

Media and Public Relations Research in Post-Socialist Societies

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Chapter Six

Communication and Media Studies in Hungary (1990–2020)

Gabriella Szabó

“Communication and media studies” (CMS) in Hungary are in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, CMS has become an established discipline, institutionalized in many departments with the abundance of applications since 1990. On the other hand, the embeddedness of the discipline is still considerably low in both the national and international academic community. The lack of any possibility to obtain the title “Doctor of Science” (DSc) in communication and media studies serves as an example of the challenges facing CMS scholars in Hungary. Data demonstrate that the contribution of Hungarian academics to international scholarship is rather poor (Demeter, 2018a). The low participation in international research projects reveals another alarming phenomenon related to CMS in Hungary.

The above discussed Janus-faced feature of communication and media studies in Hungary makes a critical evaluation of the discipline extremely complicated. This chapter addresses the issue of such contradictory development regarding the university programs, teaching, scientific outputs, and structure of the academic staff by providing an extensive overview of the specificities of the Hungarian discipline. To do so, the author analyzes documents from different sources, such as academic materials (books, articles, chapters, workshops, and conference programs) and internal administrative documentation (research reports, annual reports, and other information) supplied by CMS departments and related research groups.

In the following sections will be an outline the institutional evolution of CMS. Then, a review the most covered research topics, subjects and courses, human resources, and academic outputs. The chapter concludes by listing several challenges to communication and media studies, such as a brain drain from Hungary to Western Europe/United States, low faculty wages, low financial support for research and international travel for conference participation.

In addition, there is a constant struggle for academic freedom. The overall aim of this chapter is to contribute to the understanding of the global disciplinary development of Hungary from the experience of a post-authoritarian country.

INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND: UNIVERSITIES, RESEARCH CENTERS, AND PERIODICALS

CMS-related university degrees have been amongst the most popular social science study programs since the 1990s (Vaskor, 2019; Zöldi, 2007). Approximately 10,000 students (out of total 200,000 BA and MA students) participate in CMS undergraduate and graduate education (MTE, 2014; Statisztikai Tükör, 2017). The most prestigious CMS programs in Hungary have been listed among the most selective studies with a low acceptance rate. The number of open seats does not meet the demand from applicants. The CMS program of the Corvinus University of Budapest accepts only 25 percent of the aspirants (Eduline, 2018). In addition, the vast majority of the enrolled CMS students pay tuition fees to gain access to all university facilities while barely circa 3 percent of students receive state-funded scholarships (Joób, 2015). The abundance of applications signals long term satisfaction of students which can be considered as one of the key indicators of the educational success of CMS.

PRIVATELY FINANCED INSTITUTIONS IN CMS

There is no official data to validate the return of academic investment in CMS education. The largest private university in Hungary Budapest Metropolitan University (METU), includes degrees and concentrations in communication and media studies, applied and media arts, business and marketing, and tourism and hospitality. The METU was established in 2000 and a year later had 126 students of communication and business communication. The number of students studying at Metropolitan is approximately 7,000 (Metubudapest, 2019). Today, the METU offers both bachelor's and master's CMS degrees in Hungarian or English with a specialization in international communication, integrated media, digitalization and media convergence, as well as public relations and business communication. METU is known for its practice-oriented teaching and a strong relationship with the creative industry and media companies.

In the past two decades, *Central European University* has evolved from a loose network of scholars to the most renowned and highly scientifically reputed private university in Hungary. CEU was established in 1991 as a

multi-campus university offering graduate-level programs mainly in humanities and social sciences including CMS, in Prague, Budapest, and later Warsaw. Students were primarily hailing from Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe. Later, all activities were gradually moved to Budapest, which became the main campus by 1995 (CEU, 2019). CEU has launched a cross-disciplinary program “Advanced Certificate in Visual Theory and Practice” in order to give MA and PhD students the opportunity to learn about visual methodologies during their studies (CEU, 2019). To support graduate and undergraduate education, the CEU established the Center for Media, Data and Society (CMDS) in 2004. The CMDS has served as a platform for academic work in journalism, media policy, and new technologies (CEU, 2019). Although, CEU was forced out of Budapest by modifications to Hungary’s law on higher education, commonly known as Lex CEU, the university has had a profound impact on communication and media studies in Hungary (CEU, 2018).

