

On the way to dumbing down... The case of Central Europe¹



Angelika W. Wyka

JOHANN WOLFGANG GOETHE UNIVERSITY, GERMANY

*After the downfall of communism,
the media like all contemporary culture
have been dominated by Entertainment.
Since there is the End of History, let's have fun.*

Ryszard Kapuściński, translation A.W.

ABSTRACT: The initial assumptions that foreign capital, know-how and experience would contribute to the development of the East Central European media in terms of their content, quality and professionalism only in a positive way were found to be wrong. Five years after Eastern and Central European countries “achieved” membership to the European Union, the unfortunate characteristics of East Central Europe’s media have, *inter alia*, been devaluation of quality journalism, homogenization of media content, standardization of media content, uncritical reporting and commercialization/tabloidization.

Private media’s desire is to achieve commercial success and to have the largest audience possible. In large part, hunting for this public audience has been accomplished by providing it with imported low-quality programming, sensationalist stories, talk and reality shows and so on (broadcast media). In other words, foreign investors are pushing their own agenda on consumers by importing serials, soap-operas and talk-shows. As for print media, homogenization (internationalization/europeization) of the business model has resulted in so-called carbon copies or clones of the Western publications (for instance: tabloids *Fakt*, *Blick* or *Blask*).

At the end of the day, it must be acknowledged that this all influences the overall quality of journalism. Indeed, efforts are concentrated at making profits at the expense of quality. Furthermore, commitments to ethical standards, which would be regarded as a minimum requirement in the home country, are frequently neglected in the host country.

This paper will draw attention to the impact of foreign investment into the press and broadcasting on media performance in the East Central Europe’s region five years after the EU enlargement. Ultimately, it will demonstrate how foreign investors are dulling public awareness – “dumbing down” to make profit.

KEYWORDS: Central Europe, Western Europe, foreign ownership, German publishing houses, entertainment journalism, EU enlargement, commercialization/tabloidization, “dumbing down”



BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

Why are the media so important to the public good? It is simply, because a true democracy (*classically understood as direct rule by the people*) cannot work without

¹ Special thanks are due to Prof. Dr. Stephan Russ-Mohl, who helped me to understand the journalist as a *homo economicus*, and who carefully read and commented on the present paper. I am also indebted to Frank Ghiorso, who edited the final version of the paper.

as many of the “people” being informed as possible (McAllister, 1996, p. 2). A perfect system of representation (*the system in which all citizens can expect and are granted full participation in the decision-making affecting significantly their lives*) is totally useless, if those citizens are forced to make their decisions in ignorance or with biased information. Surely, democracy requires an educated audience. Democracy requires that all sectors and subgroups of the audience will be equally well informed (*ibid.*). In the ideal democracy, the media would then serve as a driving force for the creation of a functional public sphere (defined by such scholars as Jürgen Habermas (1962; 1989) and Nancy Fraser (1993) as *a place where different social positions can gather to voice their positions and no single voice dominates the discourse*). Specifically, the public sphere is not overwhelmingly influenced by the government, or of patriarchy, or of commercialism. Public sphere institutions should not and cannot be controlled by the state nor can be dependent on strict principles of profit maximization. Obviously, the mass media would be prime contributors to the vitality and usefulness of the public sphere. Nevertheless, for over a decade, both media scholars and media practitioners have been claiming that the content of the media is changing, offering more and more room and prominence to entertainment. Indeed, the news is more entertaining than informing, supplying mostly gossip, scandals, sex and violence. As a consequence, the media, print and electronic, have been frequently accused of a growing tabloidization/commercialization, with the resulting “dumbing down” of general quality, as they have been trying to make as much money as only possible. Unfortunately, now and then, as McAllister writes, “what is in the media’s best economic interest is not in society’s best democratic interest” (1996, p. 6). It is so widespread that a new term has been coined: “dumbocracy.” This is also the case in Central Europe.²

FROM TOTALITARIAN MONOPOLY TO FOREIGN CAPITAL’S MONOPOLY – BACKGROUND

For nearly half a century after the Second World War, Central European media systems were framed in a given political, institutional, economic and legal structure. During this communist period, the media were considered dependent upon the authoritarian state in terms of content, access, ownership, financing, production and distribution (Gulyas 1999, p. 2). The mass media were strictly controlled by communist apparatus – they were developed as the *collective propagandist, agitator*

² The revival of the idea of Central Europe (German for “Mitteleuropa”) may be a relatively recent phenomenon, prompted by specific political and cultural circumstances, but on a more elemental level we may speak of a much older, semantic struggle. Poles, Hungarians, Czechs and Slovaks have always resented being labeled East Europeans. Central Europe used to mean the Visegrad group, which included Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. The understanding of the concept of *Central Europe* is an ongoing source of controversy, however. In the present paper, whenever the name of Central Europe appears, the following countries are meant: Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic.

and organizer without fulfilling any critical function – watchdog. Opposition press (*samizdat*) was banned to prevent alternative voices from spreading (Splichal, 1994, p. 5). Public decimation of information was vaguely worded; the state had a monopoly on the content of all information.

