

# Bias, partisanship, journalistic norms and ethical problems in the contemporary Hungarian political media



**Balázs Sipos**

EÖTVÖS LORÁND UNIVERSITY, HUNGARY

**ABSTRACT:** Journalistic norms have changed in the last 20 years in Hungary. Democratic journalism appeared by 1989, when the power of the communist party disappeared at a stroke. Journalists became free, and they “enjoyed” the internal-pluralism and supported their different parties. On the other hand the parties tried to use the political media as an instrument. As a consequence of this situation the main question of political journalism became the pro-government and the anti-government behavior in the 1990s. Those biases have caused semi-investigative journalism and simulated-investigative journalism in the last 10 years.

**KEYWORDS:** partisanship, journalistic norms, media ethic, semi-investigative journalism, Hungary



## INTRODUCTION

When the norms of journalism and the questions of media ethics are studied in some democratic countries, on the one hand, the state of the journalistic profession and the level of professionalism are analysed, and on the other hand the media system is the focus of analysis. It is simple to explain that. Journalism is a social phenomenon continuously reacting to social changes, under which is its development. It is determined by external, bureaucratic interventions, media policies, technological changes of the media industry, the self-determinations and self-descriptions of the journalists, and it is affected by the media consumers (Bromley, 1997, pp. 330–350; McNair, 1998, pp. 61–65). That means that the “professional status” of journalism is dynamical (Boyd-Barrett, 1995, pp. 270–276), changing under the external effects mentioned above—and concurrently the system of professional norms is also changing, determining the quality of journalism (Schulz, 2001, pp. 47–57).

The change of norms (and, concurrently, also the change of professionals status) means that the journalists and the members of the public have different opinions on what the correct practice of journalism is. The “correct practice” relates to the



no longer rely on their earlier journalist routines, because those were shaped under the conditions of dictatorship. On the other hand not one single journalistic norm had existed during the communist system; apart from the journalism the ruling political party expected from the profession, there were journalists who attempted to meet certain Western professional standards in their work, more or less successfully. The subject of one of the interviews I made (a TV journalist at the time of the event) during my studies told me, that during the 1970s he had been on a professional scholarship in the USA, enabling him to study the operation of some editorial offices.<sup>1</sup> After his return to Hungary he reported on his experiences to his boss, among others on the basic principles of objectivity, namely, that a piece of information had to be checked from two sources. “Forget it” — was the answer.

The answer can be regarded as natural, as at that time the news items had been based on official sources or official explanations, and there was no question of checking them. But for journalists specialized in one scope the norm of objectivity during the discussed three decades had always been more strictly obeyed. This means that before the change of the political/economic system that applied to the work of economic journalists or those dealing with theatres. One journalist working for the weekly *Film, Színház, Muzsika* [Film, Theatre, Music] had been characterised by a former colleague in 2004 as follows:

He operated genuine bourgeois journalism with a weekly which served the cultural guidelines of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party. His writings stood out (among others) with their strictly exact data and lapidary stylistic perfectness from the horrible context. (Molnár Gál, 2004, p. 12)

But we have to mention the Weekly World Economy (HVG) first as the most important specialised journal. Although the political environment did not allow it theoretically the editors and journalists of it observed Western professional standards before 1989. Because of this running tradition this weekly has become the most important place for precise and investigative journalism in Hungary after 1989 — and partly because of the possibility the editors could own their weekly in the 1990s, which was a thriving and independent weekly (and a European professional investor, *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, bought 75 percent of the HVG in 2003).

On the other hand, the specialised press also had (or may have had) political tasks. The subject of another interview I conducted, used to work for a sports paper during the 1980s, and there football players used to be graded on a scale of one to ten. The Hungarian national team training for the FIFA World Cup of 1986 had been expected to achieve good results, and to “save the spirit” of the team the party headquarters instructed the paper not to give less than five points to any of the team.

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<sup>1</sup> I made four interviews in 2004 to prepare an article about journalist norms in the Communist regime and in the first decade of the democratic regime in Hungary with Róbert Takács (Takács & Sipos, 2005).

By the 1980s, however, the role concepts different from those of the official so-called Communist journalism became more prevalent, as the workers of the media tried to suit also the requirements of the public and apply certain professional standards, trying to find a balance between the service of the authorities and the expectations of the public. That was how the official hierarchy and the professional hierarchy were split. In other words (to make it simpler) two types of hierarchy emerged in the profession: an “official” one (based on ideology or power norms) and a professional one. That was not unique in countries with state socialism (see Curry, 1990, pp. 15–33, 205–211).

