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The Reality Show Called Democratization: Transformation of the Czech media After 1989

Abstract:

The underlying concept of the transformation of Czech media which started in the early 1990's was the freedom of expression as one of the fundamental characteristics of democratization of society. The whole process was taking place in an environment accustomed to the media and their usage. Media were quickly deregulated and privatized, and a dual system was set up in the broadcasting sector. In terms of the contents of their output and their structure, the Czech media changed very deeply from communist propaganda tool to profit-making commercialized industry. Their transformation did not consist in accepting social responsibility for the creation of democratic conditions and assuming the role of informal control over political power, but in building up an economically successful sector, profitable and, if possible, without regulation. Currently the Czech Republic ranks among countries where the media market is fully saturated and characterized by a high degree of commodification of the media and commercialization of their production. The media espouse their liberal democratic tradition wherever it can strengthen their position, but where they do not benefit from it, they give up this role in favour of negotiating with the political sphere.

Key words: Mass media, Czech media, democratization

The process of economic, social and political transformation which was launched in what at the time was still Czechoslovakia at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s as part of a broader, perhaps even global political development, had essential impacts on all social institutions, including the system of media and public communication. The mass media of that time, i.e. mainly the press, radio and television, joined the transformation process already at the end of 1989. In that dramatic situation they started – or at least declared that they were starting – to change from “the means of mass information and propaganda” (as they had been defined under the previous regime) into an institution of a democratic dialogue and free speech. Today, almost two decades after the beginning of this process, there are reasons not only to ask questions regarding the factors which influenced its form, but also to attempt an evaluation of its outcomes and the measure in which it has been accomplished.

To what degree are the Czech media a truly democratic social institution? To what extent have they assumed some of the traditional roles ascribed to them by normative theories

in democratic conditions? In what way do they contribute to democratization of public life in Czech society?

We will try to offer here at least preliminary answers to these questions. In order to make it possible for them to be subjected to a critical evaluation, we will (1) first outline the initial situation in which the Czechoslovak and later the Czech media found themselves at the beginning of the transformation process, and then (2) describe the basic characteristics of the transformation of the Czech media and their current status.

Our starting point is simple – and not very joyful from the viewpoint of democratic society. We will seek to defend our own conclusion, namely that **the presumed and declared desirable role of the media in democratic Czechoslovakia in the early 1990s became just a front for a rapid, uncompromising privatization of the media (subordinated to the logics of accumulation of profit and power). A strong industrial sector of media emerged, which was not restrained by any feeling of responsibility towards society, whether at the economic, cultural or ethical, let alone aesthetic level.** Czech society quickly and without reflection accepted innovations in content, form and technology which the development of media communication has been offering ever since the late 1980s.

This state of affairs very quickly brought the Czech media and Czech society close to the trends which have been observable in the “traditional” democracies of the western world, where they have been subjected to critical analyses. What makes the whole process unique is the speed of these changes, as well as the fact that they met with only infrequent, marginal criticism which has had zero impact on this process. This can be probably attributed, apart from other factors, to the Czech people’s minimum contact with the “West” at a time of a bipolar division of the world, and also to an ideological shift from “anti-capitalism” to “anti-socialism” – a product of its time (see Jakubowicz 2003:4n). So it happened that Czech society failed to perceive the risks connected with the commercialization of the media production and conglomerization of the whole media sector. In fact, Czech society resented and rejected any criticism of anything coming from the “free world”. Even a Western scholar’s critical evaluation of the development of Western media fell on deaf ears. We are referring here to statements like: *„Our era rests upon a massive paradox. On the one hand, it is an age of dazzling breakthroughs in communication and information technologies. Communication is so intertwined with the economy and culture that our times have been dubbed the Information Age ... On the other hand, our era is increasingly depoliticized ... Elementary understanding of social and political affairs has declined.“* (McChesney,1999:1-2). The dangers ensuing from the current development of society and the media were

overshadowed by the dazzling glare of the new, democratic idyll. And this was an auspicious situation for the media system quickly to change into a prospering industrial sector and an institution of symbolic and political power.