The memorable 1989 autumn of nations brought the end to the old media system. As a result, the (then) state controlled mediums of mass communication had to transfer themselves from a communist type to a pluralistic one where the differing opinions can be freely voiced.³ It was believed that freedom of ownership is the guarantor of democracy and a free press (Splichal, 2001, p. 43). Privatization of the media meant less dependence upon government. Curiously, the political views of the first non-communist governments differed widely in regards to the extent and speed of this privatization. Most of these governments, however, opted largely for rapid ownership changes in the press (Sparks, Reading 1998, p. 142). Unimaginatively, all newspapers and some local radio stations were already privatized in 1990, just one year after the ouster of communism. Unfortunately, the damaged and weakened economies could not sustain the kind of investment to develop new forms of media ownership. As such, foreign ownership was greatly welcomed by media outlets (*across the countries subject to this paper*). This was not only because they offered financial support not available in the region, but they also served to help the media to become independent upon the communist state (*so-called basic preconditions for the modernization of the media sector*). Accordingly, foreign investment in ownership, as well as co-ownership of the media, was extensive and rapidly undertaken at the very beginning of the 1990s and has remained a major aspect of media privatization in the region.

Press was the primary target of multimedia corporations and companies attempting to gain a market share (Gross, 2002, p. 64). Especially, during the first stage of the post-communist era foreign media ownership was viewed as contributing towards lessening the influence of the state and political forces in the previously state-run media. Foreign ownership was primarily thought by legislators to safeguard the media against political influence (Sukosd, 2000; Splichal, 2001; Gross, 2002), thus allowing the multinationals to penetrate the market with ease. Nowadays, the print market in Central Europe is entirely dominated by foreign capital, in particular by German publishing houses.⁴ Obviously, post-communist countries

³ Agnes Gulyas of Hungary in the article *Structural Changes and Organisations in the Print Media Markets of Post-Communist East Central Europe* distinguishes the three main processes of media transformation: democratization, marketization and commercialization. Democratization refers basically to changing political functions of the media towards pluralistic and free media; marketization is understood by the author as the establishment of market forces in the media sector; commercialization relates to the process where the commercial roles of the media came into prominence (1999, p. 61).

⁴ Among the investors are Bavarian Passauer Neue Presse (PNP) – one of the largest publishers of regional papers in Europe; Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung (WAZ) – the German media giant has a European empire of more than 130 papers; Axel Springer Verlag – the largest European publishing

were not prepared for what later turned out to be a massive influx of Western media capital. Consequently, something that would not be possible in Germany, Sweden, Norway or even Switzerland, for instance, has unfortunately become possible in post-communist Europe: over 85% (with tendency increasing) of the Central Europe's print media market is foreign-owned (see, for instance: Gulyas, 1999; Galik, James, 1999; Cashin, 2004; Wyka, 2005).⁵

A 2004 report *Eastern Empires: Foreign Ownership in Central and Eastern European Media: Ownership, Policy Issues and Strategies*,⁶ (published by the Brussels-based European Federation of Journalists (EFJ); dealing mostly with foreign investment in Central and Eastern Europe) clearly demonstrates that "This [foreign investment, A.W.] is a threat to independent journalism and freedom of expression. The old state monopoly of the media, particularly the print media, has been replaced by the new foreign capital's monopoly" (EFJ, 2004, p. 6; see also Norris, 2006). Furthermore, according to the authors of the survey there are strong indications that aggressive commercial policies have been pursued at the expense of journalistic standards, threatening pluralism and undermining journalists' professional and social rights. The encroachment of West Europe's media into the Central Europe's countries raises the crucial question: can media systems in these countries, in fact, become representative of public interests and civil concerns when key decisions about investment and even editorial attitudes towards political issues are made elsewhere? No, not without prejudice. A large influx of foreign capital into the Polish, Hungarian and Czech markets may impose a threat to indigenous media industries and, furthermore, may significantly limit media pluralism. Strictly speaking, the domination of foreign companies can prevent democratic functions of the media, since, as Anges Gulyas of Hungary notices, these companies are less, if at all, concerned with national and cultural developments (1999, p. 71). The German companies, for instance, have been trying to create global magazines for the whole of Central Europe without any variations (EFJ, 2004, p. 49). Magazines like *Tina* and *Bravo* have been distributed throughout East Central Europe.⁷

