

Journalism and Political Culture in CEES

In contemporary *media society*¹ political culture is to a high extent reproduced by the mass media or more precisely, by a part of it that serves the political information duties of the mass media. In this paper this part is called the news media or political journalism.² After the invention and introduction of the Internet, which extended the possibilities of information exchange exponentially, nevertheless, news media remain central information sources for the citizen – especially as a source of orientation (Oemichen, Schröter 2003, 375). Since more available information does not mean better or broader information respectively, as Daniel Bell already 1973 put it in his book “*The Postindustrial Society*” (which is regarded as the first theoretical conception of the *Information Society*; Bell 1975, 353).

Therefore the journalistic voice is of central importance for the content as well as the character of political deliberation. But news media are not only actively involved in the social process of the construction of current reality in society but also subject to it (Schulz 1989). Political journalism depends on the political culture in society first and foremost for the mere reason that news media are market-distributed goods and with this dependent on the demand of their customers. But furthermore, journalism is “... *a public trust that, while a business, is more than a business – it is, one might say, a business with value added*” (Dennis 1986, 95). In a democracy news media are unanimously regarded as important source of political information, which is essential for democratic participation and public deliberation. For this reason democratic governments all over the world provide a set of frameworks by legislation, regulation and the

¹ Apparently this term is mostly used for developed societies, in which mass media became a industry of significant productivity. But it can be adapted to less or least developed societies too. The overall definition for media societies is the dominance of communication via technical means in the different segments, institutions, organisations of society or between them respectively. (c.f. Saxer 1998; McQuail 1987, 3)

² The distinction between the different segments of mass media, especially concerning the information services, and the precise definition of journalism or political journalism is quite difficult. Christoph Neuberger even states the *vanishing of boundaries* (“Entgrenzung”) of this profession (Neuberger 2003). Besides new crossover formats like “infotainment” there are various overlaps of journalism and advertisement. For the purpose of this paper I will not discuss this problem in detail.

technical infrastructure as well as a more or less developed public broadcasting systems corresponding to the public interest in news media.³

During transition to democracy mass media in the CEES were re-organised from a state controlled system to mostly privately owned enterprises and public services and meanwhile the systems can be regarded as fully established, diverse and prospering. But concerning the culture of public media debate it seems as if there is still some way to go.

Firstly, there are concrete reasons for these findings, which are the average worse working conditions of journalism concerning the financial budgets of the editorials and lower standards of professionalism.⁴ Furthermore, executives in political or administrative positions or from private companies, who are not willing to accept investigation in their business, more often hamper the journalists in their day-to-day work than in Western Europe. In nearly every country officials took and still take action for libel against journalists for minor or even for wrong reasons.⁵

Secondly, in fact, journalists in the CEES break unwritten rules or written law, despite the outstanding freedom of the press as a principle of democracy they already benefit from today. Since in general press freedom is a most important prerequisite for the development of the profession but it is no tool for achieving a high culture of political deliberation. Every so often single violations of ethic or sometimes even legal rules discredit the whole profession leading to emotional, futile debates and calls for critical restrictions. To give an example: in an interview of Hungarian RTL-Klub with a professional killer end of April 2001 the journalist even asked the question: "What would be your asking price to assassinate the Hungarian Prime Minister?" (RSF 2002).

³ The regulation concerns especially the electronic mass media. For example, the Scadplus Programme of the EU formulates the principles and guidelines for the Community's audiovisual policy in the digital age as follows: "It is important for the legislative framework to maximise this growth and potential [of the audiovisual sector, note of auth.]. In view of the social and cultural role of audiovisual media, this legislative framework must at the same time protect the general interest, which has been at the basis of audiovisual policy regulation since its inception. More specifically, this regulation protects the general interest by basing itself on such principles as freedom of expression and the right of reply, pluralism, protection for authors and their works, promotion of cultural and linguistic diversity, the protection of minors and human dignity, and consumer protection."

⁴ Relic (1998); Schliep (1997); Dupuis 2003 a.o.

⁵ C.f. the annual reports of Reporters sans Frontières a.o.