Czech media in the final years of totalitarian rule and at the start of transformation

In the late 1980s, the main features of the subsisting Czech (Czechoslovak) media system corresponded with the “Soviet model”, as defined by Wilbur Schramm in *Four Theories of the Press*. The mass media were instrumental in the implementation of the policy of the ruling party, and one of their tasks was to unite and campaign in its favour. As such they were a cog in the wheel of government and party propaganda, and one of the ways of controlling them was accentuating their responsibility (Siebert, Peterson, Schramm, 1963:121). Private ownership of the media was out of the question, and only political and social organizations and government institutions were allowed to publish newspapers and magazines. The broadcast media, radio and television, were established and controlled by the state, or to be more precise, by the ruling Communist Party. The same was true of the Czechoslovak News Agency. Control over the mass media was heavily centralized and practised along two coordinated lines: the party line was dominant and the government one was subjugated to it. Vladimír Hudec, Dean of the Faculty of Journalism of Charles University in the 1970s and 1980s, put it succinctly: “... *All journalism – central as well as local – is therefore subordinated to the party leadership, it is responsible for its activities to the respective bodies of the Party or the National Front and the socialist state ...*” (Hudec 1982:136). The mass media played a clearly propagandist role, defined as formative and informational.

Despite the command economy, plagued by all sorts of shortages, the offer of the Czech/Czechoslovak media system was relatively extensive, and its structure was influenced on the one hand by quite rigid centralization and on the other by the fact that the former Czechoslovakia was a federation of two states: the Czech and the Slovak Socialist Republics. In 1988 Czech readers could choose from among as many as 30 national and regional dailies. National dailies were issued by political parties, social organizations and ministries.¹

¹ The Czech *Rudé právo* and Slovak *Pravda* dailies were issued by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and Communist Party of Slovakia respectively, *Svobodné slovo* daily by the Czechoslovak Socialist Party, and *Lidová demokracie* daily by the Czechoslovak People’s Party. The Socialist Union of Youth issued the dailies *Mladá fronta* in the Czech and *Smena* in the Slovak Republics, Czech *Práce* and Slovak *Práca* were dailies of the Revolutionary Trade Union Movement, the Czechoslovak Union of Physical Education and Sports issued *Československý sport* daily, the Ministry of Agriculture had its own daily called *Zemědělské noviny*, and *Obrana lidu* was the daily of the Ministry of National Defence.

Ideological unity and fulfilment of the social role of the media were ensured by the fact that all the publishers were members of the National Front, an umbrella organization controlled by the Communist Party.

Apart from the national dailies, there was also regional press, coming out in regional cities and district towns. It was published by the National Committees (local government authorities) in collaboration with Communist Party bodies of the respective level. Each region (higher administrative unit) had one daily and each district (lower administrative unit) one weekly. Quite popular were some evening papers coming out in cities, particularly Prague *Večerní Praha*, *Večerník* coming out in Bratislava and *Večer* coming out in Košice.

The offer of magazines in both the Czech and the Slovak Republics was relatively rich, too. At the end of the 1980s it included a wide range of periodicals targeting various demographic and interest groups, starting with children of pre-school and school age and teenagers (*Sluníčko*, *Mateřídouška*, *Ohníček*, *ABC*) to young people (mainly *Mladý svět* and *Věda a technika mládeži*), women (*Vlasta*), but also for instance motorists (*Svět motorů*) and dog breeders (*Pes přítel člověka*). Family magazines were represented, too (*Květy*), as were magazines of cultural and political focus (*Tvorba* and *Tribuna*). Very popular was a successful attempt of news magazine (*100+1 zahraničních zajímavostí*), issued by the Czechoslovak News Agency. Magazines combining propaganda with leisure reading, such as *Svět socialismu*, *Svět sovětů* etc. were a special category.