STATE-FINANCED INSTITUTIONS IN CMS

Admission statistics and acceptance rates of years 2001–2019 say that the most sought-after CMS degrees are provided by Corvinus University of Budapest, Budapest University of Technology and Economics, and University of Eötvös Loránd. Regional hubs for communication and media studies include the University of Debrecen, University of Pécs, and University of Szeged. CMS-related graduate and undergraduate degrees are also offered by the state-funded ecclesiastical institutions such as Károli Gáspár University of Reformed Church, Pázmány Péter Catholic University, and Milton Friedman University (United Hungarian Jewish Congregation) (Elmúlt évek statisztikái, 2019). In 2019, only two institutions, the Corvinus University of Budapest and University of Eötvös Loránd, offered BA, MA, and PhD combined tracks. These programs are intended for talented students who are interested in gaining intensive research experience to prepare for an advanced professional and/or academic career in CMS-related fields (Felvi.hu, 2019).

Communication and media studies are represented within the structure of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in two ways. First, in 2018 the Scientific Commission on Communication and Media was established to provide platforms for the discussion of the future of the discipline and coordinate between CMS and its sister sciences such as sociology, political sciences, anthropology, and psychology (MTA, 2018). The Commission also established the Angelos Award for Excellence in Communication and Media Studies to recognize scholars who have made outstanding contributions in CMS-related research (Corvinus Kioszk, 2018).

Secondly, the Centre for Social Sciences of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences had launched several academic projects and scientific task forces to conduct CMS-related research. Over nearly fifteen years, the Political Communication Research Group at the Centre for Social Sciences has been carrying out interdisciplinary projects in the following fields: political campaigns, government relations, the relationship between politics and mass communication, political marketing, and political image-making (MTA TK PTI PKK, 2019). Due to the institutional changes, the Centre for Social Sciences is no longer part of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. But the scientific mission of the Political Communication Research Group remains intact: to conduct high-quality fundamental research and represent Hungary in international academic cooperation.

HUNGARIAN COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION

The Hungarian Communication Association was officially established in 2005 as an organization that connects communication and media scholars from Hungary and beyond. The mission of the organization is to support the development of media and communication studies and provide a platform for knowledge exchange between faculty, staff, and researchers. Over the last fifteen years, the Hungarian Communication Association has undertaken a wide range of activities to play a progressive role in the integration of the academic communities through scientific events, as well as annual and thematic conferences.

The Association has also been a vocal critic of the reforms of the national higher education system initiated by the Hungarian government in 2015. The discontinuation of the university programs in Hungary did not become part of the legislation due to the heavy criticism. However, the reduction of state financial support for CMS-related degrees is reportedly on the table (Derényi, 2015; Szakadát, 2015). The Hungarian Communication Association has no official relationship with the International Communication Association (ICA) and the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) which are the most important cross-national scientific bodies in Europe. Members of the Hungarian Communication Association occasionally participate in the ICA and ECREA events. Some notable events include the Eleventh Central and Eastern European Communication and Media Conference organized by the University of Szeged in 2018, the ECREA Communication History Section's 2017 workshop on social identities by the Eötvös Loránd University's History Department, and the Communication beyond Mediatization Workshop in 2012 co-convened by COST Action "Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies" and Political Communication Research Group at the Centre for Social Sciences.

PERIODICALS

The Hungarian Communication Association is involved in the publication of *Jel-Kép* (ISSN 0209-584X), the flagship journal of communication and media studies in Hungary. The first issue of the *Jel-Kép* was published in 1980. The journal evolved to a quarterly publication specializing in issues of communication, media, and public opinion.

KOME, an international journal of pure communication inquiry (ISSN 2063–7330), is the official English language journal of the Hungarian Communication Association. *KOME* is published biannually and provides an international forum for theory and empirical research for communication studies and related fields.

