

MEDIA STUDIES: PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

The academic field of “media studies” is one of the modern interdisciplinary-orientated fields of social scientific research and university lecturing. It is a settled and well-developed discipline, although its stability is continuously attacked by a variety of trends, with the rapidly changing subject of its interest as one of the most important examples. The main traditions of studying the media are cognitive-empirical tradition, critical-speculative one and “cultural” tradition. Apart from that, a strong tradition of historical study of media can be traced back. The last decade and the turn of the century have opened a new topic of media studies – the ICT. With dissemination of “new” technologies and their integration into social communication, new questions have been raised: how do the ITC-based media influence the scope and shape of public communication? What are the political, commercial and cultural consequences of implementing these communications? What kinds of changes are caused by ICT regarding users’ habits? Last but not least, how to incorporate ITC development into a more traditional narrative of media development? The article aims to explain the cotemporary status of media studies with some comments on the “Czech” and “Slovak” media studies tradition and, transforming some of these questions into a possible programme for future development of the whole field.

KEY WORDS

media studies – ICT – information ideology – information power – cognitive-empirical tradition – critical-speculative tradition – cultural tradition – communication-technology tradition.

Searching for a solid place in the system of other science fields and surviving in this highly competitive environment at all represents a never-ending “fight for discourse” for every science discipline, process of gradual re-definitions of key scientific issues, searching for new topics and new determination against others, especially related disciplines. For a young scientific discipline, such as media studies, this applies in particular. The status of this discipline is influenced by a number of factors: it is developmentally formed by the media as a radically changing subject of its interest; its status is conditioned by a clash of different scientific approaches, which meet above the “media topic”. Furthermore, it has been increasingly confronted with the post-modern dictate of methodological and thematic loosening and blurring in relation to the borders

of individual scientific disciplines, which is legitimized by a general attempt to achieve an interdisciplinarity as a final and “ideal state”.¹ Although we can have certain doubts about this rather mythologized attempt (which very often only conceals the absence of the topic itself and the research strategy), the above stated trend represents a great opportunity, as well as a certain danger for the media study. On one hand, it is obvious that media studies have a potential to reflect the situation of radical socio-technical communication transformations, which bring so called informatization, or cultural and economic globalization, in a more complex way. On the other hand, however, the wide interdisciplinary character of media studies represents a danger of melting in traditional, more firmly settled “auxiliary sub-disciplines”, which consider the media as one of their main interest. It is therefore important for media studies to keep as close to their discipline borders as possible, even though it is obvious that these borders will always be crossed and redefined.

Today, there is no doubt that *media studies* are – not only in the Euro-American context – an established scientific discipline that disposes of a its own area of investigation and its scientific issues, institutions, where the actual scientific activities are performed (academia, universities, or departments), as well as its own scientific production, including a specialized publishing house, special and scientific magazines and scientific and pedagogical organizations.² That is why we will not pay too much attention to the institutionalization of media studies as a scientific discipline, since it is believed that their status is stabilized. Above all, we will focus on the basic topics, questions, and issues raised by civilization and particularly communication and technological changes of late modern societies.

Declaring that media studies have been established as a standard scientific discipline may not, however, be applied to both Czech and Slovak conditions without exceptions. Especially, the absence of the scientific periodicals has so far somehow weakened the Slovak and Czech, as well the Czechoslovak reflection of the given issues. This paper should open so far fading and dispersed discourse in the “homeland” of its own journal entitled *Media Studies*.

1. Studying media

Mass media – which in general relates to all social-communication processes – seem to tacitly contain a possible answer to the question dealing with the causes for the current state of society, which have been labelled “post-modern”, “post-industrial”, “late modern” or “information(al)”, and in which the whole society dimension of communication, that is communication secured by mass media, plays a constitutive role. Max Weber, a German sociologist and historian, spoke in 1910 at the sociology congress about the necessity to study “press” and to constitute sociology of journalism and thus opened one of the key topics of media research: media as an important political and therefore a power phenomenon. In the course of the last century, the area of media studies became a discipline, which can seek, in the sphere of the special interest (and perhaps also find), the answers

1 This was, to a certain extent, included in the conclusions of the *Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring the Social Sciences* emphasizing the need of the integrated research programmes development. (Wallerstein et al. 1998)

2 The *media studies* fulfil the basic criterion of an independent scientific discipline, or dispose of the following three basic perspectives: a) *anthropological*, reflecting a relation of a human being to the world (and thus also to the communication technology) and to themselves (via communication technology), b) *cognitive*, which reflects a way of the science thinking systematization perceived as a system of testimonies, definitions and rules of their creation, and c) *social-material* specifying the place and the role of the given disciplines in society.

to some questions relating to the substance of the economic, political and cultural functioning of the modern world.