house, Burda, Gruner + Jahr, Bauer. It is said that Central Europe has become a German press "colony." Of course, the countries have seen large scale investments by companies from other European countries – Orkla of Norway, Ringier and Edipresse of Switzerland, Lagardère Group and Hersant of France, Sanoma Magazines International of Finland, Bonnier of Sweden.

⁵ Media concentration regulations and specific anti trust laws as well as laws that journalists and publishers have make it more difficult for large publishing houses to expand.

⁶ In 2003 the EFJ published a report entitled *European Media Ownership: Threats on the Landscape*. The report was part of an EFJ project about the impact of globalization on European media, focusing on a survey of media ownership within, mainly, European Union countries. In 2004 a second part of the report was published. The study analyzed media ownership in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, including the countries, which became part of the 2004 enlarged European Union. For more see (EFJ, 2004).

⁷ Yet the Norwegian Orkla Press has chosen a different approach. They are more aware of the social and cultural differences between regions and are producing papers which relate to the specific issues

Another big problem for the Central Europe's press sector has been its lack of independence and political impartiality. A striking example of this is a journalistic piece that appeared in *Dziennik Bałtycki* (Baltic Daily), a regional daily published by Passauer Neue Presse (PNP).⁸ In 1997 the paper featured a press article entitled "Holidays with a secret agent" dealing with the possible meetings between the former Poland's president Aleksander Kwaśniewski with a secret agent Vladimir Alganov which allegedly took place during the president's holidays in Cetniewo. The president took legal action against the paper. In consequence, the owner of the daily – Verlagsgruppe Passau – quickly withdrew the allegations. More importantly, the then CEO of the publishing houses, Franz Xaver Hirtreiter, sent an apology letter to the Polish president. All investigative journalists who were involved in revealing the story were fired, unfortunately.

Foreign companies have been trying to impose their Western management models in a fully different environment. The argument goes that the media, in particular press, were colonized or even internalized by West European publishers, in fact (Ociepka, 1998; Krone 2008; Jakubowicz, 2007) – without country-specific adjustments when it came to culture-bound medium products (Krone, 2007, p. 4). Given the fact that laws protecting journalists are weak, large media take full advantage of this. Foreign publishers, for example, deny the role of journalistic organizations, set low wages and avoid signing collective employment agreements (Gross, 2002; EJE, 2005).

Foreign capital penetration may influence current affairs meaningfully. Two opinion-making Czech dailies – *Mlada fronta dnes* and *Lidove noviny*, both owned by the German Rheinisch-Bergische Verlagsgesellschaft,⁹ 74% and 96.93% respectively, have published articles on, *inter alia*, the expelled Sudeten Germans or the 1945 Benes decrees. Those articles that clearly support the German view-point on these hotly controversial issues.

It is worth stating, at this point, that press ownership laws in the countries have been very permissive towards foreign investors, however.¹⁰ The penetration of for-

and concerns of the region where the newspapers are published. As a result, the daily *Rzeczpospolita* (English for Republic) published by Orkla is regarded by Poles as very reliable, with high-quality information and analysis.

⁸ The actual German name of the publishing house reads Verlagsgruppe Passau, however.

⁹ Strangely enough, the Rheinisch-Bergische Verlagsgesellschaft owns two of the four major Czech national dailies, however, in its native Germany runs only regional titles. Naturally, this raises the question of the qualifications of the publishing house to operate the newspaper it owns.