Peer-review journals *Mediakutató* (ISSN 1586–8389) and *In Medias Res* (ISSN 2063–6253) are also interested in media related theoretical and empirical research. The *Mediakutató* quarterly was established in 2000, and *In Medias Res* came onto the Hungarian publishing scene in 2012 as a twice-a-year periodical of the National Media and Infocommunications Authority. *Médiakutató* is the focal point of the academic discussion related to press freedom and critical analysis of discriminatory practices in media discourses. *In Medias Res* is more interested in media regulations and constitutional questions of media policies.

It is worth mentioning the *ME.dok* (ISSN 2601–503X) journal can be considered as the main platform for Hungarian media and communication research in Romania since 2006. *ME.dok* is edited by the Institute for Communication and Media of Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj Napoca. The journal focuses on the specificities of minority media in Central and Eastern Europe and welcomes authors from all countries where significant Hungarian minority populations can be found.

CMS-related articles are also published in other social science journals. *Politikatudományi Szemle* publishes political communication studies, *Szociológiai Szemle* accepts research on the public sphere and public discussions while *Socio.hu* invites scholars from the fields of interpersonal interactions.

UNIVERSITY CURRICULA: CORE MODULES AND SPECIALIZATIONS

In September 2006, the Bologna Process initiated by the European Union was introduced in Hungary. It was designed to ensure comparability in the standards and quality of higher education qualifications. The traditional

college-and university-level training programs were replaced by a three-tier system consisting of a basic training program (BA, BS), a master-level program (MA, MS), and a doctoral-level (PhD, DLA) program.

In the pre-Bologna period, the courses were rather eclectic allowing the professors, research fellows, and class instructors to design their own courses or specify research projects according to their personal preferences. The adaptation of the Bologna process required massive and rapid reforms of curricula since Communication and Media Studies have had one of the broadest ranges of career paths open to graduates (Derényi, 2019).

General Outline of the University Programs

Currently, CMS BA, MA, and PhD degrees offer a wide range of modules, starting with introduction courses during the first year, and then progressing to required and special topic courses. During the first year, most courses begin with an overview of the history and theory of the field which is considered a core module. Because communication is ubiquitous in all areas of life, the topics covered in a communication program are often linked to other sciences. Therefore, by studying communication, students also become familiar with the foundations of anthropology, aesthetics, economics, law, philosophy, psychology, sociology, political science, and statistics (BA and MA programs, 2019a). Students are also taught intro-level research methods to critically analyze how the media reflects, represents, and influences the world. In addition, basic practical training is provided to improve the students' spoken, written and visual communication skills. In later years, all university programs offer specializations so students can align their studies to their professional goals (BA and MA programs, 2019b). Every university program is composed of compulsory and optional modules. Each of them has its learning outcomes, syllabus, schedule, and evaluation rubrics. All modules have a credit value and the students must complete a certain number of credits to advance.

Hungarian universities are competing for the attention of the best student prospects in various ways. Although universities provide similar degrees and courses, they differentiate their service offerings by including flexible curricula, extracurricular activities, and additional services.

Corporate and International Communication Concentrations

One of the most popular CMS degree courses covers a broad range of corporate communication. The bachelor's and master's programs in integrated

media and international communication prepares future marketing and corporate communication professionals for both private and nonprofit sectors on a global scale. It includes the most relevant aspects of business, public relations, interpersonal communication, communication dynamics, conflict resolution, negotiation, and management in an international environment. The core courses of business communication cover topics such as marketing, advertisement, sales, digital media, copywriting, creative communication, reputation management, and cross-cultural communication. The international communication programs consist of modules in diplomacy, international organizations, international law, globalization, and world economic regions, European integration, international protocol and etiquette, and regional studies. The programs are being taught by both academics and practitioners (BA and MA programs, 2019c).

Media Studies Concentration

Media studies courses are intended for students interested in learning about the theories of media and communication and their impacts on culture and society. Most programs offer concentrations in mass communication, film and visual studies, and journalism. However, it usually takes a broad approach to cover all areas including print, broadcast and digital communication (BA and MA programs, 2019d). The course topics include history of media, social theories and critical approaches to media, social campaigning, media law and communication regulations, media policy, genres of modern media, ethics, reporting and creative writing, academic writing, research methods, and many other courses (BA and MA programs, 2019e).