The concern of this paper is to tie up to the discussion about deficits of news media in the CEES and to refer to first results of consideration in the course of my research for writing a PhD. on the mass media in CEES. In this place it seems appropriate to note, that journalism as a profession and the products are generally predisposed to suffer incessant critique in society, either of undifferentiated doubts or true offence. We come across public disputes about insufficiencies concerning news reporting in every single country in Europe to a higher or lower degree; the customers likes and dislikes - which are based on individual and collective self-esteem in society - even shape the quality of journalism.

Of course, I do not want to underestimate the basic material or juridical problems the journalists still face in CEES. But on the occasion of this conference, I want to focus on the immaterial side of the problem of deficits in journalism. The thesis of this paper is that in CEES the journalism needs stronger “journalistic infrastructures” (Ruß-Mohl 1994) for improving the professional standards from inside the professional system due to the profession's own account in a high-quality performance.

On the Quality of News Media

To judge upon the quality of news media we have to consider a framework of internal and external impacts on news production (McNair 1998). Hence the structural-functional system theory is a useful approach to abstractly modelling basic principles of the structures, functions, and changes, and which consciously pay no attention to actors and individual influences on the processes in the first place.⁶ According to this model, society is a system of communications consisting of operatively self-directed social subsystems with distinct functions in society, which are interrelated, and influence each other.⁷ In this framework Niklas Luhmann defines the mass media as the functional system in society that produces publicity in three different ways:

- The reporting by the news media

⁶The social structural system-theory in the tradition of Talcot Parsons and Niklas Luhmann is probably the most important approach for contemporary theories of journalism (c.f. Löffelholz and Quandt 2000, 147; for further reading see Marcinkowski 1993).

⁷ For further reading on the general logic of social systems, their differentiation, relations and reproduction c.f. Luhmann 1986 and 1987.

- The entertaining by non-fiction formats
- The advertising.

The central functions of the news media are the *selection* and *presentation* of current information. The social system follows an *immanent* logic of action and development and along with this it produces professional standards (Luhmann 1986).

Apart from abstract comprehension of system theory concerning the problem how these influences between the functional, social systems of society work in detail⁸ – we can suppose, that the demand in society plays an important role for the profile of the mass media.

In any society essential *normative* functions are ascribed to news media - along with the demand for *reliable* information (Luhmann 1986, 49pp.) - besides the basic function of news production. These influence the way of organising mass media, the legal frame, the regulation and the media politics as well as content of news media, the ethics of journalism and the essential professional standards (McNair 1998, Weischenberg 1998). The structures of a media system in turn correspond significantly with the surrounding political and economic system (Löffelholz 2002).

In recent history after World War II the development of mass media took a different course in Western and Eastern Europe. In the Western democracies news media emancipated from the state and transformed into relatively autonomous systems. They are regarded to having a central function in democracy, since the policies have to meet with public approval: in order to reach the public, the government is dependent on mass media (Altmeppen, Löffelholz 1998, 99). In this process the main requirements for journalism in order to fulfil this function are freedom of expression and variety of opinion. The corresponding ideal of news media in democracy is fair reporting, to inform about actual and relevant issues

⁸ But the social sciences in general are not able to explain the relations between societal structures and journalism sufficiently yet (Löffelholz 2002).

comprehensively in order to give the individual the possibility to make up an own opinion for decision-making.⁹

But pushed by market forces and political dependencies, contemporary journalism does not always fulfil the normative claims in democracy. At the contrary, even in the most developed democracies journalism is strongly criticised for several malfunctions. According to the outlined logic those deficits can not be solved from outside the journalistic system for two reasons. Firstly, according to the logic of system theory, the implementation and the protection of the quality in news media, is a process of system-immanent reproduction. Nevertheless, the latter follows external penetration from the other societal systems. Secondly, principally the democratic government should not interfere in questions of media content and to accomplish either protection or control of the mass media by legal means only is generally not possible. Furthermore, nowadays the governmental concepts of regulation are too complicated and inflexible and with this even hampering the development of this economic segment of growing importance. Along with this a combination of legal regulation and self-regulation by mass media and societal institutions is the best way of control in both ways (Hoffmann-Riem 1995).

