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THE TIMID GIANT: THE EARLY DAYS OF CZECHOSLOVAK TELEVISION

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the early days of television in Czechoslovakia (from the first experiments, through trail broadcasting, to the beginning of the 1960s) from the perspective of the meanings attributed to it in the press and in the television's documents. The example of Czechoslovakia in the 1950s provides one with a special opportunity to have a look at the ways the new medium was being presented to a particular socialist society and at the attempts to define it and incorporate it into the existing cultural model. The objective of the article is to reflect on the role attributed to the new medium, from the perspective of the social reality's division into the public and private spheres through the reconstruction of the TV and press document's image of television. The reconstruction allowed for the identification and description of the essential metaphors and phrases used in the dominant discourse in order to describe the new medium and thus integrate it in the socialist reality.

Keywords: Television in Czechoslovakia ▪ television and communist regime ▪ socialist society ▪ censorship

1. INTRODUCTION

Marshall McLuhan borrowed the almost poetic term for the new medium from Edith Efron's article, which appeared in the *TV Guide* in 1963 (McLuhan, 1991, p. 286). Though the term "timid giant" was coined when television was flourishing in the United States (McLuhan writes about the 1950s), it serves as the perfect description for the early days of the new media in general, before the genres and the means of expression took shape, before people were fully aware of how great of an impact on social and political life television would have and of the fundamental way in which it would change the sphere of communication by replacing the word with the image (Sartori, 2007, p. 21).

The short period when it was still a "timid giant", a medium just coming into existence and presented to the viewers somewhat shyly is a highly interesting period in the history of television. It is the time when television forced its way between

the public and private spheres, undermining the traditional division and changing everyday habits. While Joshua Meyrowitz's claim that the development of electronic media blurs the line between the private and the public, making it possible for the outside world to barge into the home, may already be cliché (Halawa, 2006, p. 47), the strategies of public sphere appropriating the private spheres and the process of their interaction, especially in the early days of the new medium, are not obvious.

For the purposes of this text, let us (rather broadly) assume that this stage of the new medium's development lasted from the end of the experiments with television and the start of test broadcasting, on the 1 May 1953, until September 1962, when television secured a permanent place in the social structure. This is when the number of registered subscribers reached one million.¹ According to Martin Štoll, who periodizes the development of the Czechoslovak television in a similar manner, the Czechoslovak television nation was born at this time (Štoll, 2011).² In a way, it only extended its influence and strengthened its significance from then on.

The biopolitics of living space remains the focus of every authority (Foucault, 2011). However, during the communist era it was under special supervision: "The traditional family and the sphere of privacy and intimacy from the beginning of the design of the socialist future have emerged as spaces so independent and uncontrollable that they need to be given increased ideological attention" (Hanáková, 2011, p. 217). In the 1950s, there was a consistent politicization of the private sphere (Bren, 2013, p. 304) and an attempt to limit it as much as possible as undesirable and invisible (Bren, 2013, p. 302). In the 1950s, television entered this ideologically shaped space. A medium which, like radio, yet in an even more invasive way, deepens the interpenetration of the private and public spheres. It is a representative of the public sphere with its ideological message, placed in the very centre of the private sphere.

Following this, I am interested in the answer to the question of how was television presented to its viewers in official documents and press (which at that time were under strict control of the ruling communist party) in the context of attempts to limit the private sphere in favour of the public sphere in the ideology of the 1950s in communist Czechoslovakia. What terms were used to describe the new medium and what role was assigned to it in the fragile space between privacy and the public sphere?

The answer to the above questions supplements the history of the beginnings of Czechoslovak television, which Martin Štoll described so meticulously in his works (2011, 2019). It introduces new threads to the existing, primarily historical, reflection over media studies (Cysařová, 2002; Köpplová, et al., 2003; Končelík et al., 2010; Bednařík et al., 2011), so far not touched by researchers, and above all a new perspective.

1 N/a, Prehistorie. <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/vse-o-ct/historie/ceskoslovenska-televize/prehistorie/>. 2 March 2019. Martin Štoll gives the year 1961 (Štoll, 2011, p.178).

2 In this periodization, one can distinguish also the stage of experimental broadcasting, which lasted from the 1 May 1953 to the 25 February 1954, i.e. the beginning of permanent broadcasting.

It captures this period from the point of view of changes in communication, from the perspective of attempts to define a new medium (television) in relation to the structures of the dominating cultural order.

The analysis of the source material enabled to abstract metaphors and terms needed to introduce a new medium into the existing political and media discourse. Consequently, the study revealed specific tensions between the established structures and a new phenomenon forcing its way through the socialist reality. As a result, the article shows that the dominant discourse, despite having full power over the presented meanings, must also take into account the character of television and the economic and political situation in constructing the meanings attributed to the new medium. The shaping of meanings by the dominant discourse is therefore not arbitrary and unlimited even if it seems that it controls the entire communication process. In this case, the beginning of television signal broadcasting is a particularly interesting period of time, because it is then when television was shaped not only as a new medium in the reality of socialist Czechoslovakia, but also as an institution.

