
PUBLIC TELEVISION AS A PROVIDER OF HUMAN VALUES

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Abstract

Public television broadcasters are socially significant institutions. Their primary function is related to individuals – citizens – and the society as a whole, and therefore it is very important. In many countries, Slovak Republic included, public broadcasting services have been under strong criticism aimed at their functioning and financing. Since their primary function is not to make profit but rather providing their audiences with public services related to television broadcasting, they are also required to broadcast programs that are less attractive for the viewers. Contents and values presented through television programs must follow the particular legal standards of media law under which they operate as well as internal regulations – e.g. ethical codes. These regulations and codes must be applied in all processes of developing and communicating programs. However, the personality traits of employees are the key factors of producing and communicating information and entertainment. Production of television programs should take into account the critical judgment and sense of justice. Responsibility of the journalists manifests itself by paying attention to these facts in order to behave in a proper manner. The journalists are obliged to know the impact of their actions.

Keywords: public television, values, viewer, social responsibility, media

1. Introduction

We are currently witnessing the debates related to meaning and function of public television services, their mission, functions and ways of financing. It is necessary to state that public television has found itself in crisis in many countries, including Slovakia. This situation is not just the result of political and ideological influences, but also the outcome of competitive commercial environment that puts public broadcasting into disadvantage, since the public broadcasters are obliged to deliver programs that are not highly popular. Responding to diverse expectations of television's audience leads to many different systems of values. After all, public television is in a kind of contradiction to commercial television stations. This fact is reflected not only in relation to television viewers, but markedly in the choices of television programs

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and also the values they present to us [1]. In terms of reception, television holds a dominant position in our lives and thus influences the ways we embrace values.

As a result of market liberalization and globalization, public television in Slovakia was not able to avoid issues related to the economic aspect of its existence. These issues manifest themselves in ‘tabloidization’ and making news combined with entertainment (so called ‘infotainment’). Public interests were replaced by interests of individual recipients; sensationalism triumphed over common sense, as well as trivial prevailed over important. Traditional news values are subordinated to new forms of values – commercial purposes. In the context of global struggle between public and private broadcasters, D.C. Hallin and P. Mancini talk about the victory of liberal broadcasting model that is typical especially for the United States of America [2]. The ‘weakness’ of content and forms of commercial media manifests itself in ‘light’ or shallow presentation of all ideas and messages. The most serious consequence of these tendencies is the superficiality of consciousness and experiences of the recipients. We have to remark that the values, especially those related to religion, represent hope that allows us to overcome ‘hopelessness’ offered and disseminated through numerous television programs. They also give us a chance to find normative reference points that serve as sources of understanding and appreciation of the world, including the reality or ‘pseudo-reality’ presented by television. After all, precisely these values are mediated through public television broadcasting.

2. Public television – its mission and function

Most democratic countries have successfully implemented the dual system of television broadcasting that includes both public broadcasters and commercial televisions. Great Britain is considered to be the ‘cradle’ of public broadcasting services. The system of broadcasting and its regulation developed by Great Britain reflected, in many aspects, pessimism related to the benefits of private ownership as well as technological constraints – the amount of available frequencies. The final decision stated that broadcasting should have not been in ‘hands’ of private companies and therefore it should have been managed as a public resource [3].

Despite the fact that BBC was established as a private company, it did not operate that way. BBC began to function as a public institution under a Royal Charter from 1st January, 1927. Scottish broadcasting executive John Charles Walsham Reith was employed as the first Director-General of the British Broadcasting Corporation. He is considered to be the most influential person and principal founder of the modern pattern of publicly owned but independent broadcasting corporations in Great Britain. Under his leadership, the BBC has gained a position independent from government institutions as well as from external influences. Reith defined the outlines of public broadcasting services under conditions of high moral responsibility, enabling the company to create

and also early adapt the philosophy of public service with regard to the universality of outputs consisting of clear information, education and entertainment. This was to become a system which stood between the unregulated American commercial one and the highly regulated system favoured by the then new Soviet Union [4].

Public television is a medium that is typically established by law, which ensures the fulfilment of the public interest in the sphere of media communication. This means that it provides public services by production and broadcasting of television programs. Traditional requirements for public media include providing objective and unbiased reporting, caring for communication equality of minorities, promoting cultural and legal awareness or education, providing entertainment, etc. Therefore, the content provided by televisions is not just the result of individual production activities, but rather the outcome of all the activities of organization (and its role in the society).

