

CRISIS OF IDENTITY AND MEANING OF THE CZECH MEDIA EXISTANCE (WITH A FOCUS ON THE PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA)¹

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Abstract

Thanks to its role in the society, the media bring information, entertainment, and a sort of getting knowledge. Public service broadcasting should be a service in the public interest. European countries have certain existing principles determining the tasks and objectives for the public service media. By meeting the objectives of a public service medium they contribute to the creation of a public value. The public service media are affected by the environment in which they operate, they reflect the social, political and also economic situation in the society. Political grouping in the country, the nature of citizens and their attitude and confidence in their own homeland, commitment to transparency of internal relationships and structures, all that affects the resulting image of the public service media in the country, their independence and credibility.

Key words: the Czech media, public service broadcasting.

1. Introduction

Medium is the intermediary of communication between a communicator and an addressee in any environment, space, and time. Medium is speech, writing, a book, a public notice, and also the newspapers, film, radio or television. The latest medium is the Internet. With regard to the

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above-mentioned it is obvious that the concept of 'medium' is not exactly determined and it can be understood as a communication channel but also, e.g., as a technical means. According to Rozehnal (Rozehnal 2007: 8), a certain weakness of the Czech legislation is the fact that these concepts 'however variously expressed, they are not, with exceptions, defined'. Generally, it is possible to write that the media can be characterized as a technical means of mass communication (newspapers, book, television), and as social institutions producing and disseminating mass communication reports (radio broadcasting, television, publishing houses). The mass media are included into a so-called branch of knowledge and information. The media as it has been already mentioned are a provider of information, education and entertainment. The media contribute to meeting the needs of learning for the general public (Strečková 1998: 16). Jackson and Brown consider media outcomes as mixed goods. For the media of public service it means that they are the goods that cannot be excluded from consumption and at the same time they meet a prerequisite of division of consumption (Rektořík 2003: 28). Public service is understood as a mission of public administration. Its primary mission is to serve the public and fulfill its ethical duties (Pouperová 2006: 9). It can be said that more than the information and educational function the media mainly serve as entertainment. Especially television broadcasting has turned into a huge business aimed at generating a profit. Television channels predominantly offer 'a vaudeville style of entertainment appealing to the lowest areas of the audience tastes'. New digital stations succeed mainly in a so-called low season (January, February, July, and August). At that time great players (it is Prima Television and Nova Television for the Czech Republic) put on the program the reruns of their serials and older home production. In the so-called high season, they skimp on investments and in the programs appear: a number of expensive programs being purchased are lower and the release of the already recorded costly serials is postponed until the right time. The media often do not know what they should be and for whom and in which way they should fulfill their mission. Many of them are continuously looking for their place that is once they target the mass audience and then the professional one, once they incline to the tabloid tendencies, another time they behave as a serious and reliable medium.

The economic results show that the Czech media market is still coping with the legacy of the financial crisis. According to Feix (Vyletal 2013) it is necessary to differentiate a situation in individual types of the media in relation to the crisis. Generally, there is not any crisis in the media, more likely it is a permanent pressure or only a reflection of how money and users are spreading among individual media types. The crisis affects those who

have based their business only on one media type (outdoor, print or radio). A growing lack of funds for news operations is the basic problem of journalism. There is a reduction in the quality, price, cut in costs, and media commoditization. The source of the news published on the news servers is missing, the information is not verified by more sources, it is recycled over and over again and the news is artificially becoming „gutter” that is it is similar to tabloids. In addition to the financial difficulties the Czech media face other problems especially the changes in the ownership which do not contribute to the confidence in the media by the public. The owners of the media houses mostly deny influencing the contents of the media. However it should be expected when somebody buys something they will be interested in the impact on their business operation.

That is why the role of the public service media broadcasting is at present much more significant. They are expected to take on a certain social responsibility and ideals fall far below the limits of economic prosperity. The Czech Television and the Czech Radio should not compete with private broadcasters often offering a shallow and cheesy fun.

This paper is aimed at describing the field of the public service media, searching for their identity and capturing the changes the Czech television and the Czech radio are undergoing in the search for the meaning of their existence in relation to meeting the public service tasks.