¹⁰ There were, actually, no restrictions on foreign ownership in the region. Not surprisingly, in the Czech Republic and Hungary, where oversight of ownership transformation was looser than in Poland, foreign owners have a bigger, more concentrated stake in the print market. Of the four highest-circulation national Czech dailies, only one is fully supported by Czech capital. In late 1990 Passauer Neue Presse started to acquire regional papers in the Czech Republic. By 2001 the media company controlled nearly 100% of newspaper market and part of national market through its acquisition in 2001 of two national dailies in Prague – *Slovo* and *ZN Zemske noviny*. Two of the remaining three are

eign media companies has been eased by the fact that establishing a new paper in Poland, Hungary or the Czech Republic is 10 times cheaper than in Germany, France or Switzerland. The Polish company created by Passauer Neue Presse (Verlagsgruppe Passau), Polskapresse, has, for instance, been accused of displacing competitors in Poland systematically by implementing aggressive price strategies (dumping prices) to buy smaller regional and local newspapers to strengthen its own position (for a full overview of the situation please see, for instance, Szynol, 2008). By local legal means, foreign media companies, in particular German ones, have created information monopolies. Indeed, the German investor is ready to sacrifice a lot to gain a dominant position and impose its own rules and standards. The ultimate goal of the company is to make all its titles similar in terms of form and content. This holds true in the Czech Republic where the German publishing firms produce regional papers centrally (Culik, 2004, p. 2).

In the audiovisual media, the most successful profit-oriented broadcasters are TV2 and RTL Klub in Hungary. The latter is 49% owned by Bertelsmann's RTL Group. SBS Broadcasting, a USA-owned Luxemburg based, has nearly 49% voting interests and an 84% economic interests in TV2¹¹ Viasat 3, the third largest commercial channel, is operated by Modern Times Group. In the Czech Republic the market leader is TV Nova. It achieved a remarkable 44% audience share.¹² Central European Media Enterprises (CME) holds a majority share in the station. The leading media company on the Polish audiovisual market is Group ITI, a group of ITI International. SBS Broadcasting is a minority shareholder (33%) in TVN.

THE EUROPEAN UNION ENLARGEMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON NEW MEMBER STATES' MEDIA MARKETS

Traditionally, European media companies focused their activities on their national markets. However, during the last 15 years, a huge number of media companies

owned by one German company, the Rheinische Post Group. This same company, though a 20% investment in a joint venture with another German publisher, Passauer Neue Presse, has a minority interest in every regional title in the country. Passauer Neue Presse controls the balance of shares in the regional press. Hungary's ownership structure is slightly less concentrated, but is nonetheless characterized by heavy foreign investment. Of Hungary's four highest-circulation non-tabloid dailies, two are controlled by the same Swiss company, Ringier, which also owns the most popular national tabloid. PNP arrived in Poland in 1994, acquiring regional dailies and founding the regional title, Polskapresse. For more see: *European Media Ownership: Threats on the Landscape*, a report available online at <http://www.ifj.org/en/articles/european-media-ownership-threats-on-the-landscape-updated-january-2003>

¹¹ *Media in Power*; EFJ, Brussels, 2005.

¹² At some point TV Nova had a 70% audience share, but it became the subject of an ongoing ownership dispute between Vladimir Zelezny and the station's US backers, CME, owned by Ronald Lauder. For more see, for instance: *Television across Europe*, 2005; *Media in Power*, EFJ, Brussels, 2005.

have grown significantly outside their primary markets. At the same time, a process of cross-border media concentration (diagonal concentration) has appeared (EU, 2007, p. 9). It must be noted that the issue of cross border ownership has two dimensions: an international one and an intercommunity one. The first is related to the booming influence of non-European investors, mostly American, in Europe such as News Corp, Rupert Murdoch's press and television empire, Walt Disney, Viacom, Time Warner, etc. As regards the second dimension, Western Europe's companies have, as shown above, invested extensively in the countries that joined the European Union in 2004 and 2007 (*ibid.*).¹³ Every single year the process of media concentration gathers pace and with it comes increasing concern for the impact on media quality, pluralism and diversity – it can damage the freedom of expression and information.

The 2005 *Media Power in Europe: The Big Picture of Ownership* (EFJ) argues that national media laws have become harder to apply. As such, national competition rules are difficult to enforce against foreign undertakings. The 2004 enlargement of the European Union have posed particular problems and raised issues in terms of media concentration and the promotion of policies to protect media diversity. Freedom of the media and the freedom of expression are the gauges of democracy. Hence, freedom of the media is fundamental to the European Union as stated in the Treaty of the European Union and the European Convention on Human Rights as well as the Charter of Fundamental Rights. Media plurality, by the same token, is at stake for such freedom to exist. As already demonstrated, different foreign companies, mostly European, dominate now in the Central Europe's media, print media in particular, thus making difficult the development of nationally-based media outlets. Since 2004, the restriction of foreign ownership is only possible as long as non-EU investors are concerned – right of establishment and free provision of services enshrined in the Art. 43, as well as free movement of capital enshrined in the Art. 73 are rudimentary principles of the EC Treaty.¹⁴ Therefore, there should not be discriminatory provisions although the protection of pluralism may justify non-discriminatory restrictions to both these freedoms.

