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Between instrumentalization and para-journalism: current challenges to democratic roles of the media in the Czech Republic

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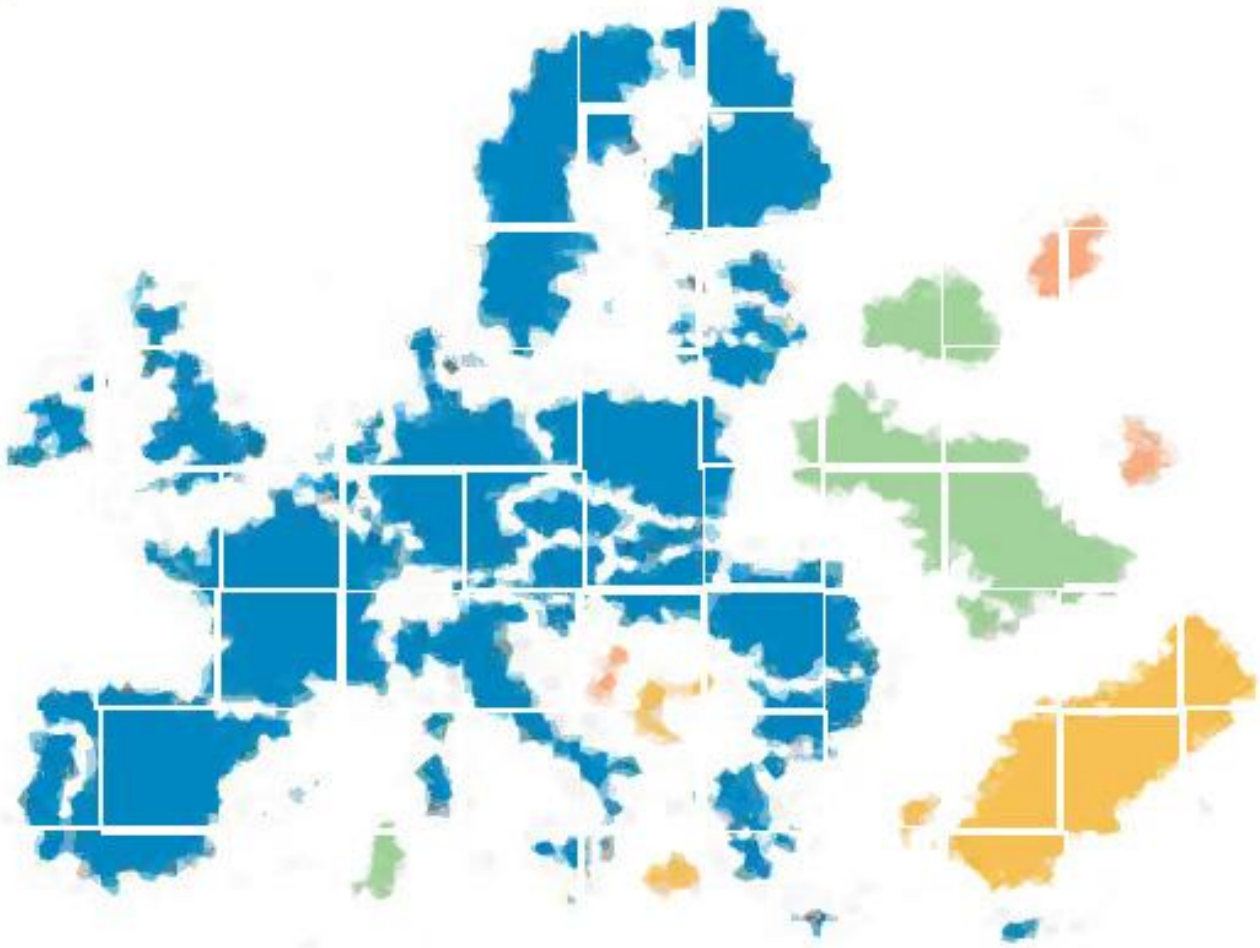
Frontiers of Democracy

Between Instrumentalization and Para-Journalism

Current challenges to democratic roles of the media in the Czech Republic

Václav Štětka



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Frontiers of Democracy
Embedding Democratic Values in Moldova and Ukraine

Moldova and Ukraine, countries of the European Union's Eastern Partnership program, are undergoing complex processes of democratic transformation, but with weak embeddedness of democratic values and principles drawbacks can occur. It is embeddedness that helps to overcome the challenges of transformation and pushes countries beyond mere frontiers of democracy towards becoming strongly committed democratic communities. The goal of the "Frontiers of Democracy: Embedding Democratic Values in Moldova and Ukraine" project of the CEU Center for European Neighborhood Studies is to facilitate embedding democratic values in the societal ethos in Moldova and Ukraine by providing a forum for discussion of the difficulties of such a complex process and by drawing on the transition experience of the Visegrad countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia).