Even though we could search and find the roots of the proto-mediological reflection in the antiquity, it is not the aim of this paper to systemize the history of *thinking about the media*, but also to try to outline the basic inspiration sources of media studies and its key dilemmas, also with respect to the local history of *thinking about media*.³

We will therefore attempt to outline (1) the approaches to the interest subject of media studies (i.e. what is the actual subject of the studies) and (2) the strongest methodological and research traditions that meet within media studies and finally (3) to indicate new research areas and topics that study of media currently faces.

1.1. Subject of media studies

If we wave aside the irrelevant meanings of the term “medium” (chemical, spiritistic, etc.) and concentrate on those that somehow relate to the social communication, we still have to face a rather extensive and non-uniform area of the “communication means” from natural language and non-verbal codes to writing, telephone and for example email, newspapers, television and also film, theatre or fine art. The extent of media studies thus includes both historical reflection of the mass media effects and the study of the establishing media culture and its reception. That is why this discipline reflects (or rather should reflect) not only the development of the media communication from the *tertiary media* point of view (so called mass media enabling to address large groups of recipients from the centre – press, radio, television), but also the *primary media* role (natural language, non-verbal communication), *secondary* (by that we understand the technical means enabling us to get over the time and space barriers and facilitate the inter-personal communication – telephone, telegraph) and *quaternary* (so called network or digital media that combine the possibilities of all three types).

The field of media studies usually focuses on the area of tertiary media and is increasingly more interested in the quaternary media, too. This includes, however, not only the media

3 It is necessary to emphasize that the beginnings of the media thinking were in the First Republic Czechoslovakia on a good level and stemmed, as well as in case of other countries, where this reflection had originated (the United States, Germany, Great Britain), from the sociological and historical roots in particular. Domestic inter-war media studies thus stemmed particularly from the sociological knowledge influenced by Weber, Comte, Spencer, and possibly Masaryk. German inspirational impulses were particularly decisive. Max Weber, Emil Dovifat, Karl Bücher, Ferdinand Tönnies, Kurt Baschwitz, Hans von Eckardt, and Otto Groth are ranked amongst the personalities that entered the “*field of sociology and communication research*” by Horst Riemann (Riemann 1989). At the inception of thinking about media in the First Republic Czechoslovakia, there were also Arnošt Inocenc Bláha, Oscar Butter, and Emanuel Chalupný, all sociologists. What played a significant role was establishing the first specialized, and in current sense mediological, periodical “*Duch novin*” (*The News Spirit* with the subhead “*Journal for newspaper studies and care for journalism*”) was published as a monthly journal since 1928 and was run by Oskar Butter and Věnceslav Švihovský. Gradually, there was a “new discipline”, or perhaps a “newspaper science” (Zeitungswissenschaft). The “newspaper science” was perceived as an independent discipline, particularly as the *sociology and history* of the journalism perceived as a specific social and political phenomenon significant for the formation of the public opinion. The last significant establishment step for the development of thinking about media in the inter-war period was the foundation of *Free School of Political Disciplines* (1928), as there was, apart from the generally political department, a department of journalism, too. In the inter-war Czechoslovakia, this school became the first and only relevant journalistic training institution. After the World War II, media studies developed mainly in relation to the development of journalism at Charles University in Prague and Comenius University in Bratislava. The institutional framework of media studies was offered by the so-called theory of journalism, a discipline that was supposed to create an opposite to the “bourgeois” social science devoted to media. Independent scientific and research institutes engaging in media studies were established in Bratislava and Prague.

in the technical and productive sense, but also organizations that secure this production, the contents offered by these organizations, the social, political and economic conditions applying to the functioning of these organizations in which media operate (from the users' expectations to the legislative frames, in which the media operate, and further to economic power of the society they enter), and especially the potential consequences that the media operation has or could have.