Prior to joining the EU it was believed in the region that the Union's eastward expansion would be an excellent opportunity to, *inter alia*, develop strong independent media and journalistic trade unions across East Central Europe. This would

¹³ Additionally, the increase of media concentration encompasses the following phenomena: (1) media ownership is no longer local in nature – this is so-called “family” papers and “family” TV stations have been vanishing; (2) media ownership is no longer limited to national markets – media companies (media conglomerates) operate in others than own country (Media Power in Europe 2005: 6).

¹⁴ At the same time, however, EU legislation does not provide any legislation dedicated solely to the control of media ownership. Rather, the rules aimed to provide plurality and diversity within the media industry. Bizarrely, while European governments see the growth of global media and growing media concentration within their own borders, they enact legislation to speed up the process (EJF, 2003, p. 4).

promote the building of transnational links through European Works Councils in publishing houses such as German Axel Springer Verlag, Norwegian Orkla and Swiss Ringier, and the development of support for the clear statements of publishing principles; such as those developed by Orkla.¹⁵ Principles that other European media companies operating in the region should emulate (EFJ, 2004, p. 64). Instead, the four years after Eastern and Central European countries “achieved” membership to the European Union, the unfortunate characteristics¹⁶ of East Central Europe’s media and journalism performance have been the following:¹⁷

Orientation towards advertising customers. Most papers, radio and TV stations get almost or all their money from advertisement and sponsoring. The media, therefore, seek to optimally satisfy the interests of their advertisers. It is obvious that all those foreign investors “want their money back, they want their interest” (Cashin, 2004, p. 9). To cut down the costs (cost-cutting), publishers often prefer to employ paid amateurs than experienced professionals. Surely, that causes a devaluation of serious journalism.

Homogenization/internationalization(europeization) of journalistic norms, work methods and content through editorial cooperation. At stake is the lack of diversity; homogenous markets tend to limit (hence, “homogenize”) the opinions being voiced. All Czech regional press, for instance, is controlled by a German publishing firm, which produces regional newspapers centrally (*with only slight variations in each regional paper*), with the result that all produced news looks so similar.

Imitation, duplication and standardization of content resulting in profit maximization and gains in efficiencies.

Uncritical reporting – media fail to exercise the important role of public watchdog, because the foreign owners do not want to cause controversy through investing in investigative reporting or criticizing the government or business in times of crisis.

Infotainment – increasing competition for audiences and, first and foremost, for advertisers have contributed to a **tailored kind of journalism**: selection, angle, packaging and content of news is driven by demand than by professional standards related to the informative and critical role ascribed to socially responsible journalism in democracy (Brants, 2007, p. 108). Ergo, the distinction between advertisements, news and entertainment is blurred. Personality-oriented journalism that

¹⁵ Orkla Media is dedicated to defending freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of information and the values of democracy. Orkla Media respects, within this framework, the identity and local traditions of its publications and, regardless of ideology, defends and supports their freedom and independence. Orkla Media respects the principles of journalism in the democratic world and, within the framework of the objects clause of its individual publications – as well as joint editorial declarations – defends the independent position of the editor. Neither governments, owners, advertisers nor any other interest groups are entitled to interfere. For more see (EFJ, 2004).

¹⁶ Let us remember that some of the listed characteristics had already existed prior to joining the Community.

¹⁷ This section relies heavily upon the following reports: (EFJ, 2005; EFJ, 2003; EFJ, 2004; EFJ, 2007; Meier, 2007).

highlights, amongst others, intrigue, titillation and scandal is another strategy for attracting large audiences.

Low journalistic standards and declining impartiality – there are strong indications that aggressive commercial policies (*western media companies are only interested in profits and revenue*) have been pursued at the expense of journalistic standards, threatening pluralism and undermining journalists' professional and social rights. In addition, there is the danger that as media groups from elsewhere in Europe acquire newspapers in CEE countries, they do not pay enough attention to training, pay and the status and independence of journalists in carrying out their work. Furthermore, the gap between practices in the country of origin, where social partnership agreements with journalists and their trade unions may be well established, and those in media operations in the Central Europe's countries, can be very wide. By all means, lower journalism standards go together with a widespread demand for sensational, entertainment-style journalism

