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The market takes all

Czech Republic: Playing the game of media trumps

The most notable feature of the post-1989 media in the Czech Republic is the triumph of the market. So convincingly have economic imperatives taken over from editorial priorities, that even the quality press has been affected by "tabloidization". Ideological domination has been replaced by the more sophisticated strategies of the market, regrets Jaromir Volek.

The transformation of the Czech media at the beginning of the 1990s took place within the context of a public space expropriated and ruled by the Leninist doctrine that defined the media as an instrument of the "awareness of the masses". Put another way, it was exclusively an instrument of centralized propaganda controlled by a single state party. Given these conditions, the transformation process involved a steep learning curve, both at the governmental-regulatory level and at that of editorial content. The end result has brought a marked change in the reading and watching habits of the public, but it was a slow and complex process.

The transformation took place in several stages. The first, pre-transition phase pre-dated the social changes of the Velvet Revolution and took place entirely within the framework of the old centralized media system. The second, transitional phase saw a real transformation, which rapidly led to the complete elimination of old power and institutional structures. The forces behind this process, especially in the Czech Republic, were liberalization and privatization. The defining changes can be observed only in the third, current post-transformation phase when the influence of particular economic, legislative and cultural-political subprocesses came together.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the domestic media landscape underwent a form of shock therapy. For decades, the Czech media system had been "frozen"; unlike the Hungarian or Polish media, it took little account of new trends in the media in western Europe and rejected any corrective measures until the last moment. This complicated the second transformation phase and, as a result, not only did it fail to reach certain goals, it did nothing to initiate the steps that would have led up to these; processes that should rightly have taken place at this point had to wait until the post-transformation period.

By identifying the structural changes the Czech media has needed to cope with, we can evaluate how successfully it has performed. These are as follows:

1. the elimination of the state monopoly on broadcast services;
2. the internationalization and globalization of media owners and content;
3. the commercialization of private media;

4. the increase in the speed of technological change, especially the digitization of electronic media;
5. the professionalization of the media;
6. the increase in plurality and diversity of content;
7. the heightening of public participation across the broader media space;
8. the withdrawal of the media from the influence of government or political structures.

After almost 20 years spent searching for new structures, only the first three goals have been fully realized; media commercialization has, most notably, been achieved completely. Unfortunately, this has extended into the public service media. The process of technological transformation can only be called partially successful. Its most significant element, digitization, is a decade behind the most advanced among the original 15 members of the European Union. One cause is the rigid media legislation that cannot react flexibly to socio-technical change; this is most evident in the digitization of television. The professionalization of the media is still not complete: a low level of professional training and competence prevails among journalists.

Least progress has been made on the last three goals, all of which concern the socio-political role of the media. Essentially, one cannot speak of an increase in diversity or plurality of opinions over the past decade. On the contrary, under their present ownership and editorial structures, the degree of homogenization or centralization, particularly of regional print media, has increased. As a result, instead of specific regional agendas, local newspapers are dominated by the same issues as the national press. To some degree, this can be explained by the fact that the German Vltava-Labe-Press Group controls over 70 per cent of the regional daily market — effectively a monopoly. Since the end of the 1990s, diversity of opinion and values generally has been curtailed; the fact that three of the four quality national dailies are controlled by German owners¹ and only one by domestic capital, is significant.²

The continuing influence of the state on the public service sector is a quite separate issue. This has been de facto "privatized" by the parliamentary parties and used as a megaphone for their own political ambitions; in effect they use the media to shut off individuals not affiliated to a political party from the public debate. Public service broadcasters do not function as an effective tool to motivate citizens to participate in public life and consequently weaken the quality of democracy.

The criteria developed by Daniel Halin and Paolo Mancini³ to compare western (Euro-US) media systems are useful in outlining the most significant characteristics of the Czech media system in its current, post-transformation form. These include the degree of professionalism in the media, the strength of the relationship between the media and political parties, and the main trends in the market.

In search of a new professional identity

The radical change in the professional standards expected of journalists after 1989 has had a distinct effect on their professional identity as well as their self-perception. Unable to reconcile their former role with the demands of the new technology and economic pressures, journalists have gradually been "de-intellectualized"⁴ and reduced to administering the machinery of communication.⁵ The "new type of journalist" as a "media employee", whose

existence depends on respecting the dominant logic of infotainment has, for now, won out over the traditional role of the journalist as reporter and interpreter of events. While Czech media entered the western European media orbit during the 1990s by accepting at least some elements of European legislation, it has not yet been able to attain higher professional standards, and instead has passively accepted the consequences of the concentration of media ownership and the commodification of editorial approaches.