Studying mass media currently represents a topically and methodologically heterogeneous field, where many approaches and disciplines meet and mutually influence each other. It is mainly due to two circumstances: (1) the fact that the "media topic" has moved into and is still in the visual field of various disciplines that define it in accordance with their own needs, approach it with their own methodological and analytical approaches and ask different research questions, usually incorporated in the context of other research; (2) the fact that mass media themselves and their status and role in the society has been changing quite substantially in the course of time and the demand to understand their actions appears in different (usually not very compatible) forms in the attitude of political elites, representatives of different disciplines as well as the general public.

This results in the fact that the field of studying the media (regardless of the fact whether it is perceived more narrowly as an independent discipline being called "media studies", "mass communication theory" or "mediology", or whether it is viewed as a thematically defined, opened unit, created by the outputs of different disciplines, ranging from history, political science and sociology to linguistics and semiotics or psychology and film science) is characterized by a high level of ease in relation to the interest subject and wide metodological/ empirical analysis register.

To a large extent, this situation is connected to three parallel processes leading to the formation of some "new disciplines" or their academic and departmental institutionalization in the second half of the last century. This related primarily to (1) increasing tension between the natural and social sciences, as well as tension (2) between (ideographically oriented) history and (nomothetically focused) social studies⁴ and finally to (3) so called "cultural turn" in social studies. This resulted in stronger thematic overlapping among the disciplines that led to the inception of firmly interdisciplinary focused disciplines, which also included the mass media amongst the others.

A number of terminological and methodological misunderstandings stem from the fact that media studies are of a widely inter-disciplinary character and include issues of both social sciences as well as humanities.⁵ Moreover, they cannot ignore the questions relating to the arrival of new communication technologies and focus more and more

4 History as an *idiographic discipline* (i.e. a branch of knowledge considering its mission to be the description of unrepeatable reality), and on the other hand, social sciences as *nomothetic disciplines* (i.e. disciplines endeavouring to reveal regularities of development and organization). In the area of media studies, the traditions of the idiographic and nomothetic thinking meet, especially due to the fact that this discipline is developmentally defined by a changing subject of its interest (media), above which both traditions meet and attempt to communicate with each other.

5 We proceed from the traditional classification of the sciences to *humanities* (literature, literature history, classical philology, philosophy, and history) which are, especially in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, strictly divided from *social sciences*. When studying humanistic disciplines, an important role is played by an emphasis to the historical dimension of the knowledge and particularly its conception as a cultivation or education. On the contrary, *social sciences*, i.e. sciences about human beings and society (such as sociology, psychology, or economy), emphasize the high level of quantification and exactness of the used methods. This level is, however, the highest with the third category – *science*, representing the sum of the natural and technical sciences.

on the issues of “socio-technical boundary” of modern communication, where the social, user experience meets the communication technologies.

Interdisciplinary character of media studies allows this discipline to consider a synthesis of knowledge from the social sciences and humanities and not to isolate from the findings of some technical disciplines (especially informatics). *In the most general level, media studies focus on description and analysis of the mediation process or functioning of complex mechanisms of idea systems transmission, in both diachronic and synchronic level. At the same time, the discipline should attempt to identify the unanticipated consequences of this socio-technical process.* (cf. Volek 2002).

“Mediation” is at the same time understood as a process in which the symbolic connects with the technical and its components include objects and their symbols, as well as individual activities, ideas and interconnected socio-technical networks. In this sense, media studies should attempt to reflect the social and technical character of the media communication, since mass media are not mere technologies, they are also socio-technical systems leading a double life as they bear two sets of meanings: those that are more or less intentionally constructed by their creators and those that are consequences of their potential openness in hardware, as well as software fields. In other words, they fulfil the intentions of their creators; on the other hand, they modify their original purpose in the contact with the social and technical environment. They thus function as material and symbolic objects. In this sense, we can discuss their double role, i.e. their role as technical means and social apparatus at the same time. The intersection of these functions differentiates the act of mediation from the mere data transmission.