Concentration of media ownership – existing media companies in the region in question are now focusing on securing their place and strengthening their own position in the market and developing strategies for the future where the big media companies buy the weaker regional and local titles or stations. However, small local publishers are making joint efforts to defend their position, which may result in a **structured partition of the regional and local market.**

Media policy has been shaped by the interests of dominant media companies and less by the interests of the general public/civil society. In the countries European media groups have taken control of national newspaper titles (Czech Republic, Hungary) but in the main the dominance rests in regional press ownership (Poland, Czech Republic). The regional press plays a crucial role in the dissemination of news and information. Indeed, the key democratic notion of local and regional newspapers is that they have their roots in the locality and are identified and report on the range of life – social, political, economic and cultural – of the town or region they are based in. In one word, the readers rely much more heavily upon consumption of regional papers. If local papers are part of larger foreign-owned groups, key decisions about investment and staffing are likely to be taken by owners in another country and this crucial relationship is weakened or disappears as commercial considerations become dominant.

Quality and quantity of local and regional political news is declining hugely after competition is eliminated.

Impoverishment of political discourse.

Increased risk potential: extended sphere of influence for owners and shareholders.

The best way of summing up the characteristics I have just outlined is: *the "new" European Union needs to slow down exploitation of the media and journalism that is eroding standards and undermining the importance of free press to young Central European democratic societies.*

ECONOMICS VERSUS DEMOCRACY: THE CULTURE OF SELLING¹⁸

In modern democracies, by and large, the mass media are very important for the functioning of democracy. The argument usually runs that the mass media are the main mechanisms by which citizens are well informed about politics, the economy, and the world. The mass media constitute the oxygen not only of democracy but of cultural exchange (Hargreaves, 2005, p. 18). The critical democratic functions are as follows:

1. **Provide** the citizens with **accurate** and **impartial information** about events, problems, phenomena appearing in the society they belong to. The mass media keep citizens informed so that they are capable of taking informed decisions (rational decision-making, which is a consequence of political pluralism and well-informed citizens).

2. **Educate** and **(re)socialize** citizens to democratic norms. The mass media are supposed to explain, interpret, analyze, and comment on the meaning of events and information. It is assumed that in order for this function to be fulfilled properly, a society needs objective, responsible and professionally sound journalists. In this case journalism is perceived as a form of education.

3. Provide **an independent platform for public deliberation** across a diverse range of views, opinions and beliefs. Undoubtedly, this function facilitates public opinion formulation and arriving at consensus, a significant feature of healthy democracy, in the most controversial matters.

4. **Control and/or keep** an eye on the government (the seat of power). The mass media act as a “**public watchdog**” – being answerable to their audience, they watch out for all abuses of power. The media are on permanent guard duty patrolling against the abuse of executive power and safeguarding individual liberty.

5. Be the **advocate** of various opinions. The mass media, if democratic, shall be a channel of articulation of all political parties and their ideologies. In particular, during election campaigns.

6. **Back up** politically and socially weak groups.

However, in the process of transition from authoritarian regimes to democracy, the role of the mass media is reasonably believed to be even more indispensable. Societies (*which had no experience with pluralism of beliefs and opinions, and did not identify with the political and social context*) now need substantive and in-depth information to orient themselves in a complex world full of complex issues. Thus, the mission of the media is, apart from those already mentioned, to foster a media culture. It must educate its readers to learn to make their decisions based on relevant, accurate and complete information. However, forces other than the “totalitar-

¹⁸ This section is based heavily upon a presentation *What Are Journalists for in Central Europe?* the author of the paper made to the conference Inclusion/Exclusion at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, February 16–18, 2006 (Wyka, 2006).

ian state” can destroy journalism; the “entertainment state”¹⁹ or commercial totalitarianism can also destroy it.

Another dilemma which has made the professionalization of Central Europe’s journalistic community difficult arises from the influx of Western influence. Without a doubt, Western technology, capital, expertise and training have poured positively into the transition period of the media of Central Europe. Yet, “naked women, heinous crimes and outlandish gossip are finding their way onto the front pages [...] as publishers learn that sex and scandal sell. They have found a large market for easily digestible, that’s-how-they-live-in-the-West stuff”.²⁰ Indeed, the news is more entertaining than informing, focusing more on gossip, scandals, sex, sensational stories about dramatic and bizarre happenings, and violence than on public policy-making. It is easier to attract an audience by mocking the antics of the politicians than by trying to cast a clarifying light. In the countries there is very clear evidence of the pressures on journalists: poor pay, low status, insecure contracts or freelance work are prevalent, side by side with weakened notions of media freedom. Furthermore, the media have adopted a highly Americanized style of political reporting relying heavily upon being scurrilous, making unwarranted partisan attacks on political, business or other VIP figures – with little regard for truth or accuracy (*Stick to gossip and entertainment – not NEWS and “useful” information.*).

