

PHD THESES SUMMARY

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**POLITICAL JOURNALISM
IN THE KADAR-ERA**

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I. Choice of Subject

Since the volume *Four Theories of the Press* from Friedrich S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm was published in 1956 it has been a commonplace that the given political system has a significant influence on the practice of the press – so the press history of the Kádár-era cannot be understood separately on its own as well, without the examination of the political system and the political processes. On the other hand ever since the appearance of printing and the modern press in the 15th and 17th centuries, these fields have always been observed by those on power as a serious source of danger, and therefore – both the secular and the church power – allocated significant resources in order to restrain and keep this ‘subversive’ activity within acceptable frames. In the meanwhile revolutions came up with the catchword of the freedom of the press – and not once ended up with themselves making restricting regulations for the press. In the 20th century in Hungary – however not only here – those periods when the political elites were liable to accept the full independence of the ever growing subsystem of mass communication were rather exceptional than usual.

So it might be an obvious choice to choose the never ending struggle for the freedom of the press as the narrative of press history in this case, too. This might as well easily lead astray, the researcher might find himself – concentrating on the battles between those on power and the workers of mass communication – exaggerating the importance of the conflicts, and choose such an ideal type as the base of the judgement of the press, that makes him or her unable to adjudicate the performance of both the press and the press control within the frames of the existing political and social order.

The dissertation – without forgetting these – is an attempt to explore the complicated relationship of the power and the journalists – existing and forming during the more than three decades after 1956. One of the peculiarities of the press and the media of the Kádár-regime is that it developed an everyday practice of mass communication that was significantly different from what it was like during Rákosi with almost the same party control machinery it inherited from that period. The party insisted on holding the control of the press undivided, on the other hand – by its directives, by the apportion of the concrete tasks of control and moreover by its changing work style – it supported the opportunity of a different functioning of the publicity. This also reflected two main revelations. First, the political leaders also need feedback, the one way, from top to the bottom communication could not be retained, even though the press could only be one – and not the most important – channel of this model. This explains why – even if only in a short chapter – the dissertation concerns the concepts about the public of the mass

media. On the other hand the flow of information cannot be stopped at the borders, the monopoly of information ceased to exist.

One of the central questions about the mass media of the era is the functioning of censorship: the party control of the Kadar-regime could secure the essential loyalty of the press for decades without establishing a central office of press censorship. This demands that the researcher not rest satisfied with enumerating the various forms of preliminary and posterior censorship from prescriptions, requirements to supervision and vituperation. For the above the cooperation and deal of those working in the press and those in the political positions were necessary, so it is important to examine the social background of the 2-3 thousand-person group of journalists and map their professional and political norms as well.

The time horizon of the dissertation is unambiguous: the Kadar-era lasted from November 1956 to mid-1988. The Rakosi era and the revolution of 1956 is not only important as the premise of our period or as the years when the institutions of the press were formed, but also because the debates mainly in 1954 and the again in 1956 brought to light the different attitudes concerning publicity existing among journalists. And 1988 marks the end of the period not because Janos Kadar was in fact moved from the top of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party (HSWP): after the party conference an attempt was started to transform the system of the party control of the press that aimed a shift to a hegemonistic way of power relations from the monopolistic one – without success. The dissertation touches upon the debates of this attempt, but does not discuss the process of the regime change concerning the press and the media.

II. Sources and Literature

The dissertation – beyond the historical literature available – is based on three main historical sources: documents of archives, press articles and memoirs and interviews with journalists.

The most important among archival documents are those from central decision making (as the Political Committee and the Committee for Agitation and Propaganda) and control and executing organizations (Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee, Information Office), which are to be found at the National Archives of Hungary. These bodies were tirelessly producing documents of different types and topic, resolutions, proposals, evaluations, statistical summaries, justificatory reports, press drafts and so on. It must be noted here, that the researcher can turn to a useful 2-volume collection of documents titled *Closed, Confidential, Limited* that discusses the questions of press control, literature policy and activities against Western influences.

There are also fonds with the personal documents of politicians in key positions of press control like István Szirmai, Miklós Óvári, János Berecz and Dezső Nemes both in the National Archives of Hungary and in The Archives of Political History and of Trade Unions. The above list of documents gives also opportunity to judge the functioning of the lower levels of party control, however to get a broader picture the documents of the archives of the counties and Budapest might give further help. The documents of the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security might enhance the understanding of the question, to what extent the activity of the state securities influenced the work and relationships of the press, and – with watchful source criticism – they can deepen our knowledge on the views and norms among journalists.

The dissertation focuses on press, in which – beyond the concerns of size – the fact that the documents of the Hungarian Radio, the Hungarian Television and the Hungarian News Agency have only lately been transferred to the National Archives of Hungary and became available for research. Nevertheless the documents of the National Association of Hungarian Journalists have been reclused from researchers for years and are stored in the Archives of the NAHJ closed due to relocation.

This is the reason why the researcher finds the most important sources of the aspirations and mentality of the journalists not in the archives but in the professional periodicals of the period – first of all in the journals titled *Magyar Sajtó* (Hungarian Press) and *Jel-Kép*, and in daily newspapers. The reminiscences of former journalists are valuable sources concerning the relationship of the journalists with the party leadership and party control and also relating their definitions about their roles as journalists. There are several interviews with journalists in the collection of the Oral History Archives of The Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, but also a number of journalists published autobiographical books.