As for the broadcast media, the Czechoslovak audiences had to make do with the programmes of the state-controlled *Czechoslovak Television* and *Czechoslovak Radio*. Apart from the federal bi-lingual channel, each of the two republics had its own and produced its own television programmes. Czechoslovakia thus had two broadcasting networks covering its entire territory, and a third started being built at the end of the 1980s. The radio had three nationwide stations plus a network of regional ones, copying the administrative division of the country's territory into regions. The offer of radio and television programmes was a mixture of mediocre and above-average works of art (from drama productions to films and poetry recitals), political "popular education" (with propaganda pervading newscasts and entertaining programmes alike), serials of domestic and foreign provenance and vaudeville-type entertainment for the mainstream audience.

The relatively well-advanced media did not offer all types of production – sensational, tabloid media and pornographic production did not exist. Also symptomatic of the time was the virtual absence of internal competition (though the offer was relatively varied in terms of type, each type usually had only one representative), and a high degree of centralization of

management. The print run of some media (for instance the *Lidová demokracie* daily or the *Mladý svět* weekly) was deliberately lower than the demand for them – they were another commodity which was in short supply. The purpose was to support the circulation of titles the contents of which better promoted the party policy. It became a habit for Czechs and Slovaks to read several dailies each day, because the scope of their reporting was limited and especially in the 1980s it was interesting to compare the small nuances in the coverage of current events and as well as in articles devoted to culture (which delivers some political message quite frequently). An average viewer usually watched the evening news and serials of domestic production.

Czech society entered the transformation process as one whose demand for media production was to a large extent saturated, and with the idea that in a democratic environment the media should be as deregulated as possible, in other words independent, and that this requirement is one of the key attributes of every democratization process. This assumption drew inspiration from the tradition of the period between the two world wars (simplified and interpreted in a distorted way), and from memories of the role and position of the media in the second half of the 1960s – the period of the Prague Spring (though this inspiration was marginalized throughout the transformation process, starting in the 1990s, by the political elite and even the media themselves).

A clear ideological ground plan of the transformation of Czech media

At the most general level, the transformation of the Czech mass media after 1989 proceeded from the social and political transformation of a society denying the principles of liberal democracy into one which espouses these principles as its unchallenged foundation. The media transformation thus was a part of a process of democratization (see Rozumilowicz 2002). In the first place it was necessary to shield the media and their functioning from potential direct interventions of the state and political power. In the Czech environment this need became reflected in the developments at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s: the creation of “independent” media was regarded as an indispensable prerequisite of a “change of the regime.” The position and role of the press (and hence also those of radio and television) were seen as an important constituent feature of establishing a democratic climate in society. As indicated above, a role was no doubt also played in these developments by the personal experience of individuals (in case of the middle-aged generation, especially those who experienced the liberalization of state control in the late 1960s and the resulting significant

and attractive behaviour of the media). Yet another factor was the historical awareness of the role of the media in democratic societies, based on a mythologized idea of what things were like during the between war period of Czechoslovakia. Some authors also attach importance to the influence of the “Western” media, particularly during the turbulent autumn of 1989 (Kevin Williams for instance refers to the influence of Anglo-American television reporting not only on the course of the events but also on the direction which the transformation processes took; see Williams 2005:100). But in actual fact what had a much more substantial impact were foreign radio broadcasts in the Czech language. If we consider the numbers of people who listened to the Czech broadcasts of the *Voice of America*, *Radio Free Europe* and *BBC* between 1982 and 1989, the increase of the size of their Czech audiences is obvious at first sight (Table 1). According to a report of the Institute for Public Opinion Research (ÚVVM) on a public opinion survey from 1988, “...according to the results of the survey, listening to radio stations such as the *Voice of America*, *Radio Free Europe*, *BBC* etc. is still widespread among our citizens. At least every third citizen listens to the Czech and Slovak broadcasts of western radio station...” (ÚVVM 1988:31-32) As concerns the ratings of foreign television programmes, the same report confirms “...a trend of moderate but constant increase in the number of people who watch programmes of West German or Austrian TV channels (currently at least one quarter of the population do so at least occasionally)...” (ÚVVM 1988:14) The authors of this document also note that the ratings depend on the viewers’ place of residence – for instance in the western regions of Czechoslovakia within the reach of German transmitters they were as high as two-thirds.