## **EXPERIMENT OF THE ADAPTATION OF THE LIBERAL MODEL OF JOURNALISM**

Peter Gross (2004, p. 111) distinguishes three phases of the change following Dankwart Rustow’s analysis in his article about Eastern European media transition. He writes:

the preparatory phase in which there is a breakdown of the non-democratic regime is the media’s transition from communist forms in 1989, begun in some countries, it could be argued, before 1989, thanks to well-developed underground and alternative media.

As we have seen, some editors and journalists used Western professional practices before 1989 and as a consequence a professional hierarchy emerged in Hungary. Moreover, all of the journalists and editors agreed (or said) in 1989/1990 that the Western or liberal norms of the profession should be followed (Bajomi-Lázár, 2002, pp. 57–64; see Fletcher & Pallai, 2000). So the adaptation of the Western or liberal model of journalism would have been caused during the transition by the tracking of Western professional practice in the special Communist environment, by the endeavour to enlarge the independence of editorial offices before 1989, and by the accepted idea of liberal norms in 1989/1990. But the environment of political journalism hindered it. Consensus democracy had changed to a majoritarian political system at the end of the 1990s and it had changed to “dominant-power politics” after 2010 (see Carothers, 2010, pp. 83–86). It means that the political basic of the liberal model of journalism was wasted. For example, the public broadcasting service worked the control of the current governments because Hungarian political culture was typified in general that parties try to use the media as their instrument. So in contempt of the advantageous situation of the year 1989/1990, the replacing of the Communist model with the liberal one was unsuccessful in Hungary, as it was in other East-Central European countries (Lauk, 2009, p. 71).

### **Freedom or loyalty?**

By the turn of 1988/1989 the power of the ruling Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt (Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party) (MSZMP) started to break in Hungary. In

January of 1989 the Agit-Prop Committee of MSZMP realised with shock that with *Népszabadság*, the central daily of the party, journalist professional aspects overruled political aspects (Sipos, 2010, pp. 74–75). During early 1989 they established that certain programmes on Hungarian Radio (MR) and Hungarian Television (MTV) were openly against socialism, but the party could do nothing against that situation (Sipos, 2007, pp. 371–373). As a former journalist of the paper at that time, Ervin Tamás recalled that in 1989, “party power was in the process of sinking and the power of the press in that of emerging” (Varga, 2001, p. 11).

The absence of a real owner encouraged parts of the editorial offices of papers to find themselves foreign trade investors as a long-term solution, investors who would provide for the independence of the given paper as well as capital needed for development. The latter meant that for instance, they became subscribers to the services of foreign news agencies, demand increased for their own network of foreign correspondents and technical developments were also needed, so that the media could provide the readers with the latest news items. (In Hungary computer-based editing had not been widespread.) Thus, the reason for finding an owner was the internal requirement of meeting the professional norms of journalism, such as independence, objectivity and fast information supply.<sup>2</sup> Another reason was to make it harder for the opposition to gain media position in the case of former MSZMP papers. On the other hand the journalists of those papers were afraid of the nationalization of the former communist party’s property including the publishing house, because it could mean the loss of their positions.

Thus in 1989 journalists had already the possibility of supporting democratic political forces, and many of them availed themselves of that opportunity. So the media became a scene of the struggle for the change of the political/economic system, and that also meant it supplied information on the democratic transformation, disbursed the relevant ideas and disputes, and even played a role in the reconciliation of interests. Thus the political role of journalists remained, but compared to the late Kádár system it had changed significantly.

Understandably, the idea that the media were the “fourth estate” quickly became popular among journalists, believing that as members of that fourth branch of power they could not only control the other three branches of power (the “legislative,” “executive” and “judiciary”), but also offered the possibility of politics making. Their concept of power was also reflected by the story I heard from my third interview subject. In 1990, after the first free elections he became the head of the *Magyar Távirati Iroda* (Hungarian News Agency). As he explained, once in 1990, Prime Minister József Antall (Hungarian Democratic Forum, MDF) delivered an address that the journalists of the news agency did not want to report on, because

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<sup>2</sup> For example the journalists of the daily *Magyar Nemzet* (which was the most important paper of the oppositional movements at that time) could elect their editor in chief in January 1990, while searching for an owner.

it happened late in the evening. The staff of the prime minister had not distributed in advance the text of the address enabling the staff of the agency to “comfortably” prepare their report in advance during the afternoon. The head of the news agency learned about the issue at night, when he himself wrote the report. The following morning, having noticed the news item issued by the agency, journalists commented: “gradually politicians will come to understand that in case they have a programme in the evening they must forward to the press the text of their addresses.” As he recalled, the head of the news agency had argued that events related to the prime minister must always be reported on.