2. METHOD

The subject of this article is a reflection on the beginnings of television broadcasting in the socialist reality of Czechoslovakia in the first half of the fifties. In my considerations, I wanted to present how the dominant discourse coped with introducing a new medium (television) into the existing meaning structures, while also struggling with technical and economic difficulties related to the creation of television and television broadcasting. I need to highlight here that the state of art has been included in the main considerations because I make use of the scientific achievements of this area in two ways. Not only do I refer to the results of previous studies, but I also use them (Štoll's work in particular) as an important complement to the presented theses.

The materials which I analysed were collected during five two-week library queries at the National Library in Prague, Olomouc Research Library, Archives and Programme Funds of Czech Television (APF ČT) during the period 2015-2019. In the end, I analysed 89 press titles from years 1953-1960, in which the word "televise" appeared 6758 times, in 576 press articles and over a thousand various documents from the archives of Czech Television, in particular minutes of meetings of the management of Czechoslovak Television and weekly reports prepared for the Minister of Culture and the management of Czechoslovak Radio.

The analysis reflected in this paper was carried out with the help of thematic coding of particular source materials (see the list of cited sources), with the aim to extract the most important categories (semantic units). Coding is a manner of indexing or categorising the text in order to establish a framework of thematic ideas about it. This form of retrieval is a very useful manner of managing or organising the data and enables the researcher to examine the data in a structured way (Gibbs, 2007,

p. 39). The codes of meaning derive directly from the texts and are also used as titles of subchapters in the following text (in this case basic codes serve as overriding thematic units):

- *Like a theatre;*
- *Like a child;*
- *For everyone;*
- *For every home;*
- *For the socialist masses.*

This method (coding) allows for the treatment of all texts as a comprehensive narrative (discursive formations; see Foucault, 1977, p. 56ff) focused on the central subject of the study: the beginnings of Czechoslovak television. Subsequently, the descriptive analysis seeking patterns and regularities derived from the established codes was replaced by the theoretical analysis concentrated on relations among particular components (codes) (Gibbs, 2007, p. 39ff). Adopting this perspective allowed me to treat all documents as an overall narrative, in which the context (time of origin, the nature of the documents) was considered at the stage of coding. This solution meant that all the used codes were derived directly from the texts themselves in which they were established, referring to the described precise method of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss rooted in a qualitative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

In the introduced context, there are no grounds for speaking about the resistance strategies against the dominant discourse in a manner the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and its representatives did (e. g. Willis, 1977; Hoggart, 1999; Hall, 2005). We may only speak about the confrontation or negotiation and the strategies for integrating a new element (i.e. television) into the reality. A strategy which is precisely reflected in the said metaphors and phrases and consists primarily of attempting to define television as such for it to fit the structures of the dominating cultural order. In consequence, we are dealing with a perspective which allows the understanding of the nuances of cultural changes via the observation and analysis of the transforming situation of communication.

3. TIMID GIANT IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

When in December 1952 the Tesla Strašnice factory provided the president of Czechoslovakia, Klement Gottwald, with the first television set which was mass produced (Tesla 4001), it could be perceived as nothing more than a piece of furniture, as the TV signal was not being transmitted yet. In fact, Klement Gottwald died on 14 March 1953, before the transmission even began (Köpplová et al., 2003, p. 192).

The first public presentation of television took place on the 15 May 1948, during the First International Radio Exposition (Mezinárodní Výstava Rozhlasu – MEVRO).³

³ Of course, earlier experiments with television could not do without an audience. Television was presented during various meetings, lectures, talks and shows for the press. As early as in 1947, the team working on television in

A group of scientists from the Military Technical Institute (Vojenský technický ústav), who had been working on the new medium since 1945, showed the audience a transmission from two recording cameras. One was located at the street intersection, so that people could see on the screen what was actually happening in the studio. The other was put in an improvised television studio. Crowds of people were able to admire the new medium for an hour three times a day.

