democracy – only on their appropriated capital, which was created by their wage earners.

panies and enterprises as well as the derived *individual power of disposal* that is secured by law, i.e. a form of relatively unrestricted *rule by* the owners of capital. At the same time, this implies an unrestricted power of disposal over the content of media products and thus over the shaping of the social, political and cultural public sphere. The latter is by no means only a problem of journalistic diversity, but it is a fundamental problem for democracies that in capitalist societies media production is also under the power of disposal of those *individual capital owners and* their interest in capital accumulation, whereby there is a concentration of large amounts of capital, assets and property (Keiser 1931).

As meritorious as the in part extremely elaborate single-country studies with data *describing* media concentration may be, they are of relatively little value academically and politically, insofar as they do not contribute to the academic *explanation and forecasting* of concentration phenomena and processes in a theoretical and socio-political context. Therefore, we require the “development of a critical-empirical media concentration theory in communication studies, which takes the place of the apologetic-normative economic theories of competition” (Knoche 2005a, 124). The basis for such a theory is the regular process of the concentration of capital, means of production and command over labour, identical with accumulation, analysed and predicted by Marx in connection the analysis of centralisation as “concentration of capitals already formed, destruction of their individual independence, expropriation of capitalist by capitalist, transformation of many small into few large capitals” (Marx 1867, 77).

Competition Theory Versus Concentration Theory

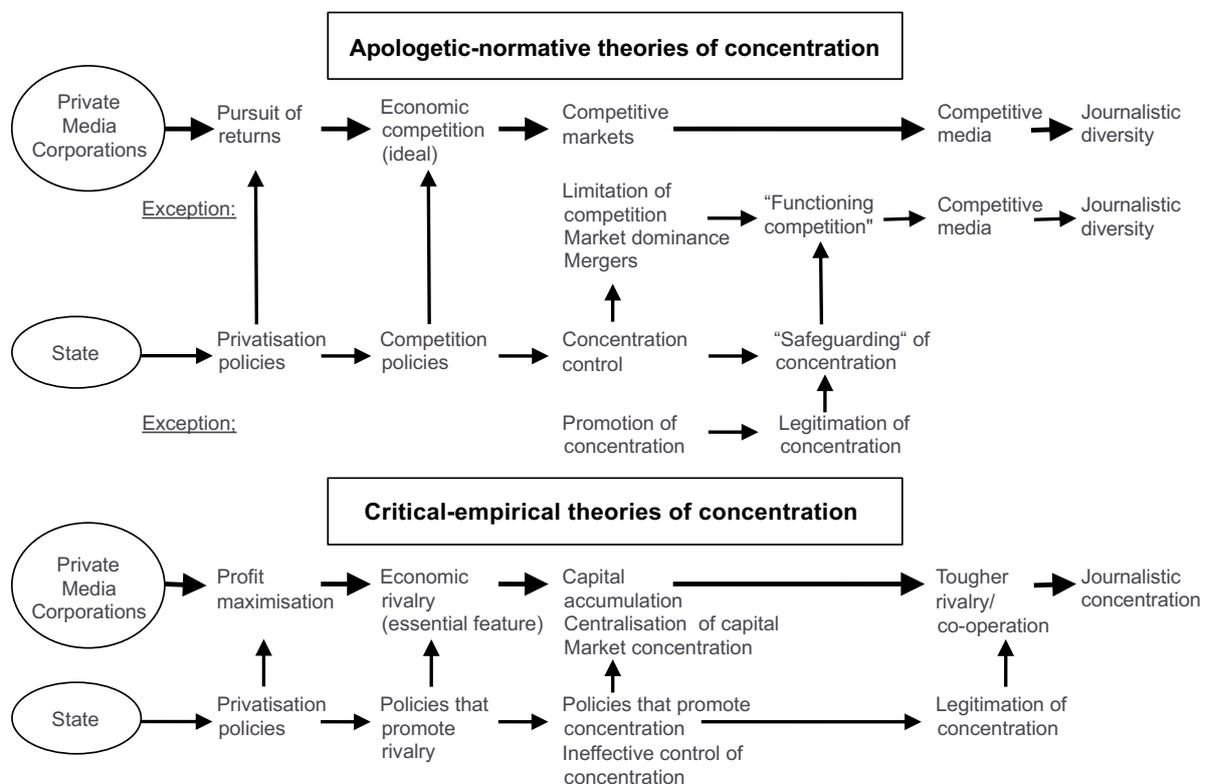


Figure 4 (Source: Knoche 2005a, 125)

In the critical-empirical concentration theory, the actual economic *rivalry* of individual capital owners associated with *profit maximisation* is seen as a *systematic, regular cause of concentration processes* that have negative consequences for the freedom of information, the freedom of opinion and the diversity of the media (figure 4, lower part). This is diametrically opposed to the prevailing theories of competition (figure 4, upper part), which are characterised as apologetic-normative because, by propagating *competition as a normative target function*, they focus on a *model* with allegedly positive consequences for the freedom of information, the freedom of opinion and the diversity of the media. Concentration is seen here only as an exception that can (allegedly) be “controlled” or propagated as positive “functioning competition”. Apologetic-normative theories fulfil the function of distracting from the empirically proven *actual* causes of media concentration and its negative consequences. Another essential contrast between the two opposing theoretical approaches lies in the definition of the function of the *state*. In theories of competition, the state is normatively propagated as a “protector” of competition and a “controller” of concentration, whereas in the critical concentration theory, the state is analysed – on the basis of empirical data – as an actual promotor and legitimiser of concentration.

Note 5:

The critical-empirical theory of concentration sees the actual economic rivalry of individual capital owners associated with profit maximisation as a systematic, regular cause of concentration processes that have negative consequences for the freedom of information and opinion as well as the diversity of the media.

In summary, it can be stated that media concentration is a problem area that has been dealt with comparatively much in international comparisons in academic studies and political action. But nevertheless,

“communication studies has mostly shown itself to be a bearer of misgivings about concentration processes in the media market. It likes to point to the important role of the press and diversity for the formation of opinion and will in society. This, however, remains a cheap lip service” (Holtz-Bacha 2006, 289).

The same “action-reaction scheme” (Knoche 1996, 103ff) can be seen worldwide: (State) commissions react to concentration processes actively driven by media companies by awarding research contracts for data documentation (Federal Communications Commission (FCC) 2010, Media Diversity Institute/International Federation of Journalists/Internews Europe 2009, Ofcom [Office of Communications UK] 2012). At the EU level, media concentration is reinterpreted with clearly ideological (distracting, obfuscating) intent by changing the words that are used (European Commission/Task Force for Co-ordination of Media Affairs 2012; Karppinen 2006, 2010). The talk is of media pluralism, freedom and diversity. Instead of control, regulation or government intervention, transparency, observation, monitoring and corporate governance are recommended. As Neelie Kroes, Vice-President of the European Commission responsible for the Digital Agenda, programmatically proclaims, the focus is on “Safeguarding Media Pluralism in the EU” (Kroes 2012). To this end, a High-Level Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism and a Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (<https://cmpf.eui.eu/>) were established in 2011. This form of symbolic politics has been rightly criticised:

“The analysis of contemporary policy debates indicates that the notion of media pluralism has been too readily reduced to an empty catchphrase or conflated with consumer choice and market competition. In this narrow technocratic logic, pluralism is often unreflectively associated with quantitative data in a way that leaves unexamined key questions about social and political values, democracy, and citizenship” (Karpinen 2010, 3).

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