In the countries under investigation, nearly all the media broadcast the same “canned” news – fear, danger, crime, disaster, and so on, and make people perceive the world as a gloomy and dangerous place. The watchdogs bark at the wrong things: “Death, crime, violence are the most demanded products of the media show. News, reportage and commentary programs have been largely devoted to crime, affairs, corruption, poverty, strikes, murders, etc. [...] No journalist has been keen to present publicly positive economic and social developments. No journalist has appeared at a news conference complimenting, for instance, a job well done. But they have often appeared where is a chance for sensation [...] Unfortunately, press and TV have been filled by journalists, political commentators and experts whose hard work only seems to aim at killing an instinct for thinking and independent judgment. The very basic goal of the media is, however, to provide a forum for deliberation based upon pluralistic opinions, thus making a passive and informed participant of this process” (Magdalena Środa, Ph.D., Warsaw University).²¹

News coverage which has increasingly been negative in tone and scandal-oriented emphasizes image over substance, focusing more on gaffes than policy statements, and interpreting politics as a strategic game played by elites. This reinforces cynicism, mistrust and apathy. Thus, the media have been responsible for turning

¹⁹ For more please see www.journalism.org/resources/education/case.

²⁰ Cited in Sasińska-Klas (1994). *The Transition of Mass Media in Poland: The Road to Liberalization*. EJC/REC Vol. 4, No. 1.

²¹ From the interview with Magdalena Środa in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, September 30, 2005. Translation AW.

the audience into ill-informed spectators rather than active citizens (Streich, 2000; Sabato, 1991).

Nowadays, the mass media, especially the private broadcasters, are educating so-called “mediots” (idiots of the media or more colloquially, couch potatoes), this is to say that the modern generation has been keeping on being passive consumers, with uncritical attitudes to popular, low quality culture. It basically means: big headlines, vigorous writing, simplification into familiar, colloquial language and wide use of illustration by huge “catchy” photos. The Poland’s biggest tabloid *Fakt* is selling 515 038 copies a day,²² in a country with a population of nearly 40 million. Take another example, TV Nova of the Czech Republic to increase its profit has been broadcasting commercial programs with tabloid-style news reporting, noisy talk shows, box office movies, Latin America’s soap operas and soft pornography (Klvana, 2006, p. 130). Nova’s news is so sensationalized and aggressive that Czechs themselves joke that “you need a towel to mop up all the blood” (Hume, 2000, p. 4). Consequently, minor dangers are blown out of proportion, whereas much more serious dangers in societies go un-remarked on (Wyka, 2005, p. 3). Sadly, the unavoidable result of this “super-commercialization/tabloidization” of the Central Europe’s media has been “dumbing down” and trivialization of newspaper and programming content.²³

The profit motive is the engine that drives decisions about the content. “Dumbing down” is the phrase very often used to label this phenomenon. Already in 1985 Neil Postman, an American media critic, wrote in his influential book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* that news, in particular television news, with its music, drama, and glamorous personalities, “is a format for entertainment, not for education, reflection or catharsis.” The evidence for dumbing down is, actually, everywhere. Papers that once had international news now feature celebrity gossip, pictures of undressed women, sex violence and populist issues.²⁴ The publisher of *Mlada fronta dnes* of the Czech Republic, an opinion-making daily, motivated by profit to the detriment of quality, managed to persuade the editorial staff to change the paper’s focus (Klvana, 2006, p. 134). In turn, television has replaced high-quality programs with gardening, cookery and other lifestyle ones.

²² ZKDP, The Polish Audit Bureau of Circulation (Oct 2007–March 2008).

²³ In a report *Television across Europe: regulation, policy and independence* authors wrote that the distinction between public broadcasters (PSB), which has mission and obligations to fulfil, and their commercial competition, in terms of program content and quality, has become increasingly blurred (Open Society Institute, 2005, p. 22). In connection with this, investigative journalism and other high-quality programming are rather scare commodities in the public media in the region. Similar process is taking place in Western Europe as well.

²⁴ A good example of this is Axel Springer’s populist reporting. It has actually raised concern that the paper often sacrifices balance for sensationalism. “One day *Fakt* (a tabloid modeled after the German *Bild Zeitung*) can blast out populist slogans and demand that Germany pays the Poles compensation for damages during the Second World War. This stuff sells. Then *Fakt* backs away and calms things down. That sells, too.”