2. Crisis of the public media service identity

It often seems that the public service media have no idea who or what they are where they belong or where they are going to. The public service media are based on the public needs and their mission is to serve the public. The public pay them although some individuals do not use that service. The most important elements of the public service media are as follows: the media serve the public, the media are funded by the public and they are under control of the public. The public service media play an important role in the democratic society, they represent the indispensable element in promoting cohesiveness and national identity. They are the image of the society for which they act as a mirror².

The program offer of the public service media has certain determined pillars. To those pillars especially belongs the following: a program offer serves the public interest, broadcasting is for everybody regardless of their age, sex, religions; the broadcasting includes the programs for minorities, broadcasted information is objective and unbiased. The contents of the

² Article 19 2013.

public service medium to be provided should have at least one of the mentioned qualities: to be of high quality and to have inspiring, original, innovative and socially committed contents. The public interest is described as any activity as long as it is beneficial to at least some groups of the population and does not harm anybody else. The interest of the public is identical with the public interest and that is why a primary role of the media is to give the majority 'what it wants'. The activity if it is to be in the public interest has to be beneficial for all members of the society for the public is 'everybody'. But it is not possible to rely on the majority opinion for two reasons: The first reason is that the majority expectations and the taste of the public reflect the attitudes of the majority viewer and adapting of broadcasting to them have similar impacts as the pressure of advertising market. It means that the pressure of the advertising market on the media leads to their ever increasing concentration and orientation on those who the advertisers want to appeal to and retain them in particular, which is the majority viewer or listener. The second reason is weakening of esthetics and ethics standards in the society which often lead to superficial and quickly changing requirements for broadcasting. One of the most important tasks of the public service media is to provide the public with the objective and well-balanced information. The balance means that the public service media would not favor any political party or movement or their opinions or opinions of various groups of the public. Objectivity means providing such information that will not distort and conceal the facts that are given neutrally and truthfully.

The activity of the media is influenced by the laws and directives. Their existence may seem to be unnecessary but values such as truthfulness, decency, accuracy, and objectivity are not always observed. The public service media endeavor to observe the mentioned principles by means of ethic codes, professional standards and rules. Observing the above-mentioned is often controlled by various authorities and councils. In the Czech Republic it is the Czech Television Council, the Czech Radio Council, and the Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting the role of which is to observe the principles. Within the European Union countries there is the Council of Europe but mainly the European Broadcasting Union. The European Broadcasting Union (EBU) links together public service media. Currently, it associates members from 56 countries. The main objective of the EBU is to protect the interests of broadcasters of the public service media by promotion of their benefit to the modern society (EBU 2013). The results of its activity it presents in the annual report, it regularly issues its own publications the aim of which is to advertise the role and position of public service media in the society. As an example it is possible to mention a publication issued in 2013 under the title of Viewpoint: Media Freedom

and Pluralism. This publication deals with significant functions ensured by the public service media and with the EU duty to protect public service media. A significant document approved in the summer of 2012 is the Declaration of the public service media basic values. The Declaration defines the fulfillment of the pledges of universality, independence, excellence, variety, responsibility and innovation without the presence of manipulation and lobby so that the viewers could get free media contents ensuring the plurality of opinion. In the same year, the 68th meeting of the General Meeting of the European Broadcasting Union took place at which a project under the title of Vision 2020 was submitted. The project points out the development in the field of technology, changes in the society, e.g. across a viewers spectrum and business, and how these changes influence the public media broadcasting. These changes are a huge challenge as it is necessary for the media to cope with them, to adapt themselves to the future trends so that the level of public broadcasting could not only be maintained but also increased. Vision 2020 is aimed at the identification of the main changes and traps the public broadcasters will have to undergo in the subsequent years. The obtained knowledge then will be used for the development of the future strategic plans and recommendations to be handed over to the EBU member broadcasters so that they could share them and use them efficiently. The outcomes of that research are to be presented at the meeting of the General Meeting at the end of 2013.