Development of the ratings of foreign radio broadcasts in Czech (%)

	VOA	RFE	BBC
1982	20	16	10
1989	32	29	15

Source: Views of the impact of foreign media in relation to selected current political topics. Final Report. Institute for Public Opinion Research of the Federal Statistical Office, November 1989, p. 16.

This was an essential feature of a time when the media were becoming transformed and the attitude of Czech society to the media was being reshaped: the Czechs started seeing the mission of the media in creating space for the discussion of matters of common interest and supplying the necessary information for this purpose.

Yet, that was not the only development at that time. The idea of liberal democratic media and their importance for democratic development prevailed in Czech society at just the time when elsewhere the liberal democratic model of the media as a safeguard of high quality of public discourse, feedback from the public to the power establishment and critical reflection of the conditions in the country (in other words, the media as the proverbial “fourth estate” and “the watchdog of democracy”) was in one of the deepest crises it had ever experienced. It was as if the dismal visions pondered by Jürgen Habermas already in the 1960s were coming true (Habermas 1990). In Western countries, the media were ever more clearly becoming a part of large conglomerates, increasingly followed the logics of maximization of profit and minimization of costs, and were ever more obviously and more voluntarily surrendering to a variety of covert pressures. When Czech society entered this environment, characterized by unprecedented **commercialization of the media** and their profound **linkage to supranational economic structures**, connected with the need to submit to pressures and the requirements of the market, it had no knowledge of the trends in the development of the media sphere. Instead, it cherished almost romantic ideas about the role and mission of the media. It was not aware that features of the emerging media system were in fact conducive to the emergence of a commercialized concept of the media (for instance consistent denationalization, emphasis on the media as private enterprise, discrimination in favour of private commercial media to the detriment of others, e.g. those dedicated to “public service”). As a result, „...some countries, such as the Czech Republic and Hungary, have embraced western-style media systems more smoothly than others...” (Williams 2005:101).

Changes in the media system in the early 1990s

The mass media entered the events at the end of 1989 as an institution whose declared mission was to ensure a legitimizing symbolic environment for the ruling stratum, and whose everyday reality was miles away from this ideal. The former regime provided them with a theoretical background (the so-called “theory of journalism”), which defined their role as an institution fulfilling an irreplaceable “informational and formative role” and having the potential to encourage and participate in the shaping of what were regarded as positive and active attitudes, serving the system. However, it never managed to achieve this practically unachievable goal, and in fact never fully trusted the media: the political power machine perceived them as a risk factor, a potential and suspected source of more or less latent resistance.

But at the same time the media led a second life – they were an important part of people's everyday life, an irreplaceable source of knowledge (though mostly acquired by “reading between the lines”), a source of entertainment and interpersonal contacts (Sunday television series had very high ratings and certainly inspired everyday conversation). Never mind how servile the media were, and how they were perceived as a tool in the hands of the power elite, they still made their mark and could not be overlooked.

This was the legacy with which they entered the process of social transformations in the early 1990s.

At the very beginning of the decade, the media started changing rapidly, as the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia lost its leading role in society, till then defined in the Constitution, and censorship was abolished. What changed first of all was the **content** of media output. The disintegration of the system in which the Communist Party tasked and supervised the media, accompanying the decline of the old regime, confronted the media with the opportunity (and also the necessity) to take greater regard of the needs and interests of the readers, listeners and viewers. The transformation of content was followed by establishing a clearly defined **independence** of media of the state (denationalization was seen as the basic condition of their democratization). In the next stage the printed media were **privatized** and the **dual principle** was introduced in the broadcasting sector. Two new types of radio and television were thus introduced: radio and television of “public service”, and private radio stations and TV channels. Partial privatization of frequencies, or of networks which had been state-controlled till then, for instance by the handover of the former federal channel of Czech Television to the commercial sector, took place at the same time.