In July of that year, during the eleventh Sokol Festival in Prague (4-8 July 1948), its citizens saw the images from three cameras set up on the Strahovský Stadium (two on the field, one on the roof of the main stand) on twenty-five television sets placed in public places (including the office of *Rudé Právo*, the main Communist newspaper). Though the broadcast became highly popular (tens of thousands of people saw it over the course of five days), the development of television in Czechoslovakia stopped (because many televisions experts were moved to military units; see Štoll, 2011, p. 75-110 for more details), and it was not until the early 1950s that it picked up again (Bednařík et al., 2011, p. 271). It reached the high point in January 1953, when Karel Kohout (executive producer at Barrandow Studios) was appointed programme director of the new television studio in the Czechoslovakian radio by the Minister of Information and Education, Václav Kopecký. A small dancing hall in the Prague's Burger Hall (Měšťanská beseda) was adapted to be a television studio. Regular broadcasting of the still experimental programme (it remained experimental until the 25 February 1954) began – not by accident – on the 1 May 1953. The official name of the station was Czechoslovak Radio – Television Studio Prague (Československý rozhlas – Tevisní studio Praha).⁴

3.1. Like a theatre

As a side note, television used radio (and theatre) genres at first, before it created its own. At the beginnings, television was understood to be a radio with added visuals. As Martin Štoll writes in his book “Television and Totalitarianism in Czechoslovakia: from the First Democratic Republic to the Fall of Communism”, which explores the technical side of television's development in depth: “Television was merely a technical curiosity on the flourishing radio market to which nobody ascribed much importance” (Štoll, 2019, p. 34). Therefore, it naturally (and not merely administratively) constituted as a part of the radio.⁵ In its early days the radio drew on writing. The first Czechoslovak radio announcer Adolf Dobrovolný would read out the news from

Tanvald managed to make a camera, a transmitter and a receiver. They tested the devices by transmitting image from their laboratory to a receiver placed in the U Müllerů Inn. Thus, the first post-war viewers of Czechoslovakian television were the frequent visitors of one of the inns in Tanvald (Štoll, 2011, p. 89).

4 Administratively, television was a part of the radio from the beginning; the separation occurred in 1959.

5 As Martin Štoll notes, in the first months care was taken to broadcast a variety of programmes. The goal was to find something that would best fulfill the ambitions of the makers, the tastes of the viewers and the needs of the authorities. (Štoll, 2011, p. 147)

newspapers bought on the way to work. In the case of television, we face, at first, the dictate of the radio and the theatre. At least to a considerable extent.

The documents promoting television prepared in November 1952 by the Institute of Radio Technology (Ústav rozhlasové techniky) also used the metaphors of theatre:

We are building a theatre, in which the stage is separated from the audience not only by a curtain and a space for the orchestra. A theatre, to which the viewer does not have to come, and yet he is a spectator, a theatre that is not really a theatre, cinema or radio, but nevertheless combines these modern cultural means – we are building a Czechoslovak television (Štoll, 2011, p. 109).

The press also used the metaphor of theatre to describe the new medium, as it presented television as theatre (or cinema or the opera) transferred to households. For instance, Iva Sedláčková and Rudolf Faulkner write in the magazine *Věda a technika mládeži* (1954, p. 300): “Moreover, we must realize that television, this theatre for tens of thousands of viewers is a new art.” Thus, the change of the public place into the private, personal one is the essence of this metaphor.

In the first stage of broadcasting, plays were broadcasted very frequently, and until 1956, from 7:00 to 7:30 PM, one could look at a sign which read “You are listening to radio news” (“Posloucháte rozhlasové noviny”) and listen to the radio signal coming out of the TV. This was the first news programme in Czechoslovakia.

3.2. Like a child

Official press materials treated the issues above as obviously transient, as their occurrence was to be detached from television creators and a natural stage of development of the television medium, associated with the progress of the socialist state, though completely independent. Press descriptions from the beginnings of the Czechoslovak television use the metaphor of the child in order to emphasise that all the difficulties result not from the state’s shortcomings, but they are a physiological consequence of a normal development that should only pass with time. Jiří Macků writes in *Květy* magazine (Macků 1953, p. 8) that, “After more than six months of experimental broadcasting, our television seeks to grow out of its childish shoes.” In the same magazine, more than six months later, František Janura notices that, “Childhood diseases are clearly visible at the beginnings of our television” (Janura, 1954b, p. 12). The metaphor of the child seems to be highly functional, as it refers to universal experience. Even if one does not have children, one undoubtedly knows about what a child must experience certain diseases to gain immunity against them.

After all, even the programme director of the new television studio in the Czechoslovak radio, Karel Kohout, used this metaphor during the press conference on 15 April 1954, in the central television studio, with the management of the

Czechoslovak Television, the members of the commission for the propagation of Czechoslovak Television, and invited journalists:

It is a very young child that needs help and asks comrades journalists – from 1 to 7 May of this year – to gradually publish in their articles in their magazines all that may help in the propagation of the Czechoslovakian television” (Propagace televise, 1954, 15 April, p. 10.).

For the record, we should add that Karel Kohout stated clearly during the same conference that, “it was decided that all articles concerning television should go through the propaganda commission, as it is necessary that these articles at this period of time are coordinated in such a way so that no early, false, and wrong information reach the general public” (Propagace televise, 1954, April, p. 7). Obviously, this means not only strict television’s control over the content of press articles but also a direct cooperation between television authorities and journalists. Hence, we may say that the image of television shaped at that time in the press was negotiated between and agreed upon in the circles of the television management and journalists. It should be remembered, however, that both the television administration and the press remained under the strict control of the Communist authorities of Czechoslovakia.

