Political Communication in Switzerland

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Switzerland is a small state (7.8 million inhabitants) with a liberal legal system and a capitalistic economic system. The media system is shaped by a prominent regional press and a strong public broadcasting sector. Until late into the 20th century, high political parallelism (external diversity) could be found in the print media. Newspapers cut their party ties only between 1970 and 1990 and today, where the press has generally become largely non-partisan, only few papers still reflect their historical roots in their commentaries. Furthermore, the print market is characterized by rising economic concentration, especially at the regional level. The broadcasting sector is dominated by the Swiss Radio and Television Corporation (SRG), a typical exponent of European public service broadcasting. It is independent of the state, financed through licence fees and has a legal mandate to inform the public according to certain quality standards. Commercial broadcasting remains weak and competition from the public broadcaster comes mainly in the form of foreign channels beaming into the Swiss market.

Professionalization of journalism is traditionally not too strong compared with other countries, with journalism schools and journalist unions only beginning to emerge in the second half of the 20th century. Only few Swiss journalists identify with active, critical role perceptions or the ideal of a watchdog press. Current media regulation guarantees basic freedoms and imposes strict limits on the state's ability to constrain media independence, but it also reflects the government's intention to maintain its authority to broadly influence the basic regulatory parameters (Marcinkowski 2007). Delayed professionalization and a welfare approach toward media regulation have also worked against current trends such as commercialization, attack journalism and personalization, although they are on the rise in Switzerland albeit at a lower level than in some neighboring countries. Taken together, these characteristics are rather typical of Northern-European countries where media systems follow the democratic-corporatist model as described by Hallin and Mancini (2004).

According to Blum (2005), five characteristics of the country's political system have an impact on Swiss political communication: (1) Switzerland is a multilingual country and its three largest language areas (German-, French- and Italian-speaking) are also carriers of cultural elements imported from the big neighbouring countries Germany, France and Italy. This has also affected political journalism and political communication in these areas; one could even say that Switzerland consists of three media markets with slightly different journalistic cultures. (2) Switzerland is a federal state with 26 politically fairly autonomous cantons. This has favoured a decentralized media market, regionally based journalism and a regionally based party structure. Election campaigns are only loosely coordinated nationally - thus showing a lower level of campaign professionalism than other countries. (3) Switzerland is a direct democracy where people co-determine policy decisions through their participation in regular referendums and initiatives (at least four times per year). Prior to the 20th century, high political parallelism (external diversity) could be found in the print media. Newspapers cut their party ties only between 1970 and 1990 and today, where the print market is characterized by rising economic concentration, especially at the regional level. The broadcasting sector is dominated by the Swiss Radio and Television Corporation (SRG), a typical exponent of European public service broadcasting. It is independent of the state, financed through licence fees and has a legal mandate to inform the public according to certain quality standards. Commercial broadcasting remains weak and competition from the public broadcaster comes mainly in the form of foreign channels beaming into the Swiss market.

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