Media legislation was gradually adapted to this development. The so-called Press Act from the mid-1960s was amended relatively quickly (a new one was adopted until 2001), new legislation regulated the rights and obligations of broadcasters, and a series of other legal norms (regulating for instance advertising) were introduced. Oversight bodies were gradually created, including the Czech Radio and Television Broadcasting Council and its parallels at the level of individual public service media, to supervise observance of the law. The emergence of private media brought **foreign owners** into the Czech media industry and with them also investments into **new technologies**, as the existing technical equipment was obsolete. A number of private owners from many countries (Germany, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United States etc.) have invested into Czech media after 1990.

The most typical feature of the reshaped Czech media scene is that those types of media production which are not oriented to profit-making and do not tend towards

conglomerization, have not prospered. As concerns the growth of their own economic strength, the Czech media quickly started catching up with the banking sector, as was documented by the dynamism of development in the area of remuneration in the first half of the 1990s (Jiráček, Kópplová, 1996). In the aftermath of the constitution and growth of the advertising market and its economic globalization, the media began to be less dependent on the state of domestic economy (Jiráček, Šoltys, 2006, Šmíd, 2004).

As a result of this development, the Czech media sector now has the following principal features:

- Regarding the print media, (a) clear dominance of foreign owners, (b) absence of quality press (half-hearted attempts to start a daily of the type of *FAZ*, *Le Monde* or *The Guardian* failed), and (c) essential transformation of the market of magazines, now dominated by domestic versions of foreign magazines;
- In broadcasting, above all (a) predominance of nation-wide private radio stations and television channels, and (b) unstable and declining (economic and political) position of the “public service” media;
- As concerns the contents of media production, mainly hypercommercialization of most media, characterized by (a) emphasis on marketing strategies, (b) connection with the advertising sector, and (c) efforts to negotiate with the political sphere, or its expedient influencing;
- In the area of technology, mainly (a) on the one hand, relatively fast introduction of new technologies, enjoying high acceptance among the users (as shown by the fast spread of mobile phones, especially in 1997-2005, and rapid increase in the number of Internet users after 2000, reaching 37 % of the Czech population by 2006), and (b) on the other hand, deliberate blocking of some new technologies (up until 2006 private television channels obstructed the switch-over to terrestrial digital broadcasting in order to retain their strong market position).

We will now try at least to outline the development in some of these areas in the period from the turn of the 1980s and 1990s till today.

Transformation of the daily press

The process of denationalization and privatization of the daily press was relatively fast and took the form of (a) transformation of current titles and restoration of older ones, (b) attempts at founding new dailies, and (c) extinction of existing ones.

Newspapers coming out before November 1989 quickly passed into private hands, their titles were changed and so were their contents and graphic design. *Mladá fronta* added the word “*Dnes*” (“*Today*”) to its name (obviously inspired by *USA Today*), while *Rudé právo* on the contrary dropped the first part of its title (meaning “red”) and became simply *Právo*. Both these dailies were privatized first by their employees, in the form of separation from the original publisher and foundation of an employee joint stock company, and both gradually assumed the position of “mass circulation” titles trying to build up a mass readership base and attract advertisers. *Lidové noviny* daily, which had been coming out even before 1989 as a *samizdat*, started coming out daily and maintained its position on the market – probably not only thanks to the prestige and popularity it had enjoyed as a *samizdat* publication, but also because it still held a relatively strong position in the reading tradition of many families as a reminder and symbol of the cultivated press in the period between the world wars.