Political Communication Concentration

Political communication courses are designed to teach students about various types of political and governmental interactions. Graduate courses typically begin with a core set of courses that cover the area of communication theory, strategic communication, persuasive rhetoric, and research methods. The curricula are developed to prepare students for creating, generating and evaluating different types of political communication, including but not limited to campaigning, news media management, political news, policy brief writing, and advocacy for different social and political causes (BA and MA programs, 2019f). Political communication modules are often integrated into the curricula of political science, sociology, public policy, and public administration (BA and MA programs, 2019g).

INTERNATIONAL RANKING, RESEARCH-BASED CURRICULA, AND STUDENT SATISFACTION

International university rankings provide a rather simplistic but clear picture of academic performance in the area of communication and media studies in Hungary. The 2019 QS World University CMS rankings by CMS subject did not include any university in Hungary in the Top 200 list (Top University Ranking, 2019). In general, Central and Eastern Europe is rather underrepresented in the QS ranking catalog. However, Charles University from the Czech Republic, the University of Tartu from Estonia, and the University of Warsaw from Poland are listed higher than Hungarian universities. It suggests that CMS departments in Hungary are far from being recognized internationally. To increase the global visibility of Hungarian academia, there is a need for improvement in the academic and employer reputation, faculty/student ratio, international research network, international publication per faculty, international citation per publication, and proportion of international students/faculty staff.

Like other Central and Eastern European postcommunist countries, Hungarian academia is still catching up with Western Europe. The past two decades have shown a slow integration of Hungarian scholars into international networks shifting from isolation to fusion. As the QS ranking imply there are considerable differences among the Visegrad countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) when it comes to their international connections. Communication and media scholars from the Czech Republic (especially Charles University in Prague) and Poland (mainly the University of Warsaw, University of Wrocław, and Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan) are more active on cross-national scientific boards, hosting international conferences and partaking in international exchanges. Scholars from Hungary could clearly benefit from membership on the international academic management committees, editorial boards of international journals, and book series. Also, applications for programs and funding opportunities of the European Union, such as Teaming, Twinning, ERA Chairs, could significantly contribute to the strengthening of educational and research institutions in Hungary and by producing important effects at the individual career level as well.

Besides the ambition and activity of Hungarian scholars, there is also a need for the responsiveness of the international academic community. More focus on Central and Eastern Europe could benefit the region when it comes to selecting partner institutions and key personnel of international CMS-related coordination bodies. However, international integration does not

imply copying the Western research agenda and university curricula. What is advantageous for quality improvement is the mutual partnership between scholars across the globe.

Concerning the role of research activities, most departments and research centers organize their academic works around strategic goals of the institution in order to support their programs. Particularly, the university programs of mass media and political communication are supported by advanced studies and long-term research strategies. In principle, all universities regularly assess the quality of CMS related research activities by collecting data on publications and research funding, and by conducting internal and occasionally external evaluations. Of course, teaching and research do not always go hand in hand. The reviewed university curricula vary on the degree of integrated research in classroom activities. While there is a general requirement that higher education should be grounded in science-based knowledge, the research-based approach to curriculum is more common in graduate and undergraduate programs with majors in mass communication rather than those that offer specialization on business or corporate communication.

As most university students in Hungary pay tuition, their student satisfaction has become an important issue for universities and their management. At all universities CMS related courses and professors are predominantly rated via a general student satisfaction system. The system is based on a highly formalized questionnaire that has various categories including lecture and tutorial facilities, teaching ability of the staff, subject expertise of staff, the usefulness of the course, and the approachability of teaching staff. The faculty performance appraisal data are generally collected yearly. However, some instructors request direct feedback from students during the course.

Student evaluations have an impact on CMS faculty careers. Popular lecturers get promoted and receive faculty awards. Also, student feedback helps the professors revise their syllabi and motivate them to try innovative learning techniques. But this consumer model has limitations. Feedback from students sometimes contains contradictory evaluations. On one hand, they seek quality teaching to obtain solid knowledge about the field; on the other hand, they dislike exams and extracurricular activities. Generally, students use alternative channels to share their experience. One of the most common platforms in Hungary is markmyprofessor.com which is an online rating site. The website uses a five-point scale to assess the performance of university teachers according to grading policy, the usability of the course, teaching ability, subject expertise, approachability, and physical appearance.