Also individual authorities of the European Union deal with the topic of the public service media and the European Commission pays attention to it as well. On its websites it clearly shows that it is aware of the media sector role in the society, its economic position but also how it contributes to the development and maintenance of culture, information, education and democracy. The European Commission mentions the theme of the public service media state support, which it does not condemn in any way. To their opinion, funding the media from the state funds often used to be inevitable in order to achieve the stated objectives aimed at meeting democratic, social and cultural needs of the society. The benefits resulting from that way of financing should outweigh the risks arising from them. That is why the European Commission requires from its member countries to define the duties of public service media so that the contribution from the state would be limited to the amount of funding necessary for meeting those pledges. The reason for such regulation is the observance of competitiveness on the media market which is quickly evolving and growing with the launching of digital broadcasting.

With the development of new technologies, changes occur on the media scene. These changes act as challenges for the public service media. A growing number of television and radio stations brings a high pressure on public service media and at that moment both amateur and professional public ask a question “what is the role of the public service broadcasting” in the society of the 21st century? In that connection Katz says that the increase in the number of broadcasting channels causes a fragmentation of viewers and this leads to the fact that “television is almost ceasing to work as a shared public space” (Metyková 2004: 5). The same may be applied to the radio where the number of broadcasting channels is much higher than on TV. There are debates associated with the existence of public service media from the philosophical, cultural or ideological point of view. The reasons for the existence or non-existence of the public service media in the society are looked for. There is no need of the search for some new theories that would entitle the right to ‘life’ of the public service broadcasters. Existence of these media is connected with meeting communication and cultural needs in certain cultural, political and technical conditions of concrete social-economic units.

Of course, there are discussions both at the national and especially at the European level. The activities of European commercial broadcasters are known. They point out the similarity of public and private broadcasting programs, certain privileges of the public service broadcasters and their expansion into services that enable the implementation of information technologies (Šmíd 2005: 4). Criticism is also connected with the program offer, the public service media offer programs that are broadcasted also by commercial television. The thing in question is that it is not possible to create programs to compete with private broadcasters by means of fees paid by licensees. As it is obvious from the experience the concentration on the major viewer leads to the decline in the public information and diversity of opinion or the absence of cultural programs intended for viewers with a challenging artistic flair.

3. Purpose of the Czech media public service existence

At the beginning, the meaning of the term ‘public service operator of broadcasting’ in the Czech environment was clear. This term meant that those operators of broadcasting had been established by the public law and set up under the Act. In the course of time, the term ‘public’ gained other meanings. Another meaning of the term is a differentiation of the public broadcasters from the state ones. In the Czech legislation such differentiation has no meaning for the state operators do not exist here. It is necessary

to realize, however, that the boundary between the state and public media is a very fragile thing because legislative power will always, even if indirectly, influence the appointment of the public media leading representatives and also the media budget. Another term associated with the term 'public' is 'public service'. Its content is not modified in the Czech legislation (Rozehnal 2007: 35). A democratic state has a certain public interest, which is maintaining of the undistorted, unbiased, impartial and objective information. This especially means the promotion of the national interest. As Fridrich says, in the Czech environment it involves maintaining the national identity, sharing of values, national culture, the Czech sports and the quality of keeping people informed (Fridrich 2005: 2).

Public service broadcasting is in the situation when there is a need for it to undergo certain changes. And this is what the Czech public service media strive after. Žák says that the obvious aim of the public service is: to educate, inform and entertain. For example, a commercial television will not publish the problems of its biggest advertiser, and that is why there is the existence of the public service media to assume this task. The public service media, according to Štern, produce programs for the viewers so that they have cultural experiences. Commerce produces to have money. Štern furthermore mentions that even a commercial Czech television is able to produce a good program with a cultural value attractive for the masses, e.g.: private traps. Then he adds that such programs are only exceptional cases. A considerable problem arises when the public service media is judged according to its viewer ratings or listener ratings. To increase these indicators the media try to produce programs that will increase the indicator ratings. And at that point it starts to face problems, which is a tendency to copy the commerce. And thus it focuses on a less frequently viewed genre and criticism arises again, the medium has no viewer ratings. Actually, it is a sort of vicious circle (Panel-Veřejná služba 2010: 4).