Post-Socialist Media Systems in the Course of Democratisation

In Central and Eastern Europe, mass media were regarded by the regimes according to communist ideology as a political mean to support the existence and development of socialist society and exclusively organised by the communist party. Censorship was applied to topics that were considered as threatening the aims of building a socialist society. This led to different values, particularly concerning the freedom of the press. Journalists had to educate, motivate and mobilise society and news media had to be truthful and objective only within these ideological borders. The inconsistency of the journalistic principles truthfulness, neutrality, reporting the different aspects on the one hand and on the other hand the loyalty to the party line was dialectically neutralised in Soviet journalism by the devaluation of facts in favour of a more deep-seated "truth", the one of the communist ideology or the

⁹ An overview of the conception of mass media in democracy theory gives Andreas Beierwaltes, who investigated the main approaches of democracy theory concerning the function of the public and the mass media: the theory of elites, the theory of pluralism and the theory of participation.

party line. Along with this the function of informing about defects and abuses in society was not substantial in the social system of communism (McNair 1991; Weischenberg 1998, p. 105pp.; Goban-Klas 1997).¹⁰

The role of journalists in the transformation processes is not very well investigated yet, the existing approaches of political sciences as well as communication sciences failed to provide adequate scientific explanation (Thomaß 2001, O'Neill 1996). But evidently the journalists were intensely involved in public discussion and driving political changes.¹¹ In these years of rapid decline of governmental authority and the formation of alternative forces, the journalists took more liberty to follow their informative and deliberative functions. The shift in the way of selection and presentation in the official news media is impressive, they supplied content that was up to then censored, reported more authentically on current affairs and opened the studios for public debate. Just so spectacular in media history was the high circulation of illegal and later accepted alternative media outlets, e.g. by estimations in Poland about 1500 periodicals were being published during the period of martial law (Howard 1994). Which leads us to the remarkable detail that these activities took place even so without being protected by legal means (Berman 2000, 114).

After the fall of the communist rule, formally the media systems were transformed quickly. The print media was privatised to a great extent in the first years of democratic order. Often the editorial staff took over the outlets. The broadcasting was changed into public service enterprises in the time from the beginning until the midst of the nineteen-nineties and broadcasting laws were introduced.¹² But regarding attitudes the implementation of democratic values took some more time - especially regarding the competition of ideas in public.

¹⁰ However, Jane L. Curry and Jerzy Olędski found out about journalists in Poland that a mayor part of this professional group felt motivation to striving for more autonomous working conditions. They did not identify with their role as agitators mobilising the masses in the Marxist-Leninist ideology but regarded themselves as the "loyal opposition" to the party (Curry, Olędski 1997) – and probably this goes for other communist media systems as well.

In this context we should keep in mind that the aspiration for steering the mass media and ideas of restrictions of news media content did not evolve in the authoritarian regimes of soviet socialism only. The "new word order of information" is a prominent example from the 1970s.

¹¹ Referring to Lucian Pye findings from the early sixties concerning the transition societies in the Third World, journalists seems to be generally involved in democratisation processes of society, according to the functions of their profession.

¹² C.f. a.o. the anthologies Hallenberger, Krzeminski 1994, O'Neil 1997, and Thomaß, Tzankoff 2001.

First of all, the formerly united social movements against the communist regimes split. While the alternative political forces were driven by the interest in political participation, the journalists were interested in gaining more autonomy according to the logic of their profession (Curry, Oledski 1997). As soon as the opposing political forces gained power after transition, the joint pressure for independence of the media faded leading to a split between politicians and journalists. Andrew K. Milton analysed this phenomenon and generalised that due to a “rational’ and self-interested strategic behaviour” the former opponents and newly elected politicians tended to keep control over the media as far as possible as soon as they gained access (Milton 2000, 6). This has to be seen on the background of governmentally insecure times and we have to take into account the communist traditions as well as the partisan culture of the recent resistance. Politicians disapproved critical reporting and accused the journalists of undermining their efforts in establishing the new order.¹³

The journalism in turn was and still is to be blamed for exactly this malfunction to a certain extent. But, as already mentioned, the role of journalism in the post-communist transformation of CEES is not well investigated yet. Journalism and the development of news media has been described or highlighted concerning certain occasions but not analysed in a broader frame.¹⁴ Nevertheless, in the next chapter I will try to summarize the current situation by turning to the most important problems of the news media in CEES.