1.2. Basic traditions in media research

In the most general level, one can distinguish a sociological tradition of media research that considers itself more as a “theory of mass / media communication”, possibly “mediology”; and a younger tradition relying on a certain fusion of selected social science and humanities (and then finding itself in the gravitational field of the “post-modern”, culturally oriented thinking), which tends to be perceived more as “media studies”. The current, generally accepted form of media studies stems from four basic research traditions (paradigms): *cognitive-empirical, critical-speculative, cultural, and communication-technology*. However, it will later be demonstrated that the stated traditions have been intensely influenced in the course of the last century of media reflection and it cannot therefore be said that one tradition has definitely replaced others. Only in certain phases of media reflection, some theoretical and research approaches appear as more important, so they could be subsequently replaced by a seemingly “dead” perspective that can react better to the socio-technical communication changes in the modern society.⁶

a) *The cognitive-empirical tradition*, closely connected to the development of the empirical sociological research, represents a research of printed and electronic media realized by a sociologist and social psychologist Paul Felix Lazarsfeld before the Second World War at New York Columbia University. The defining role was assigned to the interest

6 These theoretical and methodological changes in the course of media research can be quite well illustrated with the shift of the science interest from the “critically-speculative reflection” of the media ideologies to the “cultural perspective” partially “liberating” the recipient of the media contents. This perspective has been, however, gradually replaced by a “communication-technological” perspective, that bears some known features from the original “critical theory of media”.

in the empirical research focused especially on the effects of mass media, particularly in relation to the socio-political consequences of the media communication. The main focus of the above stated stream is not a “media criticism”, while it attempts to describe their activities and explain their reasons. The tradition of the empirical research represents an important direction of the media analysis and has contributed to the development of the media studies by a number of concepts of constitutive character. This includes investigation of mediated contents (tradition of the content analysis of news reporting or advertising), or searching for connections between media contents and other publicly thematized issues (the agenda-setting concept), or possibly the attempts to describe and explain the effects of media activities (concerning so-called media violence, for instance).

b) *The critical-speculative tradition*, for a change connected to the theoretical sociology, as well as history, stems from the above mentioned Weberian tradition of theorizing about society modernization, it is more a follow-up to the sociological thinking of Karl Marx and was processed from the 1930s to the level of a radical media criticism as an important factor of the expansion of the logic of the industrial modernity. The first generation of the Frankfurt School, such as Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, played the role of founders of this tradition. It was them who de facto laid the foundations of the critical theory of media as *ideologiekritik*. This stems from the fact that it is the ideologies communicated through media that adopt a central place in the process of socio-political reproduction of modern societies. Here, media are perceived as part of so-called cultural industry, or as producers of ideology (ideologies) serving to the power elite. One of the other lines of this media thinking is represented by a radical post-structuralist revision of its Marxist and particularly neo-Marxist foundations, as presented, for instance, by Jean Baudrillard (1983, 1987). The key impulse was brought by changes in communication technology, leading to the fact that the distinction between the object and its representation, the item and the idea are not longer valid. The revised critical theory of media reacts to this change by intensifying its attention to the symbolic change and mechanism of signification as a general principle of communication. This appears, in the new situation of media simulation and neo-reality, as a more suitable tool of the critical analysis.⁷ Further development of this tradition can be seen in the development of the critical political economy of media and in some other strongly critical approaches (from the moralizing criticism of Neil Postman to the breaking of the liberal myths in the works of Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman). The unique aspect of this conception lies particularly in the critical reflection of the symbiotic interconnection of the capital, technology, culture and everydayness.⁸

7 Baudrillard's radical revision goes a bit further and emphasizes that the media simulation does not mean a false representation, as in the case of ideology. If we are disappointed with a false representation, it is a diversion from the intact reality and there is a hope that this illusion can be distinguished from the reality. In such case, this represents a more malicious mechanism. It is not a misapplied reality, but removal of the difference between the real and false, the real and imaginary. The symbolic power thus does not have primarily ideological, but also informative character. The old ideologies strived for the extension in time and space, or aspired to the universality as a metanarration. On the contrary, the information compressed in time and space does not lay any claims to the universality, its reflection in time is somewhat difficult. The critical theory of media faces a difficult task in this sense: to reveal the dominance structures in the situation when no one dominates, nothing is dominated and there is no base for the principle of liberation from domination. Its traditional precondition or suspicion that somewhere “behind the scenes”, there is a hidden mover, is called by the general immanence into question. That is why some theoreticians think that we have to switch from the critique of ideology (ideologies) to the critique of information, or the process of its creation. This new variation of the critically-speculative perspective cannot take place in some privileged place out of the space, where the information contents are created. (Lash 2002)