The structural transformation of the Czech media system is vividly illustrated by this new-born community of journalists, which still shows certain atypical characteristics that separate it from mainstream Euro-US journalism (Volek, 2009). The sharp generational change after 1989 opened a space for young journalists who were not fully prepared in education or skills, and who, without the opportunity of training, in many cases skipped past positions as trainees or newspaper "water-carriers" and very quickly reached positions of authority as editors, publishing directors or editors-in-chief and, in some cases, even management positions. The rapid entry of the new generation of journalists did not, however, strengthen the journalistic community as a whole, either in experience or education. Czech journalists are still younger on average than their colleagues working in the western European media. The relatively low average age of journalists⁶ indicates that the weaker representation of the middle generation has not been completely resolved, even in management positions. More than half of Czech journalists do not have university-level education; only one fifth studied journalism or other forms of communication studies.

Czech journalists also differ from their western European counterparts in that they massively disregard membership in professional associations and trade unions. It is characteristic of Czech journalism that there is an absence of respected professional organizations that would offer an authoritative platform for a substantial part of the journalistic community. This not only concerns the elementary institutional care and defence of the profession, but also the cultivation of professional standards and, above all, the creation of a new professional identity.⁷ In other words, the traditional concept of journalists as members of a specific professional group, more or less directed by formal rules of institutionalized, professionalized behaviour, does not apply to Czech journalists. This is particularly noticeable if one compares them to journalists in the highly professionalized journalistic environment of, for example, the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands or Germany. Czech journalists often compensate for this lack by "informal professionalization" by way of so-called "interpretive communities", in the framework of which journalists from various media discuss professional issues. Unfortunately, this leads to a surprising degree of conformity in approaches, which, in turn, results in the campaign-style promotion of social agendas and collective media interpretations.

Congruity between politics and the media

The close ties between the values and views of political parties and those represented in the media is caused by a factor specific to Czech print journalists and is one more thing distinguishing them from western European journalistic culture. This is their broad degree of sympathy with right-wing liberal values, or more precisely, a distinct rejection of the Left. More than 50 per cent of Czech journalists identify with the Right, while only 16 per cent express sympathy for the Left. In addition, the majority of print national dailies belong to the Centre-Right.

Hence, the right wing political parties have a distinct advantage: their agenda is closer both to the agendas of the main national media and to the majority of journalists who work in them. In this sense, not only the high degree of identification with right wing and liberal values but also the relatively weak centre, is of interest. Currently, the categories of "right", "left" or "liberal" are "empty shells" for the domestic journalistic community, onto which very diverse attitudes can be projected. This approach is motivated by the particular historical experience of so-called "real socialism", identified somewhat simplistically with leftist politics *per se*.

The above characteristic closely relates to the second criteria Halin and Mancini (2004) use to compare media systems: the degree of political parallelism or congruity between party and media systems. Despite the fact that the direct interconnection of the news media with concrete political parties is now a thing of the past,⁸ we cannot speak of the party-political neutrality of the Czech media. The connection between political parties and the news media is looser today, but has not completely disappeared. This is illustrated by the values explicit in the national news media and the political preferences of their readers.

Three of the four national quality dailies — *Mladá Fronta Dnes*, *Lidové Noviny* and *Hospodářské Noviny* — pursue a centre-right political agenda. Ideologically, their editorial agendas differ only in their degree of inclination to liberal values or to economic liberalism. In other words, sympathy for the centre-right and liberal values of parliamentary parties predominates, not only in the quality dailies but also in the tabloids. A similar orientation towards centre-right and liberal values can be seen among the readership of these dailies. The independent Centre Left is now represented only by the daily *Právo*, whose readership has declined massively in the past three years.

The relationship between the quality dailies and political parties has not deepened over the past decade; editorial boards have made efforts to increase their independence. But one key problem has persisted, particularly in television: political-media clientelism. Television has become a closed circuit medium within which, over the past decade and more, the same old parliamentary parties, their representatives and their sterile political ideas, have been recycled. This could be described as the political "privatization" of the public service media.