ACADEMIC OUTPUTS

Conferences and Scientific Events

Since 2005, one of the most important academic events which has been organized by the Hungarian Communication Association showcases the latest research in the field. The popular topics are research on the Internet, media effects, media regulation, the public sphere, and visual communication. Other trends include digitalization, tabloidization, and increased governmental control over media. The events associated with the Hungarian Communication Association are meeting points where scholars, practitioners, experts, and decision-makers come together and discuss the matters of the media market and the creative industry.

Publications

It is difficult to provide an exact number of CMS related publications by Hungarian scholars. The bibliographic collection from 1991–2006 of the Hungarian Communication Association contains 437 entries, but there are no reliable sources available for the remaining years (Communicatio, 2006). By reviewing the literature produced by Hungarian CMS scholars over time, the following topics can be identified: social theories of interpersonal and mass communication, media sociology, media regulation, press freedom, and political communication.

A body of literature provides a conceptual framework for describing and analyzing contemporary communicative phenomena. The notable studies include research focusing on participation theory of communication (Bátori et al., 2006; 2007; Horányi, 2007; 2013), interpersonal communication theories (Szvetelszky, 2002; Terestyéni, 2006), adaptation of Habermas (Heller et al., 1992; Becskehazi and Kuczi, 1992; Némedi, 1990), ritual communication (Császi, 2002; 2003; 2005), philosophy of mediatization and digitalization (Aczél, 2018; Aczél et al., 2015; Tófalvy, 2015; 2017; Z. Karvalics, 2017), and post-modern media theories (Csigó, 2016).

In Hungary, media sociology is a subfield of communication and media studies. Media sociology studies the media as a social institution and investigates the impacts of other institutions on media. This discipline covers a range of topics from audience research to media literacy (Gálik and Urbán, 2008; Neag, 2016), media effects to media uses (Csigó, 2009; Janky et al., 2019; Nyíró, 2011; Nyíró and Urbán, 2010), traditional media ownership (Urbán, 2016) to social media (Tófalvy, 2018) and journalism studies (Szabó et al., 2016). These studies use qualitative and quantitative methods including content analysis, interviews, and surveys.

Other research topics also include media law, mass communication regulation, and press freedom in Hungary. Some scholars claimed that the freedom of the media has been repeatedly challenged in Hungary by the new political elites over the last three decades. Politicians exert pressure on the media in order to promote their policies and suppress criticism. As a result, the performance of the news media has fallen short of both normative expectations and the standards expected in liberal democracies. Studies measuring the violation of independence of Hungary's public media, claim that changes have put the entire system of public media—from appointing public media directors to managing its funding—under government control (Bajomi-Lázár, 2010; 2019; Bayer, 2011; Polyák and Uszkiewicz, 2014; Sipos, 2010). Some authors have challenged the notion of absolute media freedom and advocate for the role of state regulation in defending personal rights and vulnerable groups (Bárány, 2013; Koltay, 2019a; 2019b).

In Hungary, there is a rich body of literature on political communication that studies policy agendas (Boda and Sebők, 2018; Róna, 2016; Török, 2005) and Internet politics (Bene, 2017; Merkovity, 2018). Scholars also investigate the specifics of election campaigns (Kiss, 2005; Kiss et al., 2007; Kiss and Szabó, 2019) and the changing nature of news media (Szabó, 2011). In addition, studies using traditional critical discourse analysis on racism (Krizsa, 2002), anti-Semitism (Gerő, 2001), and hate speech (Pál, 2012). Recent publications addressed the complexity of populist rhetoric and other strategies (Merkovity, 2018). Communication and media scholars apply various normative and descriptive frameworks including critical viewpoints (Messing and Bernáth, 2017), social semiotics (Kiss, 2019), and networked approach (Szabó et al., 2018).