Many precedents originally created by the BBC are now parts of normative regulation of the position, activities and content of public television broadcasting in a lot of countries, of course, with regard to their geopolitical, cultural and social particularities. For example, in countries such as France, Turkey or India, broadcasting in the public interest is closely connected with the state; on the other hand, public broadcasting service in the United States works without any political support of the state. This diversity is also evident at the level of terminology. In English-speaking countries, the most frequently used terms are 'public service' or 'public service broadcasting' (PSB). On the other hand, the term 'governed by public law' is the literal translation of the German expression 'öffentlich-rechtlich'. This term now refers to public broadcasting in countries where media – before the emergence of a dual system of broadcasting – copied the Soviet model of organizing media institutions, therefore also in the Slovak Republic [5]. The model of television 'governed by law' has become a source of protection of public interest as well as a guarantee of objectivity and impartiality [6].

Broadcasting in the public interest is usually associated with a number of features that are largely derived from the constitutional guaranty of freedom of expression and stable method of financing. The *Dictionary of Media and Communication Studies* defines the following specifications of this kind of broadcasting: "Term refers to any broadcasting system whose first duty is to a public within a democracy, serving to inform, educate and entertain, and to regard audience as constituting citizens, members of communities and individuals rather than merely consumers. PSB is essentially the creation of government in the first instance, though for this reason safeguards are built into the system so that its operation is (relatively) free of government control and influence." [7]

We are able to conclude that the system of public television is currently undergoing a transformation that is primarily associated with its function for the society and financing. J. Curran comments on the crisis of public broadcasters: "Throughout much of the world, public service broadcasting has been subject to

a combined commercial, political and ideological assault. New private channels have come into being; new deregulatory regimes have been introduced; and new, hostile lobbies have been formed. In general public service broadcasting has suffered, according to numerous accounts, from a loss of legitimacy, under funding, declining audiences and a less clear sense of purpose.” [8] Situation in the recent years (perhaps in the whole last decade) in European countries has shown that public service media have gotten into a difficult situation accompanied by a denial of their basic functions in terms of contribution of these institutions to creating the public sphere and democracy itself. This situation can be seen as a ‘clash’ between media and television stations as such. M. Mistrík, the Chairman of the Slovak Council for Broadcasting and Retransmission, stated: “Even if the ‘dual system of electronic media supports a pluralistic democratic society’, in the current world full of conflict, electronic media are also in conflict. They are fighting amongst themselves for market share, they are attacking the recipient in both the good and bad sense of the word, their content is conflicting in political discussions, in movies, TV competitions, and reality shows.” [9]

A similar debate about the future of public service media, but with regard to the economic aspect of media production, took place also in our country. As a result, the national public broadcasters, Slovak Radio and Slovak Television, were re-organized by merger and began to operate under the name Radio and Television of Slovakia (RTVS) since 1st January, 2011.

Public Act No. 532 of 2010 related to the Radio and Television of Slovakia defines this broadcaster as a public institution, a national, independent, informational, cultural and educational institution that provides public broadcasting services. It can be defined as a program service that is universal in terms of geographical coverage, offering diverse programs produced on the basis of editorial independence by skilled staff, with a sense of social responsibility. This service develops the cultural level of listeners and viewers by providing space for contemporary cultural and artistic activities and as well as by presenting cultural values of other nations. The organization is financed by public funds [*Zákon č. 532/2010 Z. z. o Rozhlase a televízii Slovenska*, <http://www.rtv.s.org/o-rtvs/dolezite-dokumenty-rtvs/zakon-o-rtvs>].

In addition to the ratings and market shares of public television, another important factor related to its existence is the positive perception by the citizens – viewers, as it is funded from public sources, so called ‘payments for public services’. In 2008, the Institute for Public Affairs conducted a survey aimed at perception of the public broadcasting services in Slovakia. According to the results, only 58% of respondents agree with financing from the state budget and 88% of them would favour cancelling the payments for public services. Regarding the news, 38% of respondents prefer private broadcasters, only 27% of them search for information provided by Slovak Television news [10].

For comparison, results of the research called *Purpose Remit Survey UK 2007–2012* show that 82% of respondents would miss the BBC, if it did not exist. Viewers and listeners of the BBC expect the company to commit to

‘higher principles’ much more than the commercial broadcasters; moreover, they expect it to be a kind of ‘moral compass’. The most common values that the audiences link to the BBC include trust, reliability, quality and influence. As far as the perception of the BBC television news is concerned, viewers particularly appreciate retaining the principles of ethics and editorial integrity as well as paying attention to moral principles, originality and relevance of the provided information [*Audience Perceptions and Expectations of BBC: A Summary of Audience Research Commissioned on behalf of the BBC Trust 2007-2012*, 7-8, http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/.../audience_perceptions.pdf].

