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## JOURNAL OF SECURITY AND SUSTAINABILITY ISSUES

ISSN 2029-7017 print/ISSN 2029-7025 online

2015 March Volume 4 Number 3 (S)

[http://dx.doi.org/10.9770/jssi.2015.4.3\(1\)S](http://dx.doi.org/10.9770/jssi.2015.4.3(1)S)

### SECURITY AND INDEPENDENCE OF MASS MEDIA: A CASE STUDY OF CZECH JOURNALISTS IN MEDIA OWNERSHIP TURMOIL

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Received 10 November 2015; accepted 20 January 2015

**Abstract.** Our paper focuses on the issue of security and independence of modern day mass media. The majority of mass media is owned by large corporations and business companies and there has been noted a certain pressure on the quality and the content of media coverage that is happening with a varying degree of success in various countries. Our paper is based on the results of the Czech branch of the Worlds of Journalism Study project that took place between 2012 and 2014 and consisted of 291 interviews with journalists from all types of media, both at the regional level and nationwide. The results addressed changes in the way Czech journalists perceive their roles and ethical responsibilities and showed the altering manner in which these changes are reflected in emerging media projects. It appears that Czech journalists are now keener to accept the role of public “watchdogs” and the newly found role of journalism becomes a catchy marketing idea for the new projects.

**Keywords:** media economics, business ownership, mass media, freedom of press, Czech Republic

**Reference** to this paper should be made as follows: Tejkalová, A.N.; Láb, F.; Strielkowski, W. 2015. Security and independence of mass media: a case study of Czech journalists in media ownership turmoil, *Journal of Security and Sustainability Issues* 4(3): 500–508.

DOI: [http://dx.doi.org/10.9770/jssi.2015.4.3\(1\)S](http://dx.doi.org/10.9770/jssi.2015.4.3(1)S)

**JEL Classifications:** L82, M20, P12, P26

## 1. Introduction

The question why mass media should be independent is anchored deeply in the principle of the so-called “social responsibility” that is strong in post-Communist countries. During the period of Communist rule, the mass media was guided by the ruling Communist parties with the iron hand. Hardly any article was written or any report was made without strict censorship and ubiquitous control. This was the main reason for post-socialist mass media to become the “watchdogs” and the “voices of freedom” in the newly born post-Soviet transition economies (see e.g. Volek and Jiráček 2006; Wyka 2007; or Rydzak 2008). However, the euphoria of the first years of the newly gained freedom and democracy soon gave way to the new control over mass media by private business owners that were very often represented by the large media corporations from the West. The weakening position of the transnational media owners and sales drops of their newspapers have led to sales of their Czech acquisitions to local business elites. This trend corresponds with the situation in the whole CEE region, as mentioned by Stetka (2012).

In the last two years, the Czech Republic has witnessed the largest changes in media ownership since the early 1990s. The most striking was the purchase of the prestigious and reliable daily “Mlada fronta DNES” by the business tycoon Andrej Babiš who, alongside with his business successes launched a political party called “ANO 2011”. The purchase took place in 2013, four months before the Czech Parliamentary elections “ANO 2011” came as second, which enabled it to profit the most from the situation and allowed Babiš to become the Minister of Finance and the mastermind behind the Czech political scene. Apart from that, there were noted other media purchases. For instance, the most read tabloid daily “Blesk” was bought by the financial group J&T after Babiš bought MF DNES, a step that can be viewed as a “defensive purchase” by the other important influential business owners who might not necessarily agree with Babiš. This takeover raised doubts about the nature of Mr. Babiš’s and other tycoons’ pure intentions and led to the talks about the so-called “Berlusconization” of the Czech politics, a scenario in which a powerful politician takes control of the majority of mass media in the country which enables her or him to control the public opinion effectively and very often to her or his own good.