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The opinions expressed here are those of the author.

About the author

Václav Štětka

Václav Štětka is Lecturer at the Department of Social Studies, Loughborough University, and member of the new Centre for Research in Communication and Culture. He received his PhD in sociology from Masaryk University in Brno, the Czech Republic, where he then worked as Assistant Professor at the Department of Media Studies and Journalism, Faculty of Social Studies. Between 2009 and 2013 he was Senior Research Fellow at the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford, working on an ERC-funded project Media and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. He moved to Prague in 2013, having been appointed a Senior Researcher at the Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism, Charles University. There, he established the Political Communication Research Group which focuses on the role of social media in political communication and civic participation. His research interests encompass political communication and the role of new media, media systems in Central and Eastern Europe, media ownership and globalization.

Between Instrumentalization and Para-Journalism
Current challenges to democratic roles of the media in the Czech Republic

Mass media have always been regarded as one of the pillars of democracy by normative theories of the press, which expected them to be providing trustworthy information, offering a space for public discussion, and of course holding the power elites accountable – in the famous metaphor, serving as the watchdogs of democracy. There is a general consensus that in order to properly fulfil these roles, the media must be independent from external constraints, particularly political interventions but also from economic actors who can significantly limit their autonomy, especially through advertising and ownership pressures. As we know, the period of political transformation in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) after 1989 has been marked by an attempt to establish a free and pluralistic media environment, which would minimize the above mentioned risks and enable the media to assist in the process of consolidation of democracy. However, we have witnessed different trajectories of media transformation in the region, leading to different ends, sometimes more satisfying, but more often less so; in many countries of the region, media systems have not managed to successfully separate themselves from state power, direct or indirect one, and journalists have been operating in conditions of limited autonomy. While the stagnation or even reversal of the transformation path has been observed in some CEE countries for a number of years – in the latter case most notably in Hungary since Viktor Orbán's government took office in 2010 (see e.g. Bajomi-Lazar 2013; Bozóki, 2011) – other countries which have been for a long time regarded as examples of a successful transition have recently started displaying traces of backsliding as well, often congruent with the more general trend of democratic backlash and an ascent of populist politics which has been currently on the rise across this part of Europe. It might come as a surprise that one such country where the democratic roles of media are currently facing serious challenges is the Czech Republic – a country which, since the demise of the communist regime in 1989, has been at the forefront of the process of building a free and pluralistic media environment in Central and Eastern Europe. However, the rapid reshuffling of the media ownership structures in the wake of the economic downfall of the news media industry put some serious questions over both journalistic autonomy and the ability of the Czech news media to act in accordance with their ascribed normative roles within a democratic public sphere. In addition to that, concerns about the fading of journalistic standards have further been exacerbated by the recent upsurge of populist and xenophobic discourses on online media platforms, sparked particularly by the European migration crisis.

The new media masters: from seeking profit to deterring adversaries

The media landscape in the Czech Republic, and indeed in most part of Central and Eastern Europe in general, has been until recently characterized by a high level of internationalization – the presence of foreign transnational companies controlling a large part of domestic news outlets. While the high penetration of foreign investment into CEE media markets after 1989 has been met with mixed reactions, from the recognition of their impact on improving the technological standards of media production to criticism for bringing commercialization and tabloidization, there has been a general consensus among the journalistic community that foreign ownership managed, more or less, to keep local politicians and parties largely at bay in their attempts to control the press or at least to interfere with editorial autonomy of commercial news outlets.