The Situation Today

Today all CEES have media systems with a private press and private as well as public broadcasting companies. The legal, economical and technical frameworks meet the essential requirements, even if the situation is far open for improvement.¹⁵ Albeit in the course of European integration media laws were

¹³ But this has to be seen on the background of politically insecure times and we have to take into account the communist traditions as well as the partisan culture of the recent resistance shaping the reality of both, the journalistic as well as the political system.

¹⁴ This is a general problem due to the fact, that mass media are mostly investigated on the background of this normative functions as well as in social sciences no sufficient knowledge exists about the interconnection between media and social development (Thomaß 2001, Beierwaltes 1999).

¹⁵ This is documented e.g. in the regular reports of the EU in the course of the EU-Enlargement on <http://www.eu.int>.

brought into line with EU standards we witness incidents of political interference in the freedom of the press especially through libel laws.¹⁶ Moreover, the public broadcasting is frequently put under pressure via the state subsidies, the broadcasting councils or by other means of the political parties, in general:

*“In contrast to the print media that were left almost entirely to market forces, the broadcasting sector continued to be influenced by the state.”
(Hrvatín, Petković 2004)*

Experts express concern about working conditions of journalists due to economic pressure in the newly invented and tense market economies as well as regarding the diversity of news supply because of concentration in the media market;¹⁷ the latter often goes together with foreign ownership.¹⁸

In the beginning foreign investment was very welcomed. For newspapers like the Polish *Rzeczpospolita* it meant an early independence from state subsidies and excellent options for the modernisation of the editorial equipment, publishing facilities and professional advice.¹⁹ The journalists enjoyed the benefits, but their high expectations turned partly into disillusionment, due to the great number of non-political ventures (Relić 1998). These were special interest magazines that flooded the new markets in the nineteen-nineties as well as the different formats of tabloid press (morning and evening newspapers) and advertising newspapers.

In CEES we find no more than exceptional examples of media companies that invests in news media outlets with high standards of journalistic quality and even less companies with a strategy of corporate social responsibility; these are for example the Norwegian company *Orkla* and the Swedish enterprise

¹⁶ Regularly reported a. o. by *Reporters Sans Frontières* at <http://www.rsf.org>.

¹⁷ Fortunately the investigation of the ownership in the mass media of CEES improved in recent times, the European Federation of Journalists published a comprehensive study in 2003 and the Mirovni Institute in 2004.

¹⁸ The foreign investors are often a bit sweepingly suspected to not being interested in the adequate news media content for the regions they chose for investments.. On the other hand experts agree that the diversity of news media is sufficient also thanks to foreign enterprises and even advertising papers are regarded as helpful for news supply especially in the poor, rural regions.

¹⁹ The editor-in-chief of that time and negotiator of the takeover by Hersant in 1990 described the situation as follows: “*Rzeczpospolita* hoped that by forming the joint venture they would acquire access to modern technology. One precondition for the agreement was that the French would build, within fifteen months, a modern offset printing facility. They were also to provide us with a computer system for setting up the newspaper’s layout right in our office, furnish us with related know-how, and most important tantly, give us access to their experience with *Le Figaro*.” (Fikus 1995)

Bonnier/Marieberg. But we have to take into account that especially these media outlets with higher than average production costs need to attract a corresponding public, which is generally only a small group of over-proportionally well-educated people. Nevertheless, this target group is interesting to address to because of higher average incomes due to a higher professional qualification. In the already small media markets like Estonia for example it seems to be nearly impossible to establish this segment of news media, especially since information is easily available via internet or national supply of international news media of high standard like for example *The Economist*.