This is not to mention that the overall atmosphere at the political scene in the Czech Republic is quite tense. Doing business in the Czech Republic is complicated and problematic, with many administrative burdens still in place. According to the latest ranking of international organization Doingbusiness.org, the Czech Republic occupies the 64<sup>th</sup> place, and is preceded by such countries as Georgia (16<sup>th</sup> place), or Peru and Columbia (41<sup>st</sup> and 42<sup>nd</sup> places respectively). Even such countries as the Slovak Republic (48<sup>th</sup> place) or Botswana (54<sup>th</sup> place) ranked higher. On top of all that, in 2011 prestigious British journal “The Economist” published an article in which it scrutinized Czech political and economic system and called it “rotting partitocracy”. According to the journals, political parties in the country hijacked the democratic process and their leaders became arrogant and corrupt (The Economist 2011). This situation might be described as the “state capture”—an excessive exploitation of public resources by the ruling elite, when the state and business start to live in a symbiosis (Grzymala-Busse 2004).

The grim climate of Czech journalism has been discussed since both in terms of its economic and ethical crises. Nevertheless, a group of influential and well-known journalists who left the media owned by business entities (after Babiš bought “Mlada fronta DNES”, other media outlets were also purchased by corporate magnates), launched projects of quality in journalism (also called “slow journalism”, as a similarity to the “slow food” movement that was founded by Carlo Petrini in 1986 as an opposition to fast food concept) which represents a turning point since up until now, these projects only existed in theory. Overall, it seems that the approach to journalism in the Czech Republic, its destiny and its role in the society, is changing. However, the question is whether it is doing so for the better or for the worse. Our paper aims at analyzing the issue of security and independence of Czech mass media in the midst of the media ownership turmoil debate. The rest of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a short literature review on the business influence on mass media using the examples of various countries. Section 3 describes the data and provides a short data analysis. Section 4 brings the overview of the methodology, the research questions and the formal model. Section 5 reveals the main results and discusses their implications. Finally, section 6 comes with overall conclusions and policy implications.

## 2. Literature review

In general, the most typical forms of business influence on mass media can be divided into two main approaches. The first approach describes how indirect influence of business community on the stories journalists write is done via the use of money, presents, or freebies on the one hand, or via using the (often brutal) force on the other hand. This type of influence is neatly described especially in the case of various developing economies represented by Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, Zimbabwe, and Indonesia (see e.g. Ndangam 2006; Lodamo and Skjerdal 2009; Kasoma 2007; Mawindi Mabwezara 2011; Hanitzsch 2005). However, even in the developed and democratic economies of the West dubious practices are still not uncommon. For instance, Muggli *et al.* (2004) describe the efforts of Philip Morris to put pressure on the journalists in United States and some European countries with regard to the US EPA report on passive smoking. Goldacre (2007) described the conflict of interest of journalists while writing on medical and pharmaceutical problems. For a more comprehensive overview of the issues related to the journalists’ ethics one can see Keeble (2008).

The second approach to business influence in mass media is related to the ownership structure of the mass media. In research literature, the influence and the effects of media ownership are considered to be extremely important. Many researchers agree that media ownership might influence not only the content of the media itself, but also the political and economic processes in the country in question (see e.g. Williams 2005; Stańczyk 2011; Bileišis 2014; Giriūnas, Mackevičius 2014). Houston *et al.* (2011) shows that the state ownership of media might be associated with bank corruption. Additionally, it appears that media concentration increases corruption both directly and indirectly through its interaction with media state ownership. State ownership of the media is strongly associated to journalists' trust toward public institutions, which can also lead to a decline of public trust in general (see Hanitzsch and Berganza 2012; Hanitzsch *et al.* 2010; Bilan 2014). The research shows that in many countries concentrated ownership of media by private business entities caused a substantial reduction in the freedom of press. This is especially relevant for such countries as Ukraine, Turkey, Hong Kong, or Saudi Arabia (see e.g. Ryabinska 2011; Christensen 2007; So and Chan 2007; and Cochrane 2007; or Bilan, Y. and Bilan, S. 2011). Apart from the indirect influence on the stories published for money, freebies or threats, mass media owners have the possibility of direct influence on what, when, and how often is going to appear in the media. Moreover, owners and editors of mass media have an important influence on the deadlines of the media content (see Waters *et al.* 2011), the form of employment and salaries of the journalists (see Cushion 2007). Overall, it seems that business ownership can influence the mass media and the freedom of speech in journalism, in one way or another. Thence, it is important for the journalists as well as for the general public, to launch the debate on what is acceptable with this regard and what is not. Furthermore, the independence and the objectivity of mass media should also be guaranteed as being one of the most important principles of the developed democratic societies.