The public interest in the Czech Republic is accomplished by means of institutions such as the Czech Radio and the Czech Television. According to the Code of the Czech Television, programs are influenced by creativity, tolerance and critical thinking. The purpose of the public service is to provide the public with information, critical reflection, arts and entertainment that are protected against lobbying pressures. It is just the Czech Television that contributes to creating the space of the freedom of speech, thinking and creation in the atmosphere of respect for the man, their work and to every form of existence (Čísařová 2004: 2). The Code of the Czech Television and the Code of the Czech Radio are generally valid and binding documents for all employees of both institutions. On the basis of the fact that these institutions are the public service it is valid that the Law on the Czech Television,

and the Law on the Czech Radio have set stricter limits for the content of broadcasting than those of commercial broadcasting.

According to Duhan, the director general of the Czech Radio, ‘the Czech Radio is a laudable example, a certain standard for commercial stations’. Many, however, believe that the changes **the Czech Radio** is undergoing will lead to getting closer to commercial radios. ‘Let it approach as long as it loses none of its quality’ Duhan comments the situation. And he adds that it is just commercial stations that have got closer to the Czech Radio as they aspire to have good coverage, information on traffic, about the weather, on sports and cultural events. The Czech Radio finds itself on the horns of a dilemma of how to increase listener ratings and this is possible only on condition it will address the listeners of commercial radio stations. Here arises a fear of losing the quality journalism, reducing the number of the news from abroad, educational and analytical programs. The current management of the Czech Radio places a great emphasis on the increase of attractiveness and addressing the widest social strata of listeners (Urban 2013: 33). According to Duhan, ‘the Czech Radio will be a respected medium with twenty-five percent share on the market, respected by the public, competition, and political representation. It will remain the most trustworthy medium which people could rely on and which they will be looking for to receive useful information, cultural values and quality entertainment’ (Urban 2013: 36). Canceling of the stations such as Leonardo Czech Radio, Radio Bohemia, and the Czech Radio 6 is a certain improvement of the Czech Radio program offer. On the other hand, new stations have appeared: Czech Radio Plus, Czech Radio Jazz, and Czech Radio Junior. The new stations are focusing on the current events and journalism, jazz music, and on children. The latter station is a partial repayment of the debt towards the youngest listeners launched on the Internet and also in the digital shape. The main reason is aging of the listeners and by that step the Czech Radio tries to attract the young generation, i.e. new listeners who the radio wants ‘to bring up’ to listening to the stations offered by the Czech Radio. The Czech Radio thinks Radio Journal as a crucial station. The station transferred to the system of the so-called continuous news in which it focuses on quick and immediate journalism. This pervades the entire day and takes preference over any scheduled program. Radio Journal changed its music profile that had been criticized by the professional public for a long time. Magazines disappeared from the station, more consumer and service information were added, the content became more attractive by presenting stories, reportages, and the items were enhanced by a sound atmosphere, and programs as well as contributions were shortened (to about 4 minutes). Thereby, according to the professional public, broadcasting became more

contact. Due to those changes listener ratings of the Radio Journal station changed. However, there was no increase as expected, but the decline in the number of listeners (from 783 thousand in a half of 2012 listener's rating declined to 727 thousand in the first quarter of 2013). This decline may be temporary until listeners get used to the new style (some people label it as close to the "tabloid" style).

The Czech Television wants to be a good public service that is the centre of the community, which is able to maintain values, serves as a good archive and witness and a progressive mover of the artistic and media events. (Fridrich 2011) Viewers positively evaluate the Czech Television in the field of cultural programs (music, theatre, art) and the Czech films. In connection with the satisfaction of viewer groups' needs, the Czech Television takes into account the plurality of viewers' expectations and it is aware that by different programs it will satisfy different viewers. Documentary, educational and music programs were reported as those with the highest satisfaction, dramatic and religious programs then as those with the lowest satisfaction. 91.2% of viewers perceive the Czech Television as a provider of objective information (Česká televize 2013: 1).

In the autumn of 2012, the Czech Television started a new measurement system of viewers' ratings. The reasons leading to the implementation of the project are as follows:

- Outcomes from the measurements and the evaluation will serve to the Czech Television Council for the supervision over the fulfillment of the public service tasks.
- Furthermore, for the Czech Television internal needs as it will get a feedback at preparing the programs and also the management of the processes in the Czech Television will be better.
- The Czech Television is interested in becoming a pioneer in the public service measurement in the Central Europe area (countries such as Great Britain and the Netherlands have already had such measurement).