8 This research tradition is directly followed by a perspective of critical political media economy and a structuralist theory of media, which apart from the Marxist and neo-Marxist inspirations also stems from the semiotics

c) *The cultural tradition* represents a theoretical and methodological turn that was brought by the first generation of the Birmingham School at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s. The Birmingham “cultural turn” refused the rather overexposed and therefore one-sided idea of *ideologiekritik*⁹ and came with the synthesis of basic foundations of the communication theory, rhetoric, semiology, sociology and psychology, attempting to create a model of communication process and its functioning in the social context. This approach of the Birmingham school has thus, to a certain extent, brought the social science and humanistic perspective, shifting the attention to the roles of media in the cultural processes, the procedures in constructing meaning, and how the media message adapt to the ideological and hegemonic cultural codes, or how they reproduce them.

From the methodological point of view, the qualitative approaches prevail in this perspective, as well as an attempt to analyze equally the text and the reception strategy of its recipient,¹⁰ or possibly to put emphasis on the independence of the recipient’s “semiotic power”, as optimistically considered by John Fiske (1987 and 1989), for instance. This approach, granting the power over the effect of the media (and thus de facto also the responsibility for media influence) to the hands of recipients, developed especially at the end of 1970s and in the following two decades, which means in the time of increasing pressure to deregulate broadcast media, which was particularly strong in Europe, and when the media sphere was pushed to give in to the consequences of the economic globalization.

The term “*media studies*” does not appear dominantly in the social sciences discourse until this perspective had been established. At the same time, it is true that the issue of media represents only one of the thematic, research fields when considering a wider project, so called cultural studies. In this “cultural perspective”, mass media are thus perceived more as an epiphenomenon of the modern society dynamics, rather than the initial movers of social reality.

d) In essence, this is how the “cultural” perspective differs principally from the *communication- technology tradition* of studying communication means as technologies determining the fundamental changes in the societal systems and patterns of communication

and Lacan’s psychoanalysis. The mentioned approaches reflect the media culture from distinctly inter-disciplinary positions and attempt to set the given issues into the context of social, economic and political circumstances of the period. At the same time, culture is perceived as a way of the ideological reproduction.

- 9 The Frankfurt critical theory of media gradually came under pressure of some facts which it failed to explain in a satisfactory way. Firstly, it was the fact that the cultural “superstructure” is not only a side product of the class relations on the basic level. Secondly, the symbolic reproduction of the status quo, as presented by popular culture products, does not have to be controlled by a power elite, but is rather a hegemonic process of an agreement creation, as described by Gramsci and Althusser. Thirdly, it is obvious that hegemonic meanings do not work uniformly, but enable an alternative or opposing reading.
- 10 The synthetic form of the mentioned conception is supported by its basic components. It accepted an idea of the classical *effect theory* that the mass communication is a structuralized activity and the institutions producing media knowledge have a power to shape media agenda or to define the basic topics within its framework. At the same time, it refused the deterministic idea that mass media have an ability to influence an individual through direct effects and thus achieve the required behaviour. The theory of “*use and gratification*”, raising the issue of so-called active audience, serves as the second source. However, certain influence has also been exercised by the *interpretative and normative* media theory, which focuses on the way the reactions and interpretations of the audience are structured beyond the individual psychology border. Last but not least, we can identify a *semiological perspective* of the critical reflection in the mentioned model, which focuses on the fact how the meanings are produced in the process of communication. In other words, the conception of the atomized and fully passive audience was, in this perspective, replaced by a structure consisting of a number of sub-cultural formations or group of individuals. They achieve a more autonomous position.

behaviour of individuals. At their inception, there were Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, representatives of the “Toronto Communication School”. In the case of the Canadian theoreticians, one cannot speak about building the knowledge of media in a systematic way, or developing the methodology of media studies, either. In fact, McLuhan was primarily interested in the cultural changes of western civilizations, thus playing a role of a source of inspiration for a number of disciplines.¹¹

His approach was always based more on the poetic method of intellectual collage rather than providing a systematic analysis. McLuhan characterized his own role in the most precise way when, maintaining his typical style, he identified himself as “an explorer rather than an explainer”. The development of this tradition is characterized by shifting the interest from the research into individual communication technologies effects to the global or planetary social consequences. The development of such reflection has a number of methodological foundations from purely philosophical and speculative, over historical (especially in case of Innis) and radically critical ones, to the empirical analysis of socio-technical border, as may be encountered, for instance, in the institutions focusing on developing and modelling the functions of new communication technologies (for example at MIT).