### 3. Description of the data

Our data is comprised of 291 interviews conducted for Worlds of Journalism Study project in the Czech Republic (questionnaires), in two periods: October 2012 – January 2013 (135 interviews), and September 2013 – March 2014 (156 interviews). In total, 41 interviewed journalists in our sample were from the pre-change period from the media that underwent the change of ownership or a merge with newly bought media. Moreover, 47 interviewed journalists from the after change period from the media that underwent the change of ownership or a merge with newly bought media. The Worlds of Journalism (WoJ) Project was conducted in 2007-2011 on the basis of interviews with 2100 journalists from 413 news organizations in 21 countries. Each country was represented by 100 interviews with journalists.

The concept of “News Media” in our case was limited to media organizations that have their own news program or news section, so the radio stations which broadcast music were not viewed as news media. The Worlds of Journalism study was focused on professional journalists defined as people earning at least 50 percent of their income from news media and involved in producing and editing journalistic content. The project primarily focused on the differences in journalism cultures but more interesting concepts emerged during the data collection. Currently, branches of WoJ are extended to more countries and the data collection is on-going. For example, more data is currently collected in various post-transition economies of the Central and Eastern Europe. For more information, one can check the following website: [www.worldsofjournalism.org](http://www.worldsofjournalism.org). Our data originate from the Czech branch of WoJ. Looking at the data, some basic findings can be made: First, it becomes apparent that Czech journalists work for more newsrooms after the ownership change and the purchase of the mass media by the business company.

Second, it appears that more journalists work on temporary contracts and less on permanent positions after the medium takeover by the business entity. Moreover, at the moment the situation is that Czech journalists are working for more news outlets after the change of ownership. In addition, it appears that there is a 7% increase of journalists performing other jobs beside journalism. Furthermore, there is a noticeable increase (9%) of journalists working on various topics and subjects after the ownership change. In addition, there is a noticeable increase of produced/edited news items after the change. With all that in mind, it has to be noted that journalists' perceived role of monitoring and scrutinizing business has risen by about 12%. Our results for the partial sample of journalists affected by the change of mass media ownership also correspond with numbers within the whole sample.

Moreover, it also has to be noted that after the changes in the Czech mass media landscape, journalists started to attribute more significance to their role of being the advocates of the social change and public morale. We notice a significant increase (23%) of perceiving entertaining role of journalism as important, while there is about a 14% rise of journalists' feelings that their managers have big influence on the staff and the content. Many journalists reported feeling that their owners' influence doubled in comparison with the previous era. Compared to the whole sample the numbers are almost the same. Surprisingly, the journalists have the feeling that influence of politicians did not change after the ownership turmoil. In the same way journalists do not feel higher influence of business people. Those results are the same within the whole sample.

Finally, there was noted a 10% rise in the number of journalists who, after the change from the previous period, felt that the profit-making pressure evolved and becomes less bearable. Opposite to this, there was no change in the whole sample. Overall, the data analysis demonstrates that there have been significant changes in the Czech mass media landscape following the takeover of the main Czech mass media and perceived by the journalists. The rest of this paper is targeted at measuring the scope and the scale of these changes as well as their main determinants.

#### 4. Methodology and the model

Following the literature review, the description of the data, and our reasoning from the above sections, the following research questions (RQ) have been formulated with regard to the Czech mass media ownership change and its consequences:

RQ1: Do journalists' working conditions differ after the media ownership change?

RQ2: How do journalists perceived the change of their roles?

RQ3: Did the pressures on journalists and their work change?