Under such conditions, disputes among the democratic parties made journalists also participate in those disputes, or they wanted to take part in the decision-making process in political issues. That was hinted at also by Ervin Tamás — the journalist quoted above — when he said that during the period of the first freely elected right wing government “we hit the ceiling too often.” In his opinion the reason for that was

...we had no routine in democratic practice! [...] Today I see politics much more plastically than at that time. Those days we had the good and the bad guys, we had the “Csurka” danger [reference to the head of the right end of the biggest government party] and that was that. (Varga, 2001, pp. 31, 32)

The journalists believed, recalls Pál Eötvös, editor in chief of *Népszabadság* at that time, that their individual and group interests could be realised without limits, and “nobody will influence the preparation of the papers” and everyone can freely disclose his/her political views, right-wing, left-wing, or liberal in one and the same newspaper (Varga, 2001, pp. 169–170, 172). To put it simply, the norm of journalism became not objectivity but “free partisanship” in some of the editorial offices. In better cases disputes arose in the workshops of papers, programmes on the correctness of such practice and on the political line the paper or programme should represent. These disputes had been decided on by internal power conditions and external supporters — such as the government which wanted to see papers, radio and TV programmes popularizing its policy. In parallel to that, through privatisation and government intervention control over the media was partly reinforced (Sükösd, 2000, pp. 150–157). National newspapers were privatised. The foundation of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP, the successor party of MSZMP) remained an owner of *Népszabadság*, *Magyar Hírlap* (the official government daily before 1989) was biased in favour of the liberal opposition party, the Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége (Federation of Free Democrats, SZDSZ) while *Népszava* rather supported socialist and liberal politics. The privatisation of the fourth old daily paper *Magyar Nemzet* was influenced by the government so as to have it purchased by the right-wing French *Hersant*, turning it to the direction of the government. The government also launched a new daily (*PestiHírlap*). Similar events occurred on the market of weeklies dealing with public life. A struggle had already started in 1991

for the control of state-owned Hungarian Television (MTV) and Hungarian Radio (MR), providing public service and the struggle ended with the two institutions becoming government tools.

It is thus obvious that political bias and political parallelism were both typical of the operation of the media. Between 1996 and 2010 the media structure changed only in that the new media act institutionalised the influence of the political parties over the media; national commercial TV and radio channels emerged, which follow the model of infotainment; and since the early 2000s right-wing (Inforádió, Lánchíd Rádió, Hírtévé, Echo TV) and left-wing (Klubrádió, ATV) TV and radio channels have also been operating.

### **Loyal journalism and partiality**

The issues of control over the media, relationship to the various political parties and that of bias naturally divided the editorial offices during the early 1990s. This type of division and the issue of independence-loyalty can be well identified in the document prepared in May 1991 by Tibor Pethő, chairman and general editor of the editorial board of *Magyar Nemzet*. It illustrates what had been earlier mentioned on the internal situations of editorial offices, on “free partiality”:

The camp of our earlier readers does not want to have the current unmatched paper which is incapable of representing the principles it declares. It is neither genuinely objective nor authentic. Various types of prejudices and biases operate in the editorial office. It is impossible to prepare under such conditions a paper with uniform inwardness. (quoted by Murányi, 1992, p. 205)

In connection with the struggle between the parties, the draft raises the question as to what attitude to take vis-à-vis the government. The question was of whether the journalists (the journalists of *Magyar Nemzet*) should be loyal to the government or critical regarding its actions (see Bajomi-Lázár, 2001, p. 149). This dilemma was the key momentum of the changes of the norms of journalism and the role concept of journalists in Hungary during the 1990s.

The author of the document of 1991 interprets this issue on the basis of the experiences gained during the period of dictatorship:

Criticising the government. Permanent criticism does not improve, but rather deteriorates the work of the government. It compels the ministers to care more for the protection of their policy, than for the policy itself. [...] An unfriendly foreign land uses by choice the criticism published in the domestic press against its own country. This has been well experienced in the past [during the period of state socialism], when we had been using it continuously against the West [the democratic countries]. It is in the interest of our enemies to make the Hungarian population lose its trust in the government... (quoted by Murányi, 1992, p. 206)

In connection with this concept may I point out, that during the early 1990s a serious problem of the Hungarian media came from the absence of competing





parties, and so the prestige of the media can also drop – and that was what happened in Hungary (Vásárhelyi, 1995, pp. 46–48, 53–63; Bajomi-Lázár & Bajomi-Lázár, 2001).