A special chapter in the transformation of the daily press is represented by the development of the network of regional and local titles. It was constructed gradually (first in the border regions of Bohemia, then in the whole of it, subsequently in Moravia and Silesia, and finally in Prague) by means of privatization and gradual organizational interconnection of regional and district periodicals, published before 1989 by the respective public administration authorities and regional bodies of the Communist Party. Currently they are available in the whole of the Czech Republic under the name *Deník*, forming a system of regional press issued by a single publisher, namely the Bavarian Passauer Neue Presse. In terms of their aggregate circulation they compete with the largest national dailies (Table 2).

Average number of copies sold daily (June 2007)

Blesk	Deník	Mladá Fronta Dnes	Lidové noviny	Právo	Hospodářské noviny
432 170	328 319	287 864	70 680	154 167	58 783

Source: Verified circulation of periodicals: ABC ČR, www.uvdt.cz

Efforts to start new dailies were least successful. It seems that a mere negative definition against the existing press did not suffice for winning a large readership. Dailies *Denní*

telegraf, *Noviny* (printed on pink paper) and the (yellow) *Metropolitan* folded up after a series of transformations and mergers, and as well as *Český deník* retreated from the market somewhat later. The very ambitious project of a broadsheet quality paper with a highly cultivated graphic design, called *Prostor*, was very short-lived. Of all the dailies which emerged after 1989, in fact only the *Blesk* tabloid has been successful – probably because it has filled a distinct gap on the market.

Some newspapers which started coming out after 1945 (e.g. *Lidová demokracie*, *Svobodné slovo*, *Práce* or *Zemědělské noviny*) did not maintain their position after 1989 and despite changes of contents and name and in some case mergers they gradually disappeared. They included mostly such that were not quickly and resolutely privatized and a number of entities laid claim to their ownership and management.

In the second half of the first decade of the new century, the daily press production is more or less stabilized. It is obvious at first sight that most stable are the titles which have a pre-November 1989 tradition (*Mladá fronta Dnes*, *Právo*, *Hospodářské noviny*, *Sport*, regional dailies of the *Deník* chain) or were renewed after November (the above-mentioned *Lidové noviny* – even though their current circulation and the size of their readership can hardly be regarded as success), plus those which have filled a clear gap on the market (the *Blesk* tabloid).

What is symptomatic of the Czech daily press (and after all Czech media in general) is a massive presence of foreign owners (who control about 87 % of the overall volume of the copies issued). The publishers of *Mladá fronta Dnes* and *Lidové noviny* are owned by the German concern Rheinisch-Bergische Verlagsanstalt, *Hospodářské noviny* is controlled by Handelsblatt (publisher of a number of magazines, too), the owner of *Blesk* is Ringier (which also publishes the successful life-style weekly *Reflex* and the *Sport* daily). The production of regional and local newspapers in the whole of the Czech Republic is almost totally controlled by the German Passauer Neue Presse, which publishes Bohemian and Moravian versions of *Deník*. The only major daily which has not yet passed into foreign hands is *Právo*, former daily of the Communist Party and the only leftist (social democratic) title in the country. An effort to keep (and possibly expand) a large and internally little differentiated reading public is one of the manifestations of the media commercialization which we mentioned above.

When at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s a major part of the Czech public (including a number of journalists) was invoking the freedom of the 1960s and a simplified ideal of Czechoslovakia between the two world wars, they were forgetting that

roughly from the 1970s, even in countries with a democratic tradition the press (and media in general) had been passing through a process of ever stronger commodification. True enough, quality newspapers are still coming out, but their position is becoming increasingly fragile from the economic point of view, and readers' interest in them has been slowly but undoubtedly declining. When foreign publishers started settling in the Czech environment at the beginning of the 1990s, they found the Czech market interesting, also because it was not impeded by the existence of traditional titles – and therefore offered good conditions for a full and unrestrained development of business strategies leading to minimization of costs and maximization of profit. That is why the format and design of Czech dailies is today decisively influenced by the “MBA mentality.” This means that the media pander to popular taste in a variety of ways, from simple style of writing to competitions with scratch cards, number of inserts, colour supplements, consumer services and texts on life style, health, housing and cars, or gifts such as DVDs with older Czech movies or tax return forms. Somewhat aside this trend is the daily *Hospodářské noviny* which, though also seeking to offer a wide variety of themes, nevertheless cultivates its reputation of a less entertaining but somewhat more solid paper. **The predominant orientation on shaping the mass reading public, capitalized on the advertising market, can be regarded as one of the signals that despite declarations to the contrary, the essence of the transformation was not democratization of society but creation of a prospering and effectively functioning media sector.**