The dominance of international ownership on CEE media markets however came to a rather sudden and unexpected end around the end of the last decade, following the impact of the global economic crisis. The CEE region was hit more severely than any other region in the world by the plummeting of the markets and the GDP figures, with direct consequences for the advertising business and thereby for the media companies' revenues, particularly in the print sector. Within the span of just a few years, a number of international companies, including the established publishers like WAZ, Ringier, Mecom, Axel Springer, Bonnier or Schibsted, decided to sell their media outlets in some of the countries, or even to pull out from the entire region. By 2013, the balance of foreign versus domestic ownership has been completely reversed in countries like Hungary, Estonia, Slovakia, Bulgaria or Romania, while in other countries the presence of international media investors has significantly weakened. In the Czech Republic, this wave came with a slight delay, but with a higher intensity. Between 2013 and 2015, the map of Czech print media ownership – until then almost entirely in foreign hands – was radically reconfigured; today, virtually all the politically relevant print media, and some parts of the broadcasting scene, are controlled by domestic proprietors.

However, even more important than the nationality of the new investors is the fact that they represent a new type of media proprietors, namely local business elites – or oligarchs, as they have increasingly been labelled – coming mainly from outside the news-making industries, with primary areas of business interests (and sources of profit) in the energy sector, banking, investment, construction or real estate business. Such a type of ownership has not been a complete novelty in the region, especially in countries like Romania, Bulgaria or Latvia; in the Czech Republic, as well as in other parts of Central Europe, it has until very recently been however only marginal, and its current proliferation has taken the country by surprise. People had to get quickly adjusted to the fact that a handful of the country's richest

businessmen have between themselves almost completely divided the news media market, having added publishing houses, broadcasters and news servers into their already burgeoning collection of private assets. This includes Daniel Křetínský, a 40-year old CEO of the Energy and Industrial Holding, one of the biggest energy companies in the Czech Republic, who in 2014 purchased the publisher of the biggest-selling tabloid *Blesk* from Ringier; or Marek Dospiva, co-owner of the prominent Czech-Slovak investment group PENTA which in 2015 purchased the monopoly chain of regional daily newspapers from the German-based Passauer Neue Presse. But by far the biggest attention has been paid to another new media proprietor, Andrej Babiš, the second richest man in the country and, at the same time, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finances, who shortly before the 2013 snap Parliamentary elections which brought him in office acquired the biggest Czech media house Mafra, publisher of two of quality papers and the most read online news server *iDNES.cz*. Having later purchased the Nr 1 commercial radio station *Impuls*, he became arguably the most influential Czech media mogul, a status only intensified by his explicit involvement in high politics. This situation is quite unprecedented in contemporary European Union and certainly bears close resemblance to the former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi – a parallel for which Andrej Babiš has earned a rather unfavourable nickname "Babisconi" among domestic and international journalists, as recently quoted in an article in Foreign Policy (Cichowlas and Foxall 2015).

When describing these ownership changes, the proverbial elephant in the room clearly is the purpose for which these purchases have been made. In other words, the question is – why are the billionaires so keen on investing in media which have been shedding circulation numbers and revenues for a considerable amount of time?

While individual motivations of the new owners might be more complex, the common denominator for most of these acquisitions has been the fact that they have not been carried out for economic reasons, or at least not as a primary goal of the proprietor, but rather in order to have an instrument at hand which can be used to influence public opinion and to promote and defend the owner's other business or political interests. This conclusion can easily be made not only when considering the poor economic prospects for this ailing industry, and thereby the near-impossibility of returning the investment within a reasonable time frame, but also when comparing the economic size of these media companies with the tycoons' core business assets, which overshadow them multiple times. Should this not be conclusive enough, an explicit proof of such motivation has recently been revealed by one of the above-mentioned Czech oligarchs, Marek Dospiva. In response to a journalist's question regarding the plans of his company PENTA to invest into media, he replied by saying: "I am not going to beat around the bush: the fact that we own media gives us the assurance that it will be more difficult for anyone to irrationally attack us" (Mikulka 2015). Beyond doubt, this means that media in the hands of these powerful proprietors are considered

not as an institution which should operate independently and pursuing the interest of the public – as the democracy textbooks assume – but rather as an instrument of deterrence, whose main purpose is to ensure that nobody will dare to challenge their owners, be it a politician or a business competitor, for fear of being targeted by a smear campaign unleashed against them by the owner(s). In the context of the Czech media market, where most news media are now in the hands of a handful of powerful oligarchs and/or business groups, this creates a palpable danger of the media abandoning their watchdog role, as they are too timid to write critically not only about their own proprietor but also about the actions of the other powerful actors among the media owners.