A subject of my interview, a journalist heading a right-wing weekly was of a different opinion on the issues of incompatibility and independence. As he explained, in Hungary since 1990 party media operate, meaning that specific ranges of papers and programmes are attached to every political camp and party, and so it does not matter that people working there “depend” in person or through their family members on their own camps. Thus the political media report only on events useful for their parties and do not even strive to mediate the “completeness” of reality. “This is not the problem — he explained. — The problem is when they trespass reality.”

The demand of attachment to and promotion of specific ideologies affected the journalist profession also with the consequence that a group consciousness of journalists did not emerge after 1989, as the members of the profession show no solidarity to each other but rather to the political organisations on their sides. A sign of that was the establishment in 1992 of the Magyar Újságírók Közössége (Community of Hungarian Journalists) organising the media workers sympathising with the conservative government then in power: the reason for the establishment was that the right-wing journalists who had founded the organisation blamed with political partiality the Magyar Újságírók Országos Szövetsége (National Association of Hungarian Journalists), which had been the single professional organisation before 1992. After 1998, during the period of the later right-wing government the Magyar Elektronikus Újságírók Szövetsége (Federation of Hungarian Electronic Journalists) was established and that organisation supported the media policy of the biggest political party, Fidesz.

Economic reasons can also limit the independence of journalists. Apart from the issue of incompatibility we must mention here the relationship between media owner and editorial office. During the 1990s there were several examples to prove that the owner founded and /or published the paper not — or not only — for profit, but for social and political position, hoping to gain government orders. Under such conditions the media business had not to be necessarily profitable, as the owner intended to earn profit through other businesses. The given paper was only an instrument in that. The owner of the weekly *Magyar Narancs* convinced the editorial office of the paper of reasons not to publish an investigative article on a leading politician in 1998 (Eörsi, 1998). One of the subjects of my interviews told me that because of an article published in their paper, the owner — who had business dealings with the affected firm — fired the head of the department of domestic politics and economics and imposed a penalty over the editor-in-chief. The director of the same paper was also on the staff of the election campaign of a left-wing MP in 1998, and in that capacity he instructed the journalist to rewrite the interview he had conducted with the given politician.



record, together with one of the reporters and the TV channel paid for the “self-plot” (Zsidai, 2012). *Magyar Nemzet*, the daily sharing the media group with Hír TV, had to pay compensation in 2009, because two years earlier it had falsely stated that the son of the same minister had been engaged in blackmailing.<sup>3</sup>

Why do such solutions work again and again? Why do the consumers of those media outlets read or view them? The reason for it is that for example the readers, who read the newspapers because of their connections with parties, do not turn away from the paper in such cases because they do not care much about whether the issue was true or untrue, but whether they consider the statements authentic (Lasch, 1996, pp. 126, 129).

Another method for the creation of news items is at first sight also showing the formal signs of investigative journalism, but again it is an attempt to amalgamate propaganda and “information.” It differs from the type discussed above, in that it presents concurrently a minimum of two contradictory statements in the same article which follows this formula: either a politician of the other political party, or someone else, or nobody did something wrong. In May 2009 *Heti Válasz* wrote that the letter written by a socialist politician disclosed that the socialist party used the secret service in political issues. But the letter may be a forgery — stated the article — and may have been written by someone else who wanted the given politician to be suspected. It may also be — so the article continued — that the letter had been written by some other socialist politician. The weekly presented the given letter as a document unmasking the socialist party (although the journalist himself declared that the letter was or was not a forgery). But it was presented as a product of investigative journalism, since it was based on a “secret document” which was found in “a secret corner of the internet.”

The blogosphere serves as a real aid for those who publish unchecked pieces of information or simply create some. They have the possibility to present pieces of information and documents on some blogs as authentic pieces of information or documents. This happened in the case of the article by *Heti Válasz* as discussed above.

A few months later, in July 2009, a blog stated that the chairman of the liberal Federation of Free Democrats that in his capacity as member of a board distributing state funds, he gave over HUF 140 million to his own firm. The editorial offices (first the independent news page, *Index*) published the piece of information without checking it, and then asked the politician to comment on the news item. They acted in such a way despite the fact that on the homepage of the board referred to they could have easily checked the verity of the statement. They later disclosed that the news item contained false information, and that it had been created by a person who was in financial conflict with the affected party leader (such conflict

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<sup>3</sup> This daily had to publish 14 amendments during the first quarter of 2005 to apologise partly for the publication of false pieces of information and partly for the violation of a good name. The number of amendments was published by *Élet és Irodalom*, April 22, 2005.

by itself should have created doubt in relation to the authenticity of the piece of information).