At the same time, it must be pointed out that within the framework of the “critical”, “cultural”, and “technological” traditions of thinking about media, it is the historic perspective of studying “*media history*” that represents its crucial component. Studying socialised means of communication as an aspect of society development falls within the oldest traditions of studying media in general. Even though this is perceived more as a historiographic “topic” in the Czech environment, as well as abroad (and it is frequently perceived as such even today), it would be a mistake to ignore it. It is not a coincidence that the history of media (or originally the history of the press and journalism) became one of the supporting pillars of media studies. (Curran 2004 and Prokop 2005) With respect to studying media, the history of media represents a unifying and, to some extent, a universal perspective, which is a position that has been opening to media studies in a more real way. The description and analysis of media communication and its social effects thus always include, to a certain extent, the historical comparison or different *media sphere* types (Debray 1994) as a matrix of cultural situation or, more precisely, as reflections of data transmission conditions that are significantly determined by the level of communication technology of the given culture.

Even though it is obvious that media studies have been through various changes in scientific interest, passing over different theoretical and methodological accents, the above stated media studies traditions have always remained relevant. Their foundations are thus included selectively within the framework of the crucial part of the mediological reflection focused on three key parts of media studies.

- a) Mechanisms of creating media contents as mass representations
- b) Behaviour of media audience (media audiences) and its (their) reception strategies
- c) The role of media as economic and political institutions

These traditional topics, constituting the focus of media studies, actually create the core of the discipline that, as mentioned at the beginning, is forced to cope with the quickly

11 Not even within the framework of this research tradition, one cannot come across the term “media studies”, but rather “communication”, “mass communication” or “mass media”.

changing interest subject, i.e. the changes of the individual media and their social status. As this discipline began to establish – said with some simplification – as a reply to the dramatic development of the press and journalism and later to the rise of broadcast media, it has been recently forced to react to the communication and technology change of late modern societies. This model can be used as an example to demonstrate further in the text how media studies theme the subject of its interest in its double – technical and social – existence. Communication changes relating to the use of digital data processing and telecommunication transmissions, i.e. with the arrival of the information communication technology (ICT), they deserve careful attention themselves, as they change the character of a number of politically and socially important processes from the consumption organization to the electoral behaviour. And not only that, since process digitalization is also connected to the change of the relation to communication, which brings two new mutually connected social and political phenomena:

a) *New communication technology* that perceives the technologization of social communication as a new social panacea. In this respect, the questions concerning the character of late modern community appear as ever more intensive. It is obvious that an important part of the social interactions is realized through communication and information technology, whose logic is based on the instrumental rationality, commodification and individualization of social interactions. The problematic and disputable position of such state is however less visible, compared to the pre-information age, for it is concealed by the fusion of technological rationality and mythologized popular culture.¹² Kroker and Weinstein (2001) warn, in the given circumstances, of incoming cyber-authoritarianism and speak of forming a new “virtual class” relying on the philosophy of technological liberalism and technocratic rationalism. The virtual class, however, does not worship any coherent ideology of virtualization: it is characterized only by more or less non-critical expectations connected to the possibilities of new ICT. A substantial change lies in the fact that the social participants legitimize themselves on an information technology basis,¹³ referring to the communication technology as the good itself and open new area for new “digital pioneers” or interonauts (Virilio 2004), lost in information networks

12 The mentioned “communication ideology” is saturated particularly by the following set of the social trends that are at the same time its products:

- 1) A penetrative increase of simulated, spectacular information whose consumption is realized in the virtual environment;
- 2) An increasing role of the cultural narcissism and exhibitionism / voyeur style of presentation;
- 3) An ever more intensive surveillance of inter-personal interactions, which is strengthened by the “awareness of communication realized under supervision”;
- 4) Information commodification, which boosts the increase of the primary and secondary information inequality;
- 5) “Electronic isolationism” stemming from the scepticism to dominant mass media and supported by quantitative increase of so-called specialized communication channels or small media;
- 6) Narrowing the public space, in which information would be shared between the individuals and the groups with different value orientation (Volek, 2004).