In order to test our research questions, we run the logit model in order to assess international diversity of the perceived influences of the owners to journalism practices we compute averages and 95% confidence intervals. In order to test the hypotheses presented above we compute ordinal multinomial regression according to the following formula (1):

$$\text{Influence ownership} = \text{logit} (X_1 \dots X_n) + e \quad (1)$$

Where *Influence ownership* – the subjective level of influence from business people and media owners

$X_1 \dots X_n$  - independent variables presented in Tables 1 and 2.

$e$  – an error term

We run two separate logit models with the subjective level of influence from business people and the subjective level of influence from media owners as our dependent variables. The perceived influence was measured on the scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being the “not influential”, and 5 being the “most influential”.

#### 5. Main results and discussions

The results of our estimations of the model described in (1) are presented in Tables 1 and 2 that follow. For the sake of simplicity, we only depict the significant and borderline-significant variables' estimates, their standard errors and significance intervals.

**Table 1.** Perceived influence of business people on mass media, Czech Republic

	Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.
Religion: importance	,382	,168	,023
Ethics general: journalists should always adhere to codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context	-,597	,227	,009
Salary	-,262	,195	,180
Reach of medium – Local	-1,236	,692	,074
Gender Female	,803	,383	,036
<b>Chi-Square</b>			
	37,271		
Df	24		
Sig.	,041		
<b>Pseudo R-square:</b>			
Cox and Snell	,219		
Nagelkerke	,250		
McFadden	,118		
N =	151		

Source: Own results

Our results (see Table 1) demonstrate a number of interesting findings. First, regarding the perceived influence of business people in general (not necessarily the media owners): There appears to be a number of personal characteristics that determine the perceived influence of business people over mass media and the journalists. For instance, it appears that the more important are the religious practices to the journalists, the more is the perceived influence of business people. This result might be explained by the fact that more religious of church-going people tend to believe in fate or providence and might expect a ruling hand to guide their deeds. Therefore, they might feel the influence of business people even if it is not there. Moreover, it appears that the more importance is attributed to the journalists ‘ethics, the less is the influence of business people. This finding is not surprising, since the more straightforward, honest and moral are the journalist, the more they believe in their own moral values and codes and the less are they interested in what business elites might think.

Additionally, it yields that the higher the salary of the Czech journalists, the less is the influence of business people. This result is subjective, of course, but it raises some interesting implications. Financial independence (higher salaries) help to be more objective in the stories journalists cover since the hungry hand would more likely be following the lines of the authority that provides the food. Another personal implication is the gender issue: it appears that being a female journalist in the Czech Republic increases the perceived influence of business people. This result might be attributed to the traditional role of women in the Czech society and the feeling of being less secure in both professional and social terms in comparison with the male colleagues.

Regarding the influence of business people, there is also an interesting implication about the geographical spread of the medium. It becomes apparent that for local media (or media concentrating just on a limited range of audience geographically), the influence of business people seems to be less important. This result might be attributed to the fact that the majority of regional mass media do not typically have any bigger fish to fry and therefore concentrate on describing the local news and events. Regarding the results on the perceived influence of mass media owners (this time we asked the journalists about the owners of the mass media they currently work or are associated with) in the Czech Republic (Table 2), more interesting implications can be made.

It appears that the political orientation of the Czech journalists have something to do with the perceived influence of the mass media owners. Our results show that the more is the political stance (the closer it is right-wing) of the journalists, the more is the perceived influence of mass media owners. Perhaps, being more independent and business-oriented also increases the awareness of the other business-like people to attempt to seize control over the freedom of mass media. Furthermore, our result about the influence of religion is in accord with those from the previous model: it appears that the higher is the importance of religion, the higher is the perceived influence of mass media owners.