Let us return, however, to the first year of broadcasting in Czechoslovakia. The beginning was incredibly difficult. The introduction of television in the new space was mostly associated with various technical difficulties. First, the introduction occurred in the sphere of television programmes’ production. The first television cameras and receivers arrived, as the magazine *Československý voják* reported in October of 1953, only three weeks before the beginning of experimental broadcasting. More than two hundred wooden barrels and nine hundred large chests with the inscription “Teleprijomnik T-2 Leningrad” were reloaded in Čierna nad Tisou to the train headed straight to Prague (Jandík, 1953, p. 20). At that time, the Czechoslovak industry was unable to meet the needs of this new medium (especially in the field of television signal production technology) and, to a large extent, it had to use the achievements of Soviet engineers (Štoll, 2015 p. 56).

The recording of television programmes also posed various difficulties, especially associated with the inexperience of television employees. As stated by Martin Štoll, television staff experimented with genres, footage and broadcasting techniques. “In the 1950s, the screenwriters and other employers engaged in the programme began to explore the expressive and organisational possibilities of the new medium employing all sorts of available technological innovations” (Štoll, 2019, p. 137). This period is described by Štoll as the age of television experimentation. In July 1954, in an article which summed the first year of television broadcasting, František Janura mentions a few related anecdotes. Among others, Janura describes a situation when one of the technical workers borrowed office equipment for a scene never knowing it belonged to the president of the television (Janura, 1954b, p. 12). In the 1950s, problems were

never serious, as they were instantly solved only to appear as anecdotes, which one could laugh at in less than a year: “This is why there appeared situations that today make television employees laugh. But it was no laughing matter when it happened” (Janura, 1954b, p. 12). In the press image of the beginnings of television, complications always appeared as temporary challenges to undertake immediate actions and fix imperfections. Jan Hruška fittingly pointed out:

Our television became a reality – and it could become a reality – under conditions of the economic growth of the people’s democracy. When creating television, we used only our own products; our industry in times of the first Gottwald’s five-year-plan grew and developed its production to such an extent that we could produce all the equipment necessary from metallurgy, glassmaking, engineering and other branches of industry (1953, p. 104).

Obviously, the reality was different. Problems were not temporary at all and – without any doubt – the television management had nothing to laugh about when writing their weekly reports to the Ministry of Culture and the president of the Czechoslovak Radio, to which television belonged at the beginning⁶. Almost every other description of programmes has a note attached about the technical problems during recording. The report from 3 – 9 August 1953 presents an example of this:

A technical failure occurred just before the beginning of Saturday broadcasting. The initial information text required changes. Due to a misunderstanding between the technicians and the director, the same information appeared twice, i.e. “Here is the central television studio Prague” („Týdenní hlášení” 1953, 3-9 August, p. 4).

After more than a year, little changed in this respect. In the report for 26 September – 1 October 1953, we read: “During broadcasting, there occurred small technical problems: taking out of the negative, camera failure for some time, and the soundman did not use the gong during the ending”. (“Týdenní hlášení”, 1954, 3-9 August, p. 3)

One should not, of course, forget about the technical imperfections of the new medium, which certainly contributed to its decreasing popularity. At the beginning, the signal could be received only in Prague and within a 30 km radius. In addition, there was little to offer. In the first months, the broadcasting amounted to less than four hours over three days each week (two days in the summer) (Bednařík et al., 2011, p. 271). The reach of the Czechoslovak Television’s reception became in 1953 and 1954 one of the main motifs of press articles about the new medium. Although *Květy* magazine published in 1954 an aphorism by Jiří R. Pick, entitled “Television”, which read:

⁶ During this period, Czechoslovak Television fell under the control of Czechoslovak Radio. The two institutions ultimately split on 1 October 1959 (Štoll, 2019, p. 151).

“You say it’s progress? Oh please, you can’t even see me 150 km from Prague” (Pick, 1954, p. 13), the authors most frequently bragged that reality significantly exceeded expectations and one can receive television signal even on the Sněžka Mountain⁷, or in many different and surprising places:

The expected reach is from forty to fifty kilometres away from the Prague broadcasting station, situated on the Petřín Lookout Tower. However, the television signal was received in far more distant places like Plzeň, Karlovy Vary, and even on Sněžka ((Práce), 1953, p. 6).

This short reach was explained with technical differences between the transmission of television and radio waves (Brand 1953, p. 6; Macků 1953, p. 9; (Práce) 1953, p. 6). Therefore, extending the coverage of the television signal as fast as possible became one of the most important tasks for the nearest future of the Czechoslovak television’s development. Together with the spirit of the socialist propaganda, the task of “passing difficulties” was reshaped into a challenge ready to be conquered, tasks to be fulfilled in the nearest future, and objectives soon to be accomplished. The magazine *Československý voják* lists among the four main objectives of Czechoslovak television the extension of its signal reach (Jandík, 1953, p. 22).