13 Individuals (as recipients) are becoming a part of the “information construction” process, or they are able to construct (and destroy) the virtual worlds that correspond (or do not suit) their needs, taste and naturally also their value orientation. It is important that the logic of this construction / destruction is not always an expression of firmly established ideological positions, systems or doctrines, but rather a partial non-ideological criticism, which often provides its actors only with an individual, game-like satisfaction or gratification. For instance, the “communication tactics” of so-called hackers, or so-called cyber-terrorism, is in a number of cases quite distant from the aimed fulfilment of the programme thesis in the firmly defined ideological system.

and worshiping digital logics, which brings along not only a totalitarian elements of super-panopticon, but also seeds of social exclusion mechanisms and electronic isolationism. (Volek 2002)

b) *New power – communication strategies*

The new ICT character is determined primarily by a different information construction principle, which leads to the fact that we do not experience various cultural forms as transcendental representations, but as immanent objects, as technologies. Thus, there is a new type of *information power*, whose character is not dualistic, as with commodification logic, but is characterized by *information immanence*, which gradually dissolves seemingly inseparable dichotomy of exchange/utility value, replacing it with an immanent sphere of network elements/participants: human and technical, cultural and material objects that were detached from their social systems. (Castells 1996 and Lash 2002) In the virtual techno-culture, the entire knowledge is stored in databases in re-combinable form of information/goods. This transformation of knowledge into information relieves the knowledge from its relations to history, or live experience.¹⁴ This results in the state, when the discursive power, as described for example by Foucault (1977, 1978), retreats to the *information power*, which, compared to the discourse, does not need any legitimate arguments, but works with immediate “communication violence”.

2. Media studies in the late modern situation

Media studies have to attempt to process and explain the mentioned socio-technological communication change. This means not to succumb even to the symbolic dictate of the communication techno-optimism, as well as not to get to the “apocalyptic” regime thinking. In a certain way, it is a “maturity exam” of the whole discipline. It is the first time that media studies, as a fully developed and established discipline, have experienced social communication change probably of an essential importance. It will depend on the discipline and its representatives how they will reflect the experienced changes and incorporate them into the existing media knowledge and the society and development of their mutual interaction. (cf. Benson 2004, Carey 2005) At the same time, the discipline will undoubtedly seek an answer to the question whether this socio-technical change can be explained with the help of the tools offered by the existing research traditions. Within the framework of dealing with this task, it will be necessary to search for the answers to two key questions:

- a) Does the arrival of new ICT mean a real, significant social change or is it only extension of the old industrial capitalism principles?
- b) Can we fully understand and critically reflect this socio-technical, communication change using the tools of the traditional critical theory of media stemming from the *ideologiekritik*, or does it need to be replaced or modified in such a way that it could reflect the so-called information logic of the new network media?

14 With a certain exaggeration, it may be said that this action is fully contradictory to the one accompanying the arrival of a new medium: the film. The first visitors of the film performances were afraid of the train that seemingly arrived on the screen, believing that the train is real. Current users of the ICT do not consider the reality / non-reality of the communication content as a problem: everything that is at a disposal in the technological environment is real.

2.1. New research topics

Media studies thus face a task of reflecting socio-technical processes connected to the arrival of new information and communication technologies or more generally, the global techno-capitalism that produces new forms of culture and its daily reception. The following trends we consider as particularly important:

a) An intensive infiltration of new communication and information technology types to the every day life of the general population and quickly increasing skills and abilities of the audience to use this technology;

b) Progressing globalization and at the same time, fragmentarization of the media content production on one side and individualization of readers or audience experiences on the other side;

c) Melting the borders between the media contents consumers and creators, which turns the previously passive audiences into the actors of the media spectacle.

The above mentioned socio-technical processes push media studies to reflect the fact that the on-going media communication fragmentation and the fast domestication of the new interactive information technologies removes the symbolic power of the traditional ideological role and makes it into the *information power*. On the other hand, media studies should not ignore the importance of the ideological legitimization functions of the cultural industries, or commodification mechanisms and reification of the cultural production, as well as the social interactions. In this sense, some findings of critical political economy remain inspirational and show how closely and inseparably the information power is connected to the economic one. In a way, it is the responsibility of media studies to perceive the communication processes as a whole and thus not to overlook the “traditional” media and analyse the changes of the whole media communication environment.

There are several basic research topics and questions for media studies that can be generalized to the following issue-related groups:

I. How is the progressing commodification of the media contents, and at the same time the ongoing rationalization and technologization of the production, changing both social-political and economic functions of the media?