3. Public television and its significance in the processes of presenting values

Media play an important role in the functioning of modern democratic societies. Without the free flow of information, such societies could not exist at all. Moreover, the media are irreplaceable parts of the processes of shaping and transformation of social values – not just because they largely decide what kinds of information and facts are presented to the audiences, but also because they make publicly available many concepts and categories – political, social, ethical, geographical, psychological, etc. Thanks to the media, facts and information become understandable for the public. Therefore, the media help us to decide not only what we see of the world, but also how we see it. The model of public television has become a fully functional tool of public interest and also a guarantor of objectivity and impartiality.

The implementation of the model of public broadcasting service in almost all European countries had several reasons:

1. technical (the capacity of frequencies),
2. cultural and historical (the impact and potential of broadcasting),
3. the development of the media market (providing services to the public).

The essential reason for establishing public broadcasting institutions was the belief that functions of public service and profitability are mutually incompatible. The change came along with the development of business activities on the media market. The model of public television, so different from the competitiveness related to commercial pressures, was not able to survive the impact of much more commercial and competitive globalized media environment. Formerly dominant public broadcasters were forced to adapt to the new environment that was more dependent on the laws of the market, commercial logic and competition. In the context of the opportunities related to the shift in broadcasting, media entrepreneurs were interested in exploring the potential of the media market. Competition and new broadcasters began to operate not only within individual countries, but – thanks to the development of cable and satellite broadcasting – the audiences were also able to access the channels and stations from other countries. This situation was evident in all post-communist countries, including Slovakia.

Many factors that affect the structure of programs also change in accordance with changes on the media market and evolution of information and communication technologies. This process is dynamic; the production of journalistic information is therefore very quick and often results in undesirable features such as inaccuracy, misrepresentation or lack of professionalism. Sensationalism and ‘spectacularity’ have become the key principles of selecting information. Television refers to dramatization by two different meanings: mediating various events through images, and giving them importance – serious, dramatic or tragic tone [11].

The concentration of the elements mentioned above has increased in accordance with commercialization and tabloidization. The impact of media commercialization in Slovakia has been evident since 1998, influencing the media sector in the context of further media concentration, rationalization of work in media organization and tabloidization of content aimed at reaching higher advertisement revenues and ratings. Furthermore, these tendencies are positively associated with reduced diversity and quality of programs, predominance of marketing, and avoidance of original production and programming that leads to purchasing cheap foreign programs instead. Tabloidization is a consequence of media commercialization linked to the media content. Media, in order to gain profit, adjust their content to attract as many recipients as possible, ensuring higher advertising revenues. This effort reacts to heightened competition and leads to superiority of contents that include the prevailing elements of entertainment, sex, crime, banalities – themes adjusted to the lowest tastes of the audience [12]. The current situation of television broadcasters in Slovakia results in commercialization and subsequent tabloidization of most broadcasted contents. Their ratings prove that this type of communication has found its recipients and gained popularity.

The average viewer does not recognize the factors which affect these communication contents and the idea of audience members who understand the structure of media system is not quite real either. The producers mostly use words, ideas and expressions that can be easily understood by the majority of the audience. Television, once a tool designed to capture reality, has become its creator. Television does not just describe the social world, but also defines it [13]. Media producers work with the raised issues and themes within all creative and production processes, distributing them to the audiences – needless to say – in suitable forms. In fact, we deal with a cultural industry which has an impact on what the citizens know, feel and believe in. Moreover, this industry plays a key role in the process of formation, dissemination and preservation of cultural identity.

4. Personality of journalist and ethical aspects of the creation

The importance of television in our lives cannot be questioned, because precisely this type of media production is able to attract the audiences more than any other. Taking into account this perspective, television has great impact on

dissemination and adoption of values, overshadowing other institutions such as the Church or family. According to T. Zasepa, the media approach values in two different ways: “Some of them pass them away and others do not. According to American and European research studies, there are certain values that do not appear in the media, such as care, love, mutual support, joy and sorrow. Instead, we prefer action, materialism, ownership, optimism, competition and individualism. Values presented by the media correspond with the values that dominate within the American society. [...] Television creates current national role models and rituals that replace the old ones.” [14]

In this context, we have to pay special attention to ethical aspects of media production and responsibility of the journalists that are included in all journalistic ethical codes. It is important to know what kind of people work in the media, especially because of the potential impact of their values on the final forms of news and reports. The fact that every journalist is born in a particular place and time and each one of them belongs to a certain social class and also moves within a particular cultural circuit, generally determines his or her access to reality. Along with the level of education, personal attitudes and values of the producers, editors and journalists, we point out another important factor that influences the form and content of the news – their author and his/her perception of own social role, political opinion and religion. On the other hand, the production routines and influences within the media organization may largely negate the impact of personal attitudes, beliefs and values of an individual. The values fostered by journalists and influences that help to form their attitudes are very important parts of this profession. The way any journalist perceives reality also affects the reality presented to the audiences. In present, the journalists are at the beginning, but also at the end of the communication chain, so they have to permanently pay attention to their own importance in the processes of creating media contents. We presume that the authors formed by cultural background of Christianity are able to produce contents and messages that form and improve opinions of potential recipients, putting them in the right direction to promote peace and balance in the hectic world.