3.3. For everyone

However, so as to return to the course of argument, access to television sets also undoubtedly constituted a “childhood disease” of the beginning of the Czechoslovak television. By December 1953, only five hundred TV sets had been registered. The TV set sales were so low that on the 1 December 1953, the party organisation at the Wholesale with Household Products (Velkoobchod s potřebami pro domácnost) demanded that the government stopped production at the Tesla factory, as there was enough merchandise in the warehouses for about the next ten years (Köpplová et al., p. 195). It seems that to a large extent, the new medium was not popular due to the high cost of TV sets. During this period, as Martin Štoll noted, the medium’s factual reach was quite small and the television sets were still too expensive for the average household in Czechoslovakia: “People could not afford to buy expensive television sets anyway; and [...] there was nothing to broadcast (Štoll, 2019, p. 63). The Tesla 4001 TV set cost Kčs 4,000, while the average salary was about Kčs 1,000. Moreover, the monetary reform from June 1953 considerably diminished the Czechoslovak citizens’ potential for consumption.

But more importantly, TV could be watched in public places, such as cafes, community centres, worker’s cultural centres, etc., where it was so-called “TV cinema” (“televizní kino”). And the people met to watch television – large groups of neighbours

⁷ The highest point in the Czech Republic (1,603.3 metres/5,260 ft).

met in homes, where the hosts could afford a TV set earlier than others. Paradoxically, the birth of television was closely tied with the public sphere. In fact, the television was presented as something public from the beginning. Admittedly, mainly for technical reasons, there were few sets and the range of the signal was still limited.

Vlasta magazine offers an interesting example of placing television sets in public places. The description of the activity of the agitation point no. 314 begins with a history of two boys who come to the point's office and ask whether there is television already. Even though the answer is negative, they are assured that they soon will be able to watch television (Maříková, 1954, p. 6). On the one hand, this article pays attention to the clear need to watch television and, on the other hand, it includes the new medium in the sphere of a public institution's functioning.

A similar tone appears in an appeal with the meaningful title, *Nový pomocník hledá své přátele!* (A New Helper Seeks its Friends!) published in the instructional magazine *Vedoucí pionýrů*, intended for leaders of pioneer organizations⁸ and employees of afterschool education. The author signed as “-stc-” not only persuades that television can broaden awareness (meaning the socialist awareness) but also further indicates the methods for obtaining funds for having a television set in each Pioneer House by recalling the example of students and pioneers from Jindřichův Hradec, who announced a gathering of recyclable bottles for this goal, achieved in but a couple of days (-stc-, 1954, p. 17).

3.4. For every home

Similarly, in addition to other problems with broadcasting and reception of the television signal, the situation of public television watching was treated as the aforementioned childhood diseases; thus, as natural but passing. Ultimately, television sets were supposed to be in every Czechoslovak household, while television reception was supposed to be reachable in the entire Czechoslovakia. Věra Lukešová sums the first year of television signal broadcasting as follows:

At first, television sets appeared in more accessible places: restaurants, large trading houses, or libraries. Then, industrial plants bought television sets for workers' clubs, where their employees could regularly meet in the evenings. It was not long after, when the first families began to watch television in their homes. (Lukešová, 1954, p. 8)

The visual material illustrating the majority of the previous press articles constitutes further evidence that television was supposed to assume an eminent place in the

⁸ Pioneer Organization (officially Pioneer Organisation of the Socialist Youth Union (Pionýrská organizace Socialistického svazu mládeže) was founded on 24 April 1949. It was a mass leisure organisation for children and youth aged 6 to 15 (Pavelčíková, 2006, 19 p. 1ff).

private sphere. Each drawing (not photograph) that accompanied the articles depicts a family gathered around a television set. There is no depiction of collective watching television in a public place.

However, neither the high price nor the scanty programme deterred potential viewers for long. The Czechoslovak government was trying to make television more accessible. The price was cut down to Kčs 2,500, which was proudly described by the press:

It did not take much time for some of Prague shops to have television sets for sale. ... After the currency reform, a television set cost Kčs 4,000 while, after the September reduction in prices of products, it costs Kčs 2,500. Despite the fact that the price is relatively high even now, first private people appeared in Prague shops eager to buy a television set shortly after the price reduction ((Práce), 1953, p. 6).

Moreover, people were explicitly encouraged to buy a television set: “And now, we come to the thing we want to tell you. Buy a television set; of course, if your finances allow to fulfil this dream” (Sedláček, 1954, p. 5).