The search for an optimum ratio between costs and revenues reflects on the quality of journalistic work and the characteristics of the journalistic community. This helps explain its relative youthfulness, because young people accept lower salaries (especially young and unstable is the editorial staff of regional dailies). For journalists of the Czech dailies it is thus quite possible to work their way up to high rungs of the career ladder – for instance the positions of page editor or chief of the commentary section - at a relatively young age and without the necessary experience, life wisdom, a proper grasp of the subjects they deal with and sometimes even without adequate education and training. The result is inclination towards emotive expression of exalted, one-sided attitudes, tawdry language bordering on vulgarity, general crudeness of communication and declining identification with the journalistic profession as a life mission (and hence an increasing willingness of journalists to put their skills into the service of the advertising, public relations and political consultancy business).

The period between 1990 and 2007 can thus be described as one during which the Czech market of daily papers has been “enriched” by purely gutter-type titles, a number

of newspapers have disappeared from it, an important role is played by foreign-based owners, the dominant type of daily press covers a wide spectrum of topics and targets the wide masses, and there is no solid quality newspaper.

A problem called public service

An essential transformation took place in the system of broadcast media. Before 1989 this sector was totally controlled by the government and the Communist Party, and consisted of two institutions: *Czechoslovak Radio* and *Czechoslovak Television*. After November 1989 it was decided that a dual broadcasting system would be developed in the country (then still Czechoslovakia), in which the media set up under the respective law to produce and broadcast programmes serving public interest would coexist with commercially-oriented private ones. This decision should again be seen in the socio-economic and ideological context of the time, by far exceeding the limits of the process of transformation in Czech society, in this case the context of “deregulating the broadcast media” and the concomitant “*three crises of the media of public service*”, as characterized by Marc Raboy. According to Raboy, it was a crisis of identity, of financing and of organization (see Raboy 1995).

These were the international circumstances in which the complicated process of denationalization of the existing system and creation of a dual one started. When the pre-November *Czechoslovak Television* (with *Czech Television* constituting a relatively independent part) entered this process, its position was highly uncertain. It was perceived as an important instrument of the previous regime and the requirement of its denationalization was tinged with an element of “cleansing”. At the same time, television employees quite soon subscribed to social change unfolding in the country. Television was no doubt seen as a source of entertainment and possibly also one of “mainstream” cultural values. Unlike *Czech Radio*, however it had a purely totalitarian tradition, given that it was established in the mid-1950s.² Moreover, the public television of the early 1990s was still characterized by the mentality of an exclusive, unique institution whose employees were to a large degree privileged – at least in the sense of access to the celebrities of the time and easier access to stimuli from the “West”. The concept of “public service” had no foundation. It was in conflict with past experience, and in fact was a sign of Czech Television’s “fall from glory”, as

² For the transformation of the *Czechoslovak Radio* into a medium of public service this relatively minor fact meant a lot: as it was founded in the 1920’s, it could draw upon the tradition of the period between the two world wars.

previously it had never been under any competitive pressure and had no experience with commercial media whatsoever. The emerging post-November political structures (especially their right-wing, highly influenced by the deregulatory trends in Western European countries) were moreover hostile to the idea of a medium controlled by the state becoming transformed into one public service, and preferred the creation of private media. To top it all off, transformation of state television into a public service medium was not very clear even to the public, the potential viewers. The comprehensible and acceptable requirement of denationalization was thus changing into an uneasily understandable constitution of an institution which was not based on the experience and lacked the support of producers, political elites and the public alike.