Generally Hungarian CMS research is primarily influenced by the Western European and American research traditions and research literature in English. However, Hungarian scholars seldom publish articles in high ranked international journals (Q1 by Scimago system) or books with internationally recognized commercial or university press publishers such as Palgrave, Routledge, Princeton, Harvard, NYU, and others. One reason is the generational gap among members of the Hungarian academic community. As compared to older scholars, younger researchers pay more attention to their international career. This includes applying for international scholarships, looking for partnerships with scholars from other countries, or requesting global and regional funds in order to stimulate publication in journals with a high impact factor. Besides the differences between the generations, another possible explanation for the relatively low international visibility is the core-periphery problem in CMS: scholars from Western core countries dominate the publication field,

while academics from the peripheral region are underrepresented party due to structural reasons; see Demeter (2020).

Prominent research in international journals includes media regulations and media policy (Bajomi-Lázár, 2013; 2014; 2017), cultural studies (Barna and Tófalvy, 2017), science communication (Demeter, 2018b; 2018c; 2019a; 2019b), and political communication (Bene, 2017; Bene and Szabó, 2019; Boda et al., 2015; Papp and Patkós, 2019; Szabó et al., 2018; Szabó and Kiss, 2012). Hungarian scholars also submit their research to regional journals (e.g., *East European Politics and Societies*, *Problems of Post-Communism*) and CMS-related thematic periodicals (*Javnost—The Public*, *International Journal of Press/Politics*, *International Journal of Communication*, *Journalism & Mass Communication*, *Social Media + Society*).

Policy Papers and Materials for Practitioners

Policy papers and professional development materials for practitioners are rare in Hungary. Most notable are well organized and regular workshops provided by MerteK Media Monitor. The MerteK Media Monitor is a watchdog NGO and think tank that provides legal, journalistic, sociological, and economic expertise in academic research, public administration, and journalism. The think tank evaluates media policy and publishes policy recommendations and proposals. MerteK Media Monitor also monitors journalistic practices and attitudes in the Hungarian media, media market trends, and content of the public service media. Their publications provide opinions about decisions made by editorial boards, the authorities, and courts. The NGO develops indices and benchmarks for monitoring media regulation, and advocate for freedom of the press and media transparency. They also provide an intellectual platform for academics and practitioners to meet and discuss current matters in the media industry.

The Institute for Media Studies is another key organization which supports the Hungarian Media Council by studying media regulation, journalism history, and current media trends. It also promotes education regarding media and information communication technologies in Hungary, audience/user metrics, and legal analyses.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE INSIGHTS

Self-reflection on the discipline is an essential for helping scholarship improve. To meet this purpose, this chapter has provided an overview of

university programs and academic outputs to document the development of communication and media studies in Hungary between 1990–2019.

The history of Hungarian CMS started before 1990. However, the undemocratic conditions of the communist regime as well as its tight ideological control on academia, did not allow research to flourish. Today, CMS has become an established discipline and institutionalized in many university departments in Hungary. The ambition is that universities and research centers catch up with Western European counterparts. This is supported by efforts to invest in infrastructure but not in human capital.

Hungarian academia is highly knowledgeable about the theory and practice of media and communication in hybrid regimes and populist times including media policy, campaign communication, and journalism. However, scholars are overwhelmed by teaching duties and faculty administration tasks. Sabbaticals are extremely rare in Hungary. There is also a lack of proper research infrastructure, data available for secondary research, and low levels of methodological expertise especially on advanced quantitative/big data methods. Hungarian scholars have been learning new research methods such as network analysis, visual methods, text mining, as well as tracing emotionality, expressivity, virality, and user engagement in social media.

The discipline constantly faces multiple challenges including brain drain to Western Europe/United States, low faculty wages, few financial opportunities for research and international conference participation, a low number of publications in high ranking scientific journals, and a constant struggle for academic freedom.

Given the circumstances, there is a need to increase the international visibility of Hungarian CMS research. In order to advance the discipline, more quality publications and involvement in national and international academic networks are necessary. Scholars will also benefit from institutional autonomy and academic freedom. The financial setbacks and constant struggles to defend university programs from governmental interventions will lead to politicization within Hungarian academia and create an unfavorable environment for scholars willing to enter a competitive international field. Fortunately, the younger scholars seeking international integration and the development of new scientific entities will ensure that communication and media studies in Hungary will continue to evolve.

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