During the aforementioned press conference, the original programme director of the new television studio in the Czechoslovak Radio, Karel Kohout, announced the introduction, among other things, of the instalment system of television sets sale from 1 May 1954 (Propagace televize, 1954 April 14, p. 10). The entire discussion during the conference adopted the perspective of the individual reception of the television signal and treated public television watching as a situation that results primarily from the economic situation. This perspective was similar to the one included in the brochure supposed to be published by the publishing house Orbis, entitled *Czechoslovak Television Broadcasts*. Among its theses that were to determine the content of particular chapters were such points as: “Your television at home”; “How to set the television picture”; “Sound in television. How to set the sound”; or “Advice on signal reception. How to place your television set, how to watch television” (These brožury o Čs. televizi, Propagace televize, 1954 May 13. p. 1). This approach clearly depicts television as a private medium.

Mateusz Halawa argues that “the division into the private and the public is at the same time a division into that which we can scrupulously control and that which we cannot” (Halawa, 2006, p. 47). For the purposes of this essay, I will make the viewer’s perspective presented by Halawa more specific. In the division into the private and the public, we are (at least in this case) dealing with a difference in the degree of supervision rather than a dichotomous division into control and its lack, in the public and private spheres, respectively. While coding (public broadcast) can be subject to strict control, decoding (interpretation of the code) of the broadcasts cannot be. The production of the content which appears in the media (not only on TV) can be

supervised at every stage; interpretation is subject to this control to a much lesser extent.

The television code was controlled by the state from the start. When television was taking its first steps, Czechoslovak media were functioning based on a so-called Small Press Act (tzv. Malý tiskový zákon) from 1950, which sanctioned the existence of the Editorial Board (Lektorská rada) established by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and requiring all journalists to have an identity card of the Czechoslovak Association of Journalists (Svaz československých novinářů). The main censorship office was established on the 22 March 1953, several months before the regular, trial broadcasting of Czechoslovak Television called Chief Authority for Press Supervision (Hlavní správa tiskového dohledu, hence forth HSTD) began. One must remember that the role of the Press Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (tiskový odbor ÚV KSČ), which appointed members of the Editorial Board, did not end with the appearance of HSTD; its influence over censorship was still very strong.

Every censor (officially called a representative) had their number with which they marked the material they censored. They then allowed it (or not) to be broadcasted or printed. Publishing without the permission of a censor was prohibited. Preventive censorship in television required not only the control of the text, but also of the image, so the censor had to be present at the dress rehearsal of the live programme or while it was being broadcasted.

At first, however, the censorship had not been as scrupulous as it later became. It was surely due to censors' inexperience and more importantly, to the lack of established procedures of censoring live television broadcasts. The first documented intervention of repressive censorship in television took place on the 26 January 1954 after the broadcast of a short documentary about the production of the daily *Rudé právo*, which showed people who were later fired from the editorial staff for political reasons. Right after this event, additional censors were put in the television studio and methods of preventive censorship were established. Jarmila Cysařová describes these events in detail (Cysařová, 2002, p. 525). For instance, before a theatrical play was broadcasted, the censor first reviewed the entire creative process, from the idea, through the script and drafts, to the final version of the text, and then, he checked the backstage. In the case of live programmes, they sat next to the director and stamped each page of the script.

Believing that the public is much easier to control than the private, the socialist authorities tried to eradicate intimacy, which is not subject to supervision and which could harbour ideologically undesirable ideas. "Families and couples are not only places of parallel (to the official one) economic production and redistribution of goods, of recreating social relations and of reproduction, but they are also a space for potential opposition to the new social goals," as Petra Hanáková writes in an article on films of the late 1940s and the 1950s (*Vzbouření na vsi*, 1949, directed by Josef Mach, *Slovo dělá ženu*, 1952, directed by Jaroslav Mach, and *Kudy kam?*, 1956, directed by

Vladimír Borský) (Hanáková, 2011, p. 217)⁹. At this point, it is worth reminding that the socialist project to considerably limit the private sphere did not end with literature or film code (Zarecorová, 2015, pp. 63).

It encompassed nearly all aspects of everyday life, which is most visible in the case of collective houses, such as the one built between 1947-1957 for the workers of a nearby chemicals factory. Architects designed its spaces for common meals, bringing up children, doing the laundry, and free time.¹⁰ It would seem that watching TV in public, especially in places designed specifically for that purpose, would fit the holistic concept. This way it was much easier to control society. However, in this case, somewhat inconsistently with the project of limiting the private sphere, television was advertised also as home entertainment. As I have mentioned, the first stage of this process was cutting the price of TV sets down from 4,000 to only 2,500 crowns already in the first year. Instalment sale was soon introduced as well. In the 1960s, there were already TV rentals set up by the Tesla factory (advertised, for instance, in *Rudé právo*).