The creation of the dual system and above all the transformation of *Czech Television* were thus taking place in an atmosphere characterized by low support on the part of the political elites, necessity to confront public distrust, and ultimately also by a decline of viewers' interest, at a time when the dual system had already been fully developed and the *TV Nova* commercial channel, covering the whole territory of the country, appeared on the scene in 1994. *Nova* won the attention of a large audience by an unusual approach, offering commercially successful programmes which had stood the test of popularity in other countries, by attractive newscasts, dynamic development, as well as a sort of intimacy and informality of communication. The trend in the Czech Republic took a line of deregulation, following the west-European model, which (combined with the limited capabilities of *Czech Television*) caused that the television of public service failed to make use of the potential stemming from its position and supply at least to some extent the offer missing on the press market due to the non-existence of a quality daily paper.

The unstable position of the public service television became reflected inter alia in the so-called "television crisis" at the turn of 2000 and 2001, triggered by the escalating efforts of some members of parliament to gain a larger indirect control over it (through the agency of the oversight *Czech Television Council*). That was opposed by some TV employees. In a strained atmosphere rife with emotions which the personnel of *Czech Television* managed to create, a series of mass demonstrations took place in Prague (the largest since 1989), leading to the removal of the director general of *Czech Television*, who was to have served the purpose of greater political control. New legislation regulating its operation was drafted. However, as a result, the final wording of the *Czech Television Act* in fact further strengthened the influence which the House of Deputies had on it (see also Jirák, Köpplová,

2001). Whatever the new law achieved, it definitely did not stop the process of marginalizing public service television.

Today we can note that public service television (meaning mainly its first channel) and both private televisions with nation-wide coverage (*TV Nova* and historically older *Prima*) are very much alike and have much in common with the mass-circulation dailies characterized in the previous section. They are governed by the principles of marketing tactics and target the mass public, whom they offer a melange of programmes, from current events reporting to talk shows and entertainment including films, variety shows and soup operas. In public service conceived in this way, *Czech Television* has a great difficulty to defend its right to existence and stands little hope that it will succeed in reversing the trend observable in most of Europe.

Marketing mentality of the Czech media and the democratization process

Currently an outstanding feature of the mass media is a high degree of their dependence on market success. It leads to commercialization of their product – whether in the area of current events reporting, current affairs, commentaries, documentary output or entertainment. The media are driven by the need to generate profit, optimize their cost-effectiveness and use all means to consolidate their position – and hence by the degree of their incorporation in the political sphere. Their success rate is increasingly measured by the basic ratios of their (immediate or medium-term) economic achievements – the level of their marketed production, the size of their reading, listening and viewing public, market share. The decisive economic context of the whole transformation is no doubt represented by the development of the business sphere and the number of foreign producers and service providers entering the country – and the resulting expansion of the advertising market.

A certain, though negligible hindrance to unbridled commercialization of the media is the difference (stemming from the legislation) between public service media and commercial radios and televisions. Yet there is a distinct emphasis in this media sector on ratings as the basic measure of success. Regardless of their legal status, the broadcasting media respect the need of the advertisers to reach by all available means the largest number of recipients in prime time. In short, the media are today subservient to the requirement of economic success, and in order to survive in this situation, they use methods typical of the economic entities of our time: seeking optimum balance between costs and revenues, endeavouring to attain the

largest stability of their users, and above all employing proven and available marketing strategies.

This situation has downgraded the importance of the media as a factor of the democratization of society. Publishers and broadcasters are using it to gain the largest possible entrepreneurial autonomy and secure for themselves conditions of the lowest possible market regulation. The parameters of the democratization process, such as “independence” of the media or their role of a “watchdog of democracy” are caricatured and serve as levers which help to exert pressure on representatives of the political or economic spheres, influence the developments in the country and the moods in society. Democratization has become a peculiar and long-term reality show which the media stick to as long as it brings them what they expect of it: profit and power.

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