The new methodology represents a link of three various approaches to the measurement and evaluation of public service broadcasting. This methodology originated on the basis of cooperation between the Czech Television and the Czech Television Council. The methodology is aimed at meeting six general objectives of the public service, which is television broadcasting, the rate of meeting various viewers groups' needs and at the basic indicators of performance (Reach, Quality, and Impact). Within the fulfillment of six objectives it is: increase in keeping viewers informed; maintaining and development of the civil society and democracy; support of education and educating; stimulation of creativity and quality in culture (understood

in a broad sense); presentation of the Czech Republic, its regions and communities; bringing the world events nearer to the Czech citizens; providing the public with the achievements of new telecommunication technologies and services.

By working towards the above-mentioned objectives, the Czech Television will get an overview of how it is successful in addressing specific groups of viewers, in meeting the role of keeping citizens informed, how it contributes to the development of the civil society, to the support of education and educating or to the stimulation of creativity and quality in culture. The average share of the Czech Television as a whole (CT 1, CT 2, CT 24, and CT Sport stations) on the number of viewers during a year was 30, 16%. It has become the leading TV on the market of television channels. Everything is a reflection of the changes in the Czech Television program offer, of the newly developed programs. Since the date of 31.8.2013, great expectations are placed on the newly launched TV channels: D (children channel), and CT art (a channel focused on cultural events). In this way a free space on the existing CT 2 will be created for new current affairs programs

4. Conclusion

The future of the public service media is above all connected with their funding by license fees, seeking for new sources to finance the Czech Television and the Czech Radio. It also depends on the changes in production due to the new competitors entering the media market. The fact that citizens pay for the public service media should lead, in the ideal case, to increasing social awareness and the feeling of solidarity with them. If people were aware of those media relevance, their contribution for an individual and the society, then these media could constitute a certain unifying element among citizens. It is necessary, however, to communicate this element so that people would be aware of it, and would adequately understand and support it. The yield on license fees serves covering the costs associated with media public service activities. These media operate on the market where a free economic competition exists and it is obvious that the costs of inputs are changing they have a tendency to rise and, of course, with them rise the costs of the public service media. As a response to the growing costs to be inevitably covered by the Czech Television and the Czech Radio, the levied license fee should be raised. In the Czech Republic, the amount of the radio fee is fixed by law to 45 CZK and that of the TV fee to 135 CZK. Only legislators can change the amount of those fees because of their anchoring in the Act. A process of amendment to any Act used to be not only lengthy but also very unpopular with citizens, which can be applied to the increase of any fee.

It is just the television and radio fees that are a thorn in commercial broadcaster's sides. They think that it is „easy money” and mainly secure the sources which the public service media „will waste” at television and radio program creating and making up. Here, commercial stations are very much wrong, for the public service media are responsible for their activities and render their accounts not only to the Czech Television Council and to the Czech Radio but mainly to their viewers and listeners. Quality journalism will survive but it will be significantly changed both in terms of performance and ownership. The traditional media have succeeded in coping with the launch of the Internet. Moreover, during the period of the „crisis” the so-called mobile revolution appeared. Mobile content is the second revolution close to each other that have affected the classical media. Certainly it is not the last technological revolution we have experienced so far there will be others in the subsequent years.

To the date of 30.06.2012 the Czech Republic completely switched to digital television broadcasting. Due to the digitalization, a gradual fragmentation of viewers has taken place. The development of the society and its lifestyle also make an impact on watching television and listening to the radio. More kinds of entertainment have appeared, the coverage of households in the CR is increasing. Also the Czech Television (iVysilani.cz) and the Czech Radio (rozhlas.cz) offer their web casting. The Czech Television and the Czech Radio as the public service media have not stagnated in their activities they have not become ‘dinosaurs’ or differently called outdated institutions. The public service Czech media are the media with the future with a specific vision of what they have to offer to their viewer or listener: “we are specialists in our field and the purpose of our existence is the effort aimed at increasing the effectiveness of television and radio broadcasting”.

Like other public services funded by the public sources the future television and radio broadcasting will not be a mass matter it will not be used by everybody but all the time it will be at the disposal and beneficial to all the people.

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