Turning to online platforms: the dark side of information abundance

The apparent tendency towards instrumentalization of mainstream news media in the hands of the Czech oligarchs, as well as the visible instances of self-censorship by journalists working there, has not gone without an effect on public attitudes towards the media. Opinion polls have been continuously showing declining trust in media – which has sunk by 20 per cent during the last ten years, according to the Centre for Public Opinion Research (CVVM 2015). The latest figures from the Digital News Report (2016) suggest that Czechs display one of the lowest levels of trust in media across the 26 countries in the sample; 34% of respondents trust the media, and only 20% trust individual journalists (Newman 2016).[1] It is therefore no wonder that people have been turning to the Internet in an attempt to find alternative sources of information – a trend which has certainly been in place well before the ownership changes, but which has arguably been only intensified following the rise of the Czech oligarchs into media moguls.

Technology optimists have long hailed the Internet as a medium with a potential to enhance democracy and enable users to practice a more decentralized, participatory and reflexive communication than the traditional mass media. Similar arguments have been repeated when we entered the Web 2.0 age, marked by the rise of social media which have been gradually gaining prominence not just as discussion platforms or mobilization instruments, but ever more as sources of news, as survey data have been consistently showing in the recent years. In the Czech Republic, according to the Reuters Institute's 2016 Digital News Report, over a half of the internet population (51%) uses social network sites for the purpose of reading news – a 10% increase from 2015 (Newman 2016). It is undeniable that not only news consumption, but also production is rapidly moving online, with digital-

[1] Organized by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, the Digital News Report summarizes data from an annual survey which explores changing news habits among internet users around the world. The 2016 edition involved 26 countries: United States, United Kingdom, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Belgium, Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria, Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, Greece, Turkey, Korea, Japan, Australia, Canada and Brazil (http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/).

born news projects multiplying. In terms of the sheer amount of news sources, it can be said that the public sphere has never been more pluralistic.

However, we have been becoming increasingly aware that there is a dark side to this online information cornucopia, one which has to do with the almost complete lack of control over the quality of information circulating on the Internet and within social network sites. The price for plurality, it seems, is the necessity to navigate through a complex and rather murky environment infested with rumours, hoaxes, unverified claims and data sources, as well as with deliberately manufactured misinformation campaigns. While hoaxes have been present on the Internet ever since the beginnings of this global network, recently we have been witnessing systematic attempts at spreading misinformation, orchestrated by various political actors – including states – with serious consequences not just for democracy but also for international security. In this respect, it is indicative that the World Economic Forum has recently identified the spreading of digital misinformation as one of the main threats for contemporary society.

The Czech Republic has of course not been spared of this phenomenon, which became perhaps the most visible amidst the European migration crisis that has sparked a very different kind of online public engagement than what the cyberoptimists had in mind when praising the ability of the Web 2.0 technologies to promote rational deliberation. In stark contrast to those theories, the Internet and social media became primary channels for expressing low human instincts, giving rise to manifestations of irrational fear, verbal aggression and hate aimed at nameless crowds of refugees (who – ironically – largely avoided the Czech Republic on their way to Western and Northern Europe). Nevertheless, as dangerous as the spreading of myths, hoaxes and hate speech undoubtedly is – something the current migration crisis has proven beyond reasonable doubt – it can be argued that an even greater peril for democracy comes from the kind of hybrid news/PR media platforms which are thriving online and which pretend to be professional journalistic outlets, without however observing any ethical codes and standards of journalism as a profession. In the Czech Republic, currently the most successful and influential representative of this type of para-journalistic business projects is the online paper *The Parliament Letters* (www.parlamentnilisty.cz).Established in 2003 as a print magazine by an influential Prague lobbyist Michal Voráček, this outlet has nothing to do with the actual Czech Parliament but unabashedly uses this name to boost its symbolic status and trustworthiness in the eyes of the readers and advertisers. The paper – nowadays published exclusively online – operates on a simple business model: keeping expenses at a very minimum level, employing just a handful of staff and publishing few original news stories, while re-posting edited news content from elsewhere. In addition, it gives a virtually unrestricted platform to politicians and other public actors who use the offered space as a blog, exploited by the editors who publish excerpts from their opinion posts as "news" on the front page, usually peppered with a spicy headline. According to one analysis (Urban 2015), the six staff members of