**Table 2.** Perceived influence of mass media owners, Czech Republic

	Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.
Political stance (left-right)	,195	,094	,037
Religion: importance	,206	,154	,180
Ethics general: journalists should always adhere to codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context	,359	,213	,093
Reach of medium – Regional	,834	,644	,196
Specialist vs. Generalist – Work on a specific beat	-,746	,440	,090
Rank of respondent – „Junior“ manager	,838	,497	,092
<hr/>			
Chi-Square	36,088		
df	24		
Sig.	,054		
<hr/>			
Pseudo R-square:			
Cox and Snell	,229		
Nagelkerke	,240		
McFadden	,084		
N =	139		

*Source:* Own results

The argument can be the same as in the previous case – people who believe in supernatural powers guiding their way, also tend to see the guiding hand in their bosses and owners. A very interesting outcome is related to the morale and ethics: our results confirm that the higher are the ethical principles of Czech journalists, the higher is the perceived influence of mass media owners. The implications might be two-fold: First, it appears that journalists who are (or consider themselves to be) highly ethical, also tend to dig more into unlawful and indecent practices. Second, it might be that the standards for ethical people differ from those for ordinary people whose morale is not that strict. What might be considered by the regular citizens as normal and acceptable (since it is considered mundane in the Czech Republic), might be unacceptable in accordance with usual moral standards and regulations.

The result of the regional media having less influence from mass media owners from the previous model has repeated itself. There is no surprise about it – although big business players in the Czech Republic usually concentrate on controlling the regional media from the very beginning, they do not attempt to exert any pressure on what they are covering, since the local and regional media in the Czech Republic concentrate on news and issues of minor importance that are of no special importance in shaping up the public opinion on the national scale. Finally, it appears that being a specialist increases the perceived influence of mass media owners, while being a junior manager increases the perceived influence of mass media owners. These results are not surprising, since

### **Conclusions and implications**

Our results show that following the takeover (or the purchase) of the main Czech mass media outlets by the business owners, the overall landscape has changed. It can be observed that currently journalists tend to work for more newsrooms and for more news outlets at a time.

The employment security has also changed – there are reported to be less permanent and more temporary positions. All these makes the journalists to do more other paid jobs beside journalism in order to make the ends meet. An implication to that is that Czech journalists do not specialized as much in some specific areas of expertise as they used to.

Nevertheless, our results also demonstrate that the roles of journalism and journalists in the Czech society have changed. According to the majority of our respondents, the roles of journalist should be (attributed as most important):

- Monitor and scrutinize business
- Set political agenda
- Advocate for social change
- Provide entertainment and relaxation

We noted a higher influence of the business people in general and media business owners of mass media and the pressure on journalists to work more with a purpose of yielding higher profits. Moreover, in the eyes of the Czech journalists, the influence of politicians and business people did not change. Our results tend to correspond with the current trends within the whole media landscape:

- More important role of journalists in monitoring and scrutinizing business
- Feeling of rising influence of owners over news organizations
- The perceived influence of politicians remains the same
- The perceived influence of business people remains the same
- Influence of profit-making pressures did not rise considerably

Overall, our results demonstrate that in the Czech Republic business people and business organizations represented by the private companies and corporations tend to exert certain forms of control over local mass media outlets. This might have several explanations with the most obvious one being that private business does not need bad publicity, so some pressure over journalists to ameliorate the public image of business entities is viewed as having a “higher purpose”. Business companies support the creation of their positive role in the society and shaping up their favorable image is desirable and “good for business”.

Furthermore, the role of journalists’ personal factors and characteristics also seems to be of a great importance. It appears that religious practices, being a right-wing supporter, being an ethical person both tend to increase awareness of the business people and business owners’ influence of mass media in case of Czech journalists. Younger, more specialized and female journalists feel more pressure from the business people and business owners, while older, male and multidisciplinary journalist tend to try to adjust to the new conditions and report no such feelings.

Another interesting finding is that regional and small mass media that cannot shape the public opinion nation-wide are not used by business tycoons to convey their agenda to the public, so the pressure and the reported influence in this case tend to be quite low.

Finally, it seems that the question of corruption in Czech mass media owned by the business tycoons appears to be of a special interest in the light shed by our research and would probably deserve to become a special topic of additional research in this field. It appears very interesting to determine whether journalists who tend to accept money or presents from their business owners (or the business people in general), also increase the overall perception of the subjective influence of mass media by business entities.

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