Journalistic performance in CEES often shows a lack of proficient professional standards besides a number of outstanding examples. This concerns especially the basic accuracy of reporting, the checking of information and information sources as well as the distinction between report and comment. As a result of the high demand of labour force in news media in the course of the transition and the establishing of new media outlets a huge number of people without professional training entered journalism (Schliep 1997; Relić 1998; Dupuis 2003). Nowadays the situation has improved, but still e.g. in Latvia the department of journalism of the Latvian university even schedule the teaching lessons for the evening after the working hours of their students (Dupuis 2003). Besides training on and off the job by most of the foreign media companies, several universities and journalists schools in Germany and other Western European as well as North American countries provide courses for Central and East European journalists.²⁰ But experience of the teachers proves that the efforts of trained journalists to introduce the new gained skills this often meet reluctance in the editorials back home (Benson, Koksik 2002, 2).

Janina Fras and Zdenca Mansfeldová studied the Polish and the Czech news media after transition regarding language. They found out, that journalists developed a higher amount of negative terminology, which can partly be explained by disillusionment after transformation, for example the use of the term “post-communist countries” instead of “new democracies”. Nevertheless, the stilted

²⁰ The author knows about training provided by the news agency Reuters, Bonnier/Marieberg, Orkla, Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung, Axel Springer Verlag, Hersant and at least about ten specialised programmes in Germany, among those a fellowship supplied by the Free University of Berlin called *Journalisten International* (formerly *Journalisten aus Russland, JAR*).

“artificial” and “hypocritical” “style of soviet times changed into a richer, less conventional and ritualized language and there exist different styles of expression according to the different groups in society. While Frascos criticises the lack of distinction between information and commentary, Mansfeldová points out that the public is more actively involved today. Generally they see a tendency of vulgarization and tabloidisation of the language in the news media (Frascos 1997, Mansfeldová 1997). Experts often explain this development by the editorials' and companies' concern for high profits.²¹

The most important topic dealt on in numerous reports about media in CEES is the problem of conflicts between different ethnicities in these countries. This is evident for the Balkans. For example in March 2004, broadcast media were supposed to be partly responsible for an outbreak of violence by reporting about the drowning of Kosovar-Albanian children in a scandalising way while already in a very early stage interpreting the incident as an ethnic crime without any evidence. This was leading to the first severe crisis of mass media in Kosovo (OSCE 2004).

“While displaying the weaknesses it did, the media was not, of course, intentionally instigating violence. But the media has a responsibility to react properly and professionally to serve the best interests of the population of Kosovo.

Without the reckless and sensationalist reporting on 16 and 17 March, events could have taken a different turn. They might not have reached the intensity and level of brutality that was witnessed or even might not have taken place at all.” (OSCE 2004, 3)

Besides some hotspots, ethnocentrism and ethnic tensions are an overall incidence in CEES to a higher or lower degree, as a result of nationality and its great importance in the course of overthrowing the communist rule (Smith 1996). In Latvia this even led to two parallel public spheres along the ethnic frontiers and a corresponding split of the media landscape. The conflict is well investigated because of the social implication, due to the very high share of Russian-speaking population.²² While Latvian news media in the early years tended to completely

²¹ Journalists and media experts in Poland and Latvia mention a similar disapproval against economic interests today than they felt against the former influence of the communist party (Curry, Oledski 1997, Dupuis 2003).

²² Population in 2002: Latvian 57.7%, Russian 29.6%, Belarusian 4.1%, Ukrainian 2.7%, Polish 2.5%, Lithuanian 1.4%, other 2% after CIA world factbook.

ignore the interests of the Russian speaking population the Russian news media tended to bias strongly on the Russian news agenda and to report negatively, sometimes even wrongly about Latvian issues of integration (Šulmane 1999). Meanwhile the situation has been improved also due to the fact that the government puts a high effort in social integration.²³

Another problem of similar quality is the widespread anti-Semitism in CEES, which occurs regularly. One example: on February 20th, 2004 the editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Respublika* caused international protest by bringing up the permanent prejudice against Jews in his editorial letter. He wrote among others:

“Could any of us think that the members of the international mafia would start covering their dirty activities with the memory of Holocaust victims” and “we should be especially careful with Americans, because America is ruled by Jews” (cited after JTA Print news)

This letter belonged to a series of letters, which was titled “Who rules the world.” At the same time we have to mention the engagement by NGO’s and governmental institutions against similar problems, e.g. the journalistic department of the university of Vilnius supplies courses about minority issues, the problem of racism, and xenophobia.