In the above case we cannot speak of political motivation, but rather about the fact that the editorial offices were prejudiced against the chairman of the party. Right-wing editorial offices were partially against him because he was left-wing, and the case also fitted the interpretation scheme that left-wing parties were corrupt. That was why certain independent editorial offices also considered the news item as credible. If my interpretation is correct, the above example can also be put into the earlier discussed category of unchecked news items (similar to the case of a corrupt representative). The only difference lies in the internet based source.

My last example is a borderland between creating a news item and neglecting to validate information. The story goes like this: somebody created a blog in May 2012 and published incriminating information on a right-wing politician. The politician was a recently resigned state secretary who actually accused his own government of corruption, and the blog blamed the former state secretary with corruption. The false news item of the freshly created blog was published less than four hours later by the Hungarian News Agency without verifying the statement.

## CONCLUSION

The transformation of political media in Hungary can be characterised as a facility diverging from the system of norms of Anglo-Saxon journalism, although practically all the journalists considered it at the beginning of the transformation as an example to be followed. That happened despite the fact that all types of professional ethical codes stressed the need for impartiality, objectivity and the separation of news from opinion. The Hungarian media system today displays the character of integration of politics and the media, with greatly biased journalists. Such partiality is so strong that information is not checked when it serves the interests of the given political party or coincides with their ideology. Some editorial offices themselves create news items to support certain political aspirations. There are editorial offices where journalists and editors act as political aids of certain political parties. Such journalists are speakers of political demonstrations and they themselves also organise demonstrations (e.g. in March and October 2012 pro-government mass demonstrations were organised by some members of the staffs of right-wing radical papers *Demokrata* and *Magyar Hírlap*).<sup>4</sup>

All this has basically two reasons: (1) the political culture of Hungary, which is based on instrumentalization and political expectations demanding the media organisations to be loyal to political parties; (2) the media market in Hungary is small, and the political media can survive only with political support (this is for

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<sup>4</sup> The daily *Magyar Hírlap* was purchased in 2005 by a Hungarian private investor, transforming the daily from a left-wing liberal medium to a right-wing radical one.

instance the case of *Magyar Hírlap* or of *Népszava*, supported by the Socialist Party), so neither has any autonomy. It must be added that journalists working there do not require it. Their readers, it seems, unconditionally accept the articles as authentic. The public generally despises journalists, and casts doubt on the authenticity and credibility of the political media.

The political media is only partly an instrument of political parties. There are many journalists with strong biases, who are not affiliated with any political party. But the fact that bias is a prevalent journalistic norm.

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**APPENDIX**

## The mentioned political media-outlets

	1989/1990	1990–2000	2010–
HVG	Oppositional, liberal	Independent, liberal	Independent, liberal
Magyar Nemzet	Oppositional, with internal-pluralism	Right wing, conservative	Right wing, pro-government*
Magyar Hírlap	Oppositional, liberal	Left wing, liberal	Extreme right wing, pro-government**
Népszabadság	Belonged to the communist/socialist party	Left wing, socialist	Left wing, socialist
Népszava	Belonged to the communist trade union	Left wing	Left wing, socialist
Pesti Hírlap (1992–1994)	—	Right wing, pro-government	—
Új Demokrata / Magyar Demokrata (1994–)	—	Extreme right wing	Extreme right wing, pro-government
Magyar Narancs (1989–)	Left wing, liberal, belonged to the Fidesz	Independent, left wing, liberal	Independent, left wing, liberal
Heti Válasz*** (2001–)	—	—	Right wing, pro-government
Index****	—	Independent, liberal	Independent, liberal
Lánchíd Rádió***	—	—	Right wing, pro-government
Inforádió**** (2000–)	—	—	Right wing, liberal, pro-government
Hír TV* (2003–)	—	—	Right wing, pro-government
Echo TV (2005–)**	—	—	Extreme right wing, pro-government
Klub Rádió (1998–)	—	Independent	Left wing
ATV (1990–)	—	Independent	Left wing

Note: The signs (stars) mean the same owners.

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The mentioned Hungarian parties

	1990	2010–	To be in
MDF	Right wing, conservative	—	1990–1994 1998–2002
SZDSZ	Left wing, liberal	—	1994–1998 2002–2009
Fidesz	Left wing, liberal	Right wing	1998–2002 2010–
MSZP	Left wing, socialist	Left wing, socialist	1994–1998 2002–2010