The Parliament Letters publish around one hundred articles per day, however original news content accounts for less than 15 per cent of this number; the biggest portion of the rest consists of reprinted texts and opinions from social networking sites, blogs and other websites (often conspiracy inclined), regardless of how marginal or obscure these sources and authors of such opinions are. Despite pledging political neutrality, the selection of material which they reprint and repost on the front page is very much biased and ruled by right-wing nationalism, with the predominance a of an anti-EU/US, pro-Russian, anti-Islamist and anti-immigration agenda. The readership figures demonstrate that this agenda resonates very well with the Czech online audiences; with almost one million unique users per month, *The Parliament Letters* are by far the most visited news website which is not part of any mainstream media conglomerate, and currently occupies the eighth place on the list of the most popular Czech online news servers. Given this popularity, various extremist views and opinions which would otherwise remain marginal have an opportunity to enter mainstream public discourse, also because other news media are often picking up on what appears on *The Parliament Letters*. At the same time, their public visibility is greatly enhanced through the current Czech President Miloš Zeman who, in his ostentatious ignorance of the mainstream journalistic scene (which often criticizes him), has chosen *The Parliament Letters* as his main PR channel, giving them exclusive interviews and inviting their staff members to accompany him on his international state visits.

Many Czech media commentators and experts agree that the activities of *The Parliament Letters* are seriously harming professional journalism and embody one of the biggest, if perhaps not that clearly visible, threats to democratic public sphere. This is not just because of deliberately engaging in the spreading of various populist and extremist views and agendas, but – even more importantly – also because of pretending to deliver news while in fact distributing mostly just nasty, unfounded opinions and slurs which, through the process of editorial repackaging, become "facts". The paper is not at all bothered by any notion of journalistic accountability; it is characterized by a total renunciation of n basic journalistic duties, such as fact-checking, interpreting what was said, or putting the quotes into context. Regardless of all these questionable practices, there are no signs that its popularity and political influence might be decreasing; for many of its readers, it clearly represents an "alternative" to the mainstream media scene which they perceive as biased and controlled by specific interests – an image that *The Parliament Letters* have been actively nurturing, as demonstrated by their street poster claiming that "Nobody dictates us what we can write about". Ironically, the paper has recently also fallen prey to the process of oligarchization; since last year it is co-owned by Ivo Valenta, a senator and a billionaire who owns one of the biggest gambling companies in the country.

Conclusions: whither professional journalism?

The tendencies outlined in this essay arguably point to the deepening of the crisis of professional journalism in contemporary Czech Republic, while being in many ways illustrative of the situation in Central and Eastern Europe as a whole. The challenges stemming from the growing prominence of online-based communication technologies and news-gathering and distributing platforms are of course felt very much all across the world; however, the case of the Czech Republic – and to a large extent of the CEE region in general – is still specific in the degree of professional autonomy of mainstream news media, which in this part of the world is currently being questioned due to the increasing prominence of the ownership model which is not oriented at achieving profits but rather securing business and political influence (see Štětka 2015). This is certainly not to say media in the West are completely free of economic or ownership influences and interferences, constraining at times their watchdog role; however, it can be argued that, in the Czech Republic, instrumentalization of the media for their proprietors' particularistic goals has become a standard and largely accepted practice, rather than an occasional deviation from what is still being considered a "normal" role of media in a democratic society. Unfortunately, as it was demonstrated above, the new media scarcely offer a reasonable alternative, being either part of the companies owned by oligarchs, or – as in case of *The Parliament Letters* – making their business by directly opposing the principles which professional journalism should cherish. There are certainly other online platforms, those which care for quality and where good investigative journalism still can be found (in many cases thanks to journalists who fled from the mainstream media after having been acquired by the tycoons); however, their reach is generally much more limited, and most of them are all struggling to find a viable business model which would secure their financial sustainability. With the public service media – perhaps still the last stronghold of quality journalism with a sizeable public impact, despite partial flaws and occasional mistakes – becoming subject to ever growing political pressures, the urgency to protect the future of professional journalism in this country feels more pressing than ever.

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Published:

Center for European Neighborhood Studies
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Contact:
Nádor utca 9, Budapest, H-1052, Hungary
Tel.: + 36 1 237-3000 ext. 2391
cens@ceu.edu

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