This is only one of innumerable incidents of violations of the ideal democratic political culture, which, as already mentioned, occur everywhere in the world but less severe or less often or, at least, more criticised in the more developed democratic systems. Some further examples: last year politicians *physically attacked* a photographer when he took pictures of them in front of the Warsaw party headquarters. In the Czech Republic the director of the public radio in Lodz banned a programme about corruption because *“the public radio should not get mixed up in a political party’s internal affairs”* (RSF 2004). In Latvia a popular TV-programme (*Kriminālinformācija*) on crime was originally invented and financed by the Ministry of Interior. This programme shows reports on crimes from theft of bags up to paedophilia giving the *full names and pictures* of the delinquents.

²³ Concerning integration policies, research, and further information c. f. the Secretariat of Minister for Special Assignments for Society Integration Affairs, <http://www.integracija.gov.lv>.

Judging upon the public reaction leads to the general assumption which *Sarmite Ēlerte*, editor in chief of the leading Latvian newspaper *Diena*, points out as follows:

“The problem in Latvia’, and in the whole former Warsaw pact, I think, is the great importance of the Conspiracy Theory (...) If there is new information, people cannot analyse the things pragmatically. And it is then easy to be committed to something: I do not know about what it is but I have a good look at the world. I do not think this is a reference for independent people, for independent newspapers.”(Dupuis 2003, 54)

This is probably partly a general problem and partly a heritage of structures of information flow and the according conventions of the totalitarian systems outlined above. Since the opinions, attitudes, and behaviours of the individual are shaped by longer lasting societal orientations of how the public or different social segments in society perceive the political system, its institutions and its performance (Berg-Schlosser, Schissler 1987) it will, most likely, take some time until new conventions are established.

Conclusions: Considerations On The Improvement of Political Culture in the News Media of CEES

Summarising, the newly established media systems of CEES joined a well developed and professionalised global media market and caught up quite quickly. Nevertheless, the news media still need to develop a more democratic, political culture. According to the previous theoretical considerations improvements in journalism are a question of system-immanent changes. Following this concept we can distinguish two types of dynamics, which forces journalism to improve the professional standards.

Firstly, news media are strongly controlled by the “vote at the newsstand” or the “vote by the remote control”. The more of different individual opinions a media outlet can integrate in a “consensus product”, the better for the sales of the product (c. f. Karmesin 1999, 195ff). In this sense it is safe to say, that foreign investment into CEE news media enterprises helped raising the professional work standards of journalism. It accelerated developments regarding the renewal of technical equipment and professional standards and most of the media companies provided

training for their staff. Hopefully in future the share of supply and of demand for qualitative news media will increase, which would force the owners of the media companies to develop a sound corporate identity and reputation of its media outlets, maybe even strategies of corporate social responsibility.

The second means of quality assurance in news media are “journalistic infrastructures” which are both, an indicator and a tool for raising quality in this profession. These are:

- Institutions of voluntary self-control: press councils, ombudsmen in the media enterprises²⁴
- Professional organisations
- Media journalism and press awards
- Education, training on or off the job
- The communication and media sciences
- Non-governmental organisations (Ruß-Mohl 1994).

These infrastructures already exist in CEES but they are not well developed yet since they apparently can not manage to establish strategies for solving any of the problems of news media performance outlined above.

Compared to the development of the Western European media systems in the past the establishing media systems in CEES nowadays face a different set of challenges. The technical possibilities and the information flow has increased and still increase rapidly. Today it is much more complicated to navigate through information as well as to regulate mass media. In Western Europe experts only recently started to elaborate the idea of “co-regulation” “or regulated self-regulation”, which means to coordinate legal means and those infrastructures of journalism for media regulation in information age (Schulz, Held 2002). It would be to the advantage of political culture in CEES if in the course of regional and

²⁴ These are institutions for dealing with conflicts concerning accusations or abuses of violating rights as well as mediating between the different interests involved. This is especially useful since very often it is matter of discretion to judge the journalist maybe violating law in order to gain information of public interest.

overall political integration of the EU the journalism could profit from an increasing international co-operation in the legal sphere as well as in the different fields of journalistic infrastructures.

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