- To what extent is the current character of the political communication influenced by the increasing release of the media production and distribution from the structures of the national state?
- How does the growing penetration of the globalized media contents influence the processes of constructing political and cultural identities of their recipients?
- What is the impact of the increasing intensity of the communication flow and its pluralization and fragmentarization into (dis)integrative processes within current Western societies?
- To what extent do the mechanisms of “information simulation”, spectaclization and virtualization strengthen the escape from the everyday social and cultural reality and what is their contribution to the attenuation of their perceived validity?
- What is the contribution of the new ICT to the increase in indirect social interactions?
- How do the new ICT and “traditional” technologies influence each other? That is, how independent is the logic and grammar of the “content” construction offered in the ICT environment, or to what extent does it differ from the principles used in “traditional media”?

II. How does the uneven approach to ICT influence the level of social and political citizen participation?

- What are the effects of the primary (vertical) information inequality? Does it lead to the strengthening of information poverty in certain social groups, or to what extent does it support the process of dualization in late modern societies?
- What is the intensity and consequences of information and communication inequality in the international (regional or global) scale?
- How are the traditional political communication categories transformed (if at all) into the environment created by ICT?

III. How does the arrival of new ICT influence the behaviour of media audience?

- To what extent does the character of media consumers' reception strategies change in relation to the arrival of interactive communication technologies?
- How does the use of new communication and information technologies as tools of new power forms (as well as possible sources of status quo subversion) change?

IV. Media studies and their role in the framework of the nation state

Apart from the global discipline challenges, media studies have their own special national **topics and tasks** and their processing “belongs” particularly to other social science disciplines. The following topics and questions are particularly in question:

- What was the real role of media between 1938 and 1989?
- How did media contribute to the transformation processes, especially the changes of 1989–1992?
- What was the progress, conditions and consequences of Czech media transformation at that time?
- What are the economic and political parameters of the incorporation of Czech media into the economic globalization process, technological convergence and content hybridization?
- How and with what effects (internal and external) have Czech media been incorporated to the structures of European or global media industry after 1989?
- What are the social role changes of the journalists as professional communicators, particularly in the context of the above mentioned communication technology changes and general commercialization of media?

The above mentioned selection of research topics does not lay claims to include all topical groups relevant to the media research in the late modern situation. It rather attempts to highlight all important problem areas. It is based on the assumption that *the media behaviour, or the production system, distribution and reception of the media contents is, in principle, determined by the relations among the state, economy, everyday social practices and dominant communication/information technologies*. In other words, studying media should remain inseparably connected to research into society, economy and politics.

4. Conclusion

Even though the extent of media studies – as already suggested – is significantly larger and does not and will not limit itself only to the reflection of the changes connected to the arrival of ICT, some of the speculations regarding these changes can help to sketch in the idea about questions that media studies face.

A fresh new challenge currently facing the discipline regards the symbolic effects of the arrival and use of new communication technologies, given the environment of rather dynamic intersection of two universes: the world of the communication technologies and the world of everyday cultural practices. At the heart of the interest, there should therefore be the *act of mediation*, as a form of socio-technical behaviour, which contributes to the production of new political behaviour and the structuralization of social systems that are created inevitably in relation to the key information and communication innovation in late modern societies. The suggested process of socio-technical structuralization leads to the fact that the technology and culture dualism gradually falls apart into the immanent sphere of global information order. What was previously considered as representative culture of narration, discourse and picture, largely accepted by consumers in a dualistic relation, has now become *technoculture*. In this context, the deeply enrooted dualism of media studies is becoming unsustainable, since it leads to demonizing new information and communication technologies, and on the other hand, to non-critical adoration of so-called intelligent technologies. Media studies have to attempt to overcome this traditional clash between techno-optimists and techno-sceptics. It should thus try to connect *praxis* as material history and *techné* as systematic knowledge. In our opinion, the discipline is, to some extent, predetermined to perform this task largely due to its multi-disciplinary character, which refuses any strict academic division, or any idea of "fortified" fields of study and scientific disciplines bitterly guarding their own scientific niche. In this sense, media studies inevitably find their intellectual heritage in the legacy of *Frankfurt, Toronto and Birmingham Schools*, which, in essence, attempted to break through the discipline and methodological boundaries of individual social and humanistic disciplines.

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