The status of public television as a broadcaster that acts in the public interest determines the messages of broadcast programs while also adjusting their form and content. In addition to meeting requirements set by the law, the public broadcasting services should also implement specific internal regulations that guarantee their rights and outline their obligations with respect to consequences which may result from broadcast content (especially under pressure caused by tabloidization and commercialism). We talk about the ethical codes as well as about the social responsibility of the media.

The journalistic ethics can be seen as a set of moral standards that define commitments and principles respected by the people who work as journalists. Whether they are written or not, this norms and principles are also results of long-time journalistic experience. This experience allows them (to greater or lesser extent) to follow their conscience and therefore distinguish between social good and evil. Any code of journalistic ethics seems to be only an attempt to

create written formulation of the most important professional customs related to journalism. Unlike legal regulations, ethical code is not enforced by the state power. The journalists create and follow it voluntarily. However, this principle of willingness is also one of its potential weaknesses, because violation of the code is usually not associated with any kind of sanction.

The permanent presence of the economic factor and media market also means that the media operate in two different spheres of social life – media and economic. The reason for this bipolarity lies in the media activities which have become one of the rapidly evolving sectors of the economy. All media types are placed in the context of economic imperatives that gain their specific form and strength within particular media companies. Currently, the key social challenge related to the media industry refers to the integration of business and media activities that would maintain the primary mission of the media – to serve the public interests [15]. Media organizations often ignore the challenges; activities of their reporters, newsrooms and creative teams are primarily focused on profit.

The responsibility of the media linked to the public interest, not only in case of the media ‘governed by law’, may be defined by the following features: (1) public responsibility takes precedence over responsibility to the employer; (2) paying attention to important current issues; (3) respecting the public’s right to receive truthful information; (4) respecting the human rights of every person; (5) guarding democracy; (6) rejecting aggressive wars and avoiding their propagation; (7) refusing violence and aggression; (8) dismissing any form of discrimination; (9) providing space for presenting values and ideas [15, p. 267]. The attitude of the Church to the media is rather positive, because the media play an important role in disseminating information, culture, education and they also aim to create interpersonal contacts. The Church defines the media as tools of social communication, highlighting not only the dimension of their activities, but also their objectives and messages. These objectives are associated with creating communities through communication. However, the Church also remarks that the media function as ‘bridges of mutual communication’, but also as barriers – their impact on socialization may be negative, especially due to their tendency to spread the late-modern relativistic culture that denies the existence of absolute truth.

5. Conclusions

The issue of ethical aspects of television programs and values they communicate has been an important part of the debates about quality of television since its invention. However, the given problem has become far more serious in the context of emerging tabloidization and commercialism. Commercial broadcasters, attempting to attract the audiences, have implemented unfair practices beyond the boundaries of ‘good taste’, decency and *de facto* also humanity. Therefore, public television broadcasting should offer the viewers an alternative to such negative tendencies. Obviously, the human factor plays the key role in the process of making television programs. In spite of existing codes

and rules of journalistic profession, we cannot challenge the importance of personal qualities of the people working in the media – the journalists. This fact underlines the importance of the ‘personal’ approach to the journalistic world – being a journalist is not only a profession, but also a mission. The main goal of journalism is to pass information. The responsibility of the journalist includes impartiality and conscientiousness, respect for the recipients and cooperation in shaping civic awareness and rational attitudes in relation to the society and its institutions.

Although the mission of public television is not to compete with commercial broadcasters, we realize its position may be seen as a communication space focused on producing and broadcasting programs that respect ethical codes and social morale. Such programs should include correct information, use appropriate language and they should function as original works that respect the human rights. On the other hand, they must not cross the boundaries of good taste, present any kind of discrimination, underestimate the intellectual level of the audience or abuse the feelings of the viewers, not to mention that spreading hatred and violence is absolutely forbidden. Identification of organizational principles embedded in legal standards and ethical codes and definition of moral principles adapted by the journalists function as basic outlines of producing television programs that present values related to cultivation of the viewers and the society as a whole. By respecting these principles, public television is able to promote cultural, educational and moral development of the society. Of course, fulfilling these goals is not possible without applying certain reciprocity and respect on both sides. The state should – taking into account the needs and interests of the viewers – create adequate conditions for the existence and functioning of the public broadcaster at all levels of its competence – political, legislative, technological and cultural.

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