Undoubtedly, it must be remembered that promoting watching TV individually at home was partly due to an economic aspect. The simplest and most banal one, it would seem, as the state was interested in the profits that could be made from a new booming industry. As Marek Krajewski argues, “it is the economy and the vulgar pursuit of profit, though we commonly label them as wrong, dangerous for social life and culture, set-off processes that bring life to the circumstances of our existence, make us constantly wonder at how interesting the world is,” (Krajewski, 2006, p. 5). This aspect is often left out, especially if we are analysing television from the point of view of semiotics, so I would like to emphasise it.

Of course, at first, (throughout the period described in this article) watching TV in groups, in public – in cafes, workers cultural centres, community centres or at the homes of friends, family or neighbours – was still more common. Nevertheless, with the considerable support from, power holders, television began to enter the private sphere with a public code, violating its character, which was already very weakened by the radio. It seems that behind these actions, apart from the economic reasons mentioned above, there was the belief that mass audiences are passive – a claim resonating with the Frankfurt School (thus, it did not originally concern television).

According to Horkheimer and Adorno the culture industry forms the social consciousness, tastes and preferences, instils the desire to satisfy false needs (produced

⁹ Also, Hanáková (2011, p. 218) demonstrates that the roots of this project are associated with the interwar avant-garde which sought a new, liberated man, freed as well from the musty atmosphere of home. Nevertheless, it seems that though the similarity of the ideas is striking, the way the communist project was carried out and its scope differentiate it from the idea of the avant-garde.

¹⁰ The idea of collective housing (the so-called Koldům) originated with leftist architects in the mid-1920s. The utopian vision of a community living together was to be fulfilled in the specially planned apartments with common kitchens, dining rooms, laundry rooms and all other facilities performing all functions necessary in a society (they included pre-schools, day cares and places for recreation). As a result, private space was limited to the absolute minimum (Zarecorová, 2015, p. 63).

by the industry) and as a result, eliminates true needs. The viewer, unaware of these mechanisms, accepts false needs as their own, passively surrendering themselves to manipulation. Therefore, it is an inherent power of the media to control a passive viewer. According to the Frankfurt School's theory, the cultural industry is a means of subjugating the working class and strengthening the durability and stability of the capitalist system. (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, pp. 118-119)

In contrast, according to the official documents, socialist television was to inculcate socialist values, cultivating the "true" desires of an individual. This had been clear before broadcasting began. In the report on the state of television in Czechoslovakia from the 18 September 1951 we read:

While in the capitalist world, television is spread like a tool of subversive and destructive propaganda concentrated on decadent culture and perverse sensation, in our country it will serve the creative and peaceful values of our socialist efforts. It's only in socialist society, as we see in the Soviet example, that television gains its true and useful social meaning (Štoll, 2011, pp. 106-107).

3.5. For the socialist masses

Thus, the same medium that was an instrument facilitating the preservation of the bourgeois yoke when used by capitalist cultural industry became a way to the "wonderful new communist world" when used by socialist authorities (it is important to point out, that this was only happening in the media representation in the press and television's documents aimed at Czechoslovak socialist society). Thanks to the television ideas of socialism could be propagated. It seems that there was no need to explain the paradox. In fact, the situation was not even considered a paradox, analogously to earlier media. For instance, in 1950 the National Assembly of Czechoslovakia passed an act, in which the mission of the press in socialism was clearly defined: "help in the effort to build the Czechoslovak nation and cooperate in its education for socialism" (Köpplová et al., 2003, p. 254).

The ideological significance of television from its beginning is described perfectly by Valter Feldstein, the author of the first comprehensive study of the new medium from the historical, aesthetic and ideological points of view in Czechoslovakia. He elaborated on the idea of "good" - socialist and "evil" - capitalist hegemony in a book entitled *Television Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*: "Television in a socialist society serves the goals, interests and needs of all citizens, consciously fulfils the tasks of socialist and communist education" (Feldstein, 1964, p. 29). Socialist television was to teach, not delude; set free, not subjugate; and educate, not deceive. Television itself was not an evil instrument; it was merely an instrument in the hands of good or bad government, once again drawing from the picture made by contemporary documents.

These views were neither individual nor incidental. We may even say that – in the 1960s – this approach already had a long tradition as similar beliefs were uttered from the very beginning of the Czechoslovak television broadcasting. For instance, in the weekly *Svět práce*, Václav Jelínek talks about an American dancer, Mrs Wandr, who requested asylum in Czechoslovakia with her husband and compared the socialist and capitalist televisions:

Of course, she did not talk about our television but about the television in the United States. In American television, the programme slightly differs from our television. Stagings of classical works of literature? Are you mad? Television has a completely different programme. Murder, robbery, and debauchery, and again, murder, robbery, and debauchery. This is the everyday content of American television. Horror, scare, and fear found the atmosphere of the American television (Jelínek, 1954, p. 2).