Alas, the dumbing down of culture leads us to market-oriented consumer culture of a poverty of thought and expression. The trend towards commercialized/tabloidized news in the region will be even worse in serving the Central European citizenship in the future. A major influence is, as McAllister notices, the current direction of advertising (1996, p. 6). This causes that the media have become more profit oriented (at any cost) and less relevant for the development of democracy and public sphere.

REFERENCES

- Bennett, W.L. (2001). *News. The Politics of Illusion*. 4th Edition, New York: Longman.
- Bogart, L. (1995). *Commercial Culture. The Media System and the Public Interest*, New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Culik, J. (2004). The Czech Republic. In: M. Kelly et al. *The Media in Europe: The Euromedia Handbook*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp. 31–42.
- Curran, J. (2002). *Media and Power*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Fraser, N. (1992). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. In: C. Calhoun (ed.). *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 109–142.
- Galik, M.(2004). Hungary. In: *Media Ownership and Its Impact on Media Independence and Pluralism*. Ljubljana: Peace Institute, Institute for Contemporary Social and Political Studies.
- Gross, P. (2002). *Entangled Evolutions. Media Democratization in Eastern Europe*. Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press.
- Gulyas, A. (1998). Kolonizacja czy wyzwolenie rynku? Kapitał zagraniczny w węgierskich mediach. *Zeszyty Prasoznawcze*, R. XLI, No. 1–2, pp. 153–154, Kraków.
- Habermas, J. (1962 transl. 1989). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hargreaves, I. (2005). *Journalism. A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Holtz-Bacha, Ch. (2006). *Medienpolitik für Europa*. Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Jakubowicz, K. (2007). *Rude Awakening: Social and Media Change in Central and Eastern Europe*. Cresskill NJ: Hampton Press.
- Klimkiewicz, B. (2004). Poland. In: *Media Ownership and Its Impact on Media Independence and Pluralism*. Ljubljana: Peace Institute, Institute for Contemporary Social and Political Studies.
- Klvana, T. (2006). Czech media during the transformation period. In: *Transformation: Czech Experience: People in Need* with support of the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, pp. 127–134 [a copy in my possession].
- Krone, J. (2008). Foreign media investments. Engagements of West European newspaper publishers after the end of the Cold War in the East European classical newspaper markets. In: Dobek-Ostrowska B., Głowacki M. (eds). *Comparing Media Systems in Central Europe. Between Commercialization and Politicization*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego.
- McAllister, M. (1996). *The Commercialization of American Culture: New Advertising, Control and Democracy*. SAGE Publications.
- Meier, W. (2007). National and transnational media ownership concentration in Europe: A burden for democracy? In: Meier W., Trappel J. (eds.). *Power, Performance and Politics: Media Policy in Europe*. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft.
- Open Society Institute (2005). EU Monitoring and Advocacy Program, Network Media Program: Monitoring Reports 2005: *Television across Europe: regulation, policy and independence*. Budapest.

- Gulyas, A. (1999). *Structural changes and organisations in the print media markets of post-communist East Central Europe*, <http://www.javnost-thepublic.org/media/datoteke/1999-2-gulyas.pdf> (retrieved October 22, 2005).
- Hallin, D.C., Mancini, P. (2003). *Americanization, globalization and secularization: Understanding the convergence of media systems and political communication in the U.S. and Western Europe*, http://communication.ucsd.edu/people/f_hallin_homogenization.htm (retrieved May 20, 2008).
- KRRiT (NBC) (2005). *Media Pluralism*, <http://www.krrit.gov.pl/angielska/mediapluralism.pdf> (retrieved January 12, 2007).
- Norris, P. (2006). *The role of the free press in promoting democratization, good governance, and human development*. Harvard University, UNESCO. Background paper, http://www.humanrightsinitiative.org/programs/ai/rti/articles/undp_rti_2006/annex3_background_paper.pdf (retrieved May 2, 2007).
- Splichal, S. (2001). *Imitative revolutions. Changes in the media and journalism in East-Central Europe*, <http://www.javnost-thepublic.org/media/datoteke/2001-4-splichal.pdf> (retrieved September 12, 2006).
- Wyka, A.W. (2005). *Good and Reliable Watchdogs of Democracy? Ethics and Journalism: Case Studies from Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic*, <http://www.eumap.org/journal/submitted/wyka.pdf>.