Indicators of change in the market

The structure of media markets is usually determined by the following criteria: the number of newspapers sold daily per thousand adult inhabitants; audiences for television news as compared to the readership of the daily press; and the relative market share of quality and tabloid press. In the first case, 205 copies are sold per thousand adult Czechs. This is lower than the UK (401), Germany (355) or Austria (350), but higher than in France (182), Belgium (176) or Portugal (72).⁹ In other words, it is a slightly above the EU average. If we compare the average daily audience of the main television news with the readership of the daily press, the behaviour of the adult Czech population again differs from the European average: approximately 3 per cent more people read a daily paper than follow the main television news — 49 per cent and 46 per cent respectively. In the majority of EU countries the percentages are reversed, with television audiences often very much in the majority.¹⁰

The most striking indicator of the change in the Czech media market is its increasing commercialization or tabloidization. This is illustrated by the relative sales of so-called quality and tabloid dailies. While sales of the former still dominate, the trend over the past decade clearly shows a rapid growth in the sale of tabloids. In 1993, only 8 per cent of the adult population regularly read the tabloid press; by 2008, this was almost 25 per cent. This latter figure may not represent an accurate picture since it does not measure the extent to which the quality dailies have been affected by creeping tabloid and commercial practices.

However, if we compare data on the Czech Republic with that on Hungary and Poland, it is clear that the Czech quality media are faring better than their neighbours. We can look for an explanation of this in the fact that traditional Czech dailies were transformed in the 1990s into a "market type quality press", which used a number of tabloid editorial approaches. In this context, it might be more appropriate to talk of a "semi-quality Czech press", which mixes previously incompatible editorial ingredients.

The commercial imperative

Any preliminary diagnose of the state of health of the Czech media after 20 years of its new existence, must be made against the background of its situation at the beginning of the 1990s. The old professional ideology was in ruins and the new one still over the horizon. The breakdown of the old "ownership relationships" and the loss of the forced "subscribing" public was a serious threat to the press and the journalists working in it. The fact that they not only overcame this problem but were able to achieve an increase in circulation is worth noting as evidence of a certain cultural ability to survive, which historically has always been related to rational economic thinking.

Almost twenty years after the collapse of the old media system, it can be said that its transformation led to a radical change in all basic coordinates determining the direction of the Czech media. The key dynamic in all this was commercialization. Most of the Czech media have adapted to the economic realities of the market: the media is just one more commodity forced to adapt to market imperatives as it comes ever closer to being little more than infotainment.

A role is also played by the dynamically changing character of media ownership, where concentration in ever fewer hands has entirely wiped out the memory of the late-1980s, when the philosophy of deregulation, liberalization, and decentralization seemed — at least in the western European context — the indisputable principle of progress for advanced media cultures. However, this was overtaken relatively quickly by the philosophy of commercialization. The most important domestic cultural-political magazines such as *Host*, *Literární noviny*, *A2* and others, have resisted this trend for the time being.

In other words, the 40-year, ideologically determined media diet has been replaced by a somewhat different set of values in which the market rather than the state or the parties is the determining factor. Ideological censorship has been replaced by profit-censorship in the Czech media. But even this is not ideologically neutral: the totalitarian strategy of violent ideological domination has been replaced by a more sophisticated strategy in which audience attitudes and tastes are formed by the hegemony of the market.

- ¹ The liberal right-wing *Lidové noviny* and centre-right *Mladá fronta dnes* are controlled by Rheinisch-Bergische Verlagsgesellschaft Düsseldorf and the economic right wing liberal daily *Hospodářské noviny* by Verlagsgruppe Handelsblatt GmbH, Düsseldorf.
- ² The centre-left *Právo* is owned by the Czech company Borgis.
- ³ Daniel C. Halin and Paolo Mancini, *Comparing media systems. Three Models of Media and Politics*, Cambridge 2004.
- ⁴ Jaromír Volek and J. Jirák, "Professional self-image of Czech journalists: selected attributes" in *Czech and Slovak Media Studies*, 4/2008. And see also Jaromír Volek, "Czech journalists after the collapse of the old media system: Looking for a new professional self-image" in *Media Systems East and West: How Different, How Similar?* Budapest 2009 (forthcoming in June).
- ⁵ In contrast to the frequent criticism by media analysts and politicians, the Czech public ascribes a relatively high level of credibility to journalists and ranks them in this respect above businesspeople, politicians, teachers and scientists. Journalism appears as a very attractive profession that allows one to encounter interesting ideas and people. In addition, there is a strong assumption that working in this profession requires a broad education and the ability to understand the complexities of the current world better than the average citizen. This image is supplemented by the idea that it is a profession that pays well above the average. Thus one might say that the majority of the Czech public idealizes journalists and endows them with highly unrealistic characteristics.
- ⁶ The average age is 36, the median age 34.
- ⁷ Only 9 per cent of journalists are members of professional associations; 10 per cent are members of trade unions.
- ⁸ The single important exception is the Communist *Haló noviny*.
- ⁹ Source: ABC and World Association of Newspapers (2007).
- ¹⁰ The data must be interpreted with some caution: the research methodology used to determine the conditions in the EU countries cited is not entirely comparable.

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