The author clearly contrasts American television programming with the Czechoslovak broadcasts. Besides, he does so in a very characteristic manner, by using exaggerated argumentation. First, by recalling a mother who worries about the mental state of her children, Mrs Wandr, says that she has two little boys, and second, by showing an emigrant who saw everything with her own eyes, which emphasises the authenticity of the experience.

In the abovementioned appeal to the leaders of pioneer organisations and employees of the afterschool education published in *Vedoucí pionýrů*, there appears no comparison with capitalist television, but the author very clearly indicates the educational possibilities of the new medium. The author emphasises television's role in the upbringing of youth and recalls a programme about Africa, which brings to life the collection of the Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures, in which actors retell traditional African legends, while viewers may admire African animals on screen: "The best lecture could not have such results and the most perfect geography textbook could not approximate such a distant land better as does the picture box of a television set" (-stc-, 1954, p. 17).

It was clear that television had the potential to be a channel of propaganda (and was used as such), which is consistent with the belief in the passivity of the viewer and therefore, with the view that censorship – especially preventive censorship – would effectively control the content being broadcasted. As a result, television could become a private mode of entertainment, since the content would directly influence the viewers and thus, the controlled view of reality would almost imperceptibly cross the threshold of home, becoming a part of the occupants' everyday life. The belief in the power of the medium was clear from the beginning. Earlier experience with the radio and the success of television in the United States, in Western Europe and in the Soviet Union were clear signs of the television character, its possible uses in propaganda, and the directions in which it would develop. Before broadcasting began, the

authors of the report on the state of television in Czechoslovakia from the 18 September 1951 had written: “[...] the television is a more effective information medium than the radio” (in Štoll, 2011, p. 107). This obviously means that the potential for the use in propaganda was fully taken advantage of from the start. As late as in 1958, in a secret resolution, the management of the radio and the television drew attention to the fact that economic propaganda is not effective enough and postulated:

[...] Greater prowess of propaganda, more effective demonstration of successes in building socialism and the fight for a socialist morality, orientation on socialist education of intelligentsia, partisanship in art, folksiness, political operativeness, bringing classical music and contemporary folk art closer, increasing the participation of progressive, contemporary music, better political education of creators (Štoll, 2011, p. 167).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Television entered the private sphere so easily and with the permission (and even with the help) of the regime, as the regime was convinced of the ease with which the broadcasted code could be controlled and of the direct effect of the content on the consciousness of the viewer. This resembles one of the hypothetical positions of the viewer (the dominant/hegemonic) in the structure of mass communication. When the viewer takes the connoted meaning, decodes the message in the terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded. Consequently, the viewer is operating inside the dominant code (Hall, 2005, pp. 125-126). And by extension, it seems the regime did try to not admit the possibility of another reading of the code than the one that was meticulously programmed.

Attributing meanings to the new medium, despite the fact that the power over the meanings expressed in the press and television documentaries was in one hand, did not take place in a one-way manner. It turns out that not only the dominant and dominated discourses have an impact on the specific meanings. The nature of the new medium, its technical capabilities and the context (in this case, the economic and political situation in socialist Czechoslovakia) also play an important role.

Summarising the metaphors used in the source material, the comparison with theatre (often opera or cinema) involves one of the ways in which unknown phenomena are incorporated into the world we already know. Before the new element of reality (in this case, television) is incorporated into the social reality, it is often compared with another phenomenon that has been functioning in the particular reality for a long time (in this case, theatre, opera, or cinema).

Television is a medium pertaining to the private-owned realm, yet it was initially presented as a state-owned medium due to the high price, the availability of the TV television signal, or the lack of adequate numbers of TV sets on the market. It was only over time (though relatively soon) that TV took its rightful place, adequate to its

essential properties. This is what leads directly to the commonly used metaphor of a child whose identity is just being shaped.

As shown in this article, the terms 'television for everyone' and 'television in every home' are of the essential nature. Economic and commercial circumstances (for example, the purchasing power of Czechoslovak society or the technical capacity of the Czechoslovak industry) did not allow for the immediate implementation of the socialist requirements, i.e. equality of access to a television signal and television receiver. These slogans, therefore, had to be accompanied by appropriate reservations.

The function assigned to television in the press and in the analysed document that television was to perform in the socialist society ("For the Socialist Masses") had to be semantically separated from the function it already performed in capitalist societies. Thus, its role as a carrier of socialist propaganda was justified and television became a teacher of the idea of socialism for Czechoslovak society.

When attempts are made to greatly limit the private sphere, the most difficult one to control, television finds its place there, makes itself comfortable and begins to slowly annex the private sphere. The new medium gives the authorities a sense of control or at least a great influence upon the private sphere. This was one of the reasons why they actively participated in the process of putting a TV set in every home as quickly as possible and turning the citizen into a viewer, in the eyes of the authorities, a passive receiver, mindless consumer of programmed ideological content.

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