The articles of daily and weekly newspapers make up an enormous – practically in general unprocessable – amount of sources of information. The researcher has the chance of not getting lost in the ocean of this information when examining a narrower problem. In this dissertation the author renounced the broader introduction of case studies in order to preserve the cohesion of the structure and the logic of the exposition.

The literature on the press history of the period is far from abundant. The comprehensive works often concern the questions of publicity, but the press and the media generally play only a subsidiary role. In the book from Ferenc Pölöskei–Jenő Gergely–Lajos Izsák titled *20th Century Hungarian History* a separate chapter is dedicated to literature and cultural policy, but it only covers literary magazines. The fundamental work of Ignác Romsics, *The History of Hungary in the 20th Century* discusses the press and the media as part of cultural history, and above all

exposes the figures of circulation and media consumption. The volume *Cultural History of Hungary* edited by László Kósa draws two main cleavages in cultural policy – one sharp in 1948 and one more blurred in the 1960's. It applies a wide approach of publicity, including not only the richly examined fields of literature and cinema, but also the messages of architectural styles. It does not deal specifically with the press of the era, and discusses television as part of the history of everyday life. The *History of the Hungarian Society* from Tibor Valuch endeavours to depict the society of journalists in a sub-chapter: it labels journalists – along with actors – as members of professional classes. The data available reveal the school qualifications, marriage characteristics and payroll figures of journalists. Most of the historical studies and monographs use the press as a historical source not as central subject of examination – however in some brief chapters – like in the case of glasnost or the Pozsgay-interview in Zoltan Ripp's history of the regime change and the Tiszatáj-case in Tibor Huszár's Kádár biography – press may be in the spotlight. Although there are some extensive works relating one or another sphere of publicity – like that of István Bart on book publishing or Éva Standeisky's book written about the relationship between the writers and those on power, no monograph has been published on the press or the mass communication of the whole period. The huge enterprise in the field of press history led by Miklós Szabolcsi stopped at 1892. The university textbook written by György Kókay, György Buzinkay and Gábor Murányi has a short chapter from the latter but it is only rather the review of the topic.

The most explored periods of the history of the publicity of the Kadar-era that also provoked the interest of researchers are the years of repression and consolidation after 1956, the end of which is usually drawn in 1962–1963, and the decaying decade of the 1980's. The previous was the subject of authors like Edit Pór, Melinda Kalmár and the Volume I of the document collection *Closed, Confidential, Limited*. The latter was chosen by András Bozóki, István Hegedűs and also the collection of studies titled *Hungarian Media History* edited by Péter Bajomi-Lázár starts in 1979. A typical approach of the studies concerning the period as a whole is the description of the structure of the publicity. However most of the authors drawing the models of publicity – Mária Heller–Dénes Némédi–Ágnes Rényi, Róbert Angelusz, Guy Lázár, Tamás Fritz – are not historians.

Beyond these valuable studies have been published concerning minor question of the field, for example on censorship and self-censorship (Endre Karátson, László Vörös), on the history of certain periodicals (György Gyuris, György Németh), on certain politicians (Sándor Revesz's Aczél-monograph must be emphasized and for an earlier period the Géza Losonczy biography of

György Kövér), on press debates (László Zöldi), on press market (Zoltán Jakab, Gábor Juhász), on the sociological character of journalists (Róbert Angelusz et alii).

III. Structure

The dissertation is made up of 10 chapters. After the introduction outlining the topic, the methodological questions and the aims of the examination Chapter 2 summarizes and evaluates the theories concerning the publicity of the era. It displays the different stages of publicity – the press is only one of them – and furthermore the ways the basic ideological theses influenced the opportunities of publicity, what changes the publicity-concepts of the political elite went through and how it could be implemented in practice.

Chapter 3 deals with the evolution of the structure of the press, and first of all concentrates on the question what realignments happened in the structure of press and mass communication, and what political, social and economic processes lay in the background of this.

Chapter 4 contains the detailed introduction of the complex system of the tasks and relations of the different organizations and bodies involved in the mechanisms of press control, and the development of that during the more than three decades – while the next chapter analyses, how the cooperation of the above institutions functioned in practice.

Chapter 6 follows the evolution of the principles of information coverage and examines what landmarks reveal the changes in the views of party leadership on information and what influenced the shaping of these ideas. Later it is unfolded what kind of picture can be drawn about foreign, home politics and economic journalism and what constant tensions kept existing and what typical, edifying conflicts arouse.

The next two chapters deal with the society of journalists. First – with the help of statistical data – the dissertation confirms that – after several rounds of drastic personal changes – the constitution of the workers of mass communication changed, and shows what realignments happened in the depth during three more or less calm decades, and to what extent it met the will of those on power. Then the dissertation turns to the analysis of the development of the patterns of norms, professional roles among journalists, bringing into spotlight the different motivations and changes in the relations to power and self-restraint.

Chapter 9 briefly sketches the changes in the triangular relationship between power, journalists and the public. It also examines to what extent could the demands, opinion and feedback of the public play a role in the viewpoint of the party leadership. The last chapter focuses on the role of politicians.

IV. Findings

The concept about the sphere of publicity of the HSWP went through a significant development in the examined period, not independently from the modifications of the main ideological theses and the theories of socialist democracy. Thus the reconsideration of the notion of class struggle emphasized that the main battlefield had moved from the physical dimension to the territory of economy and political awareness, which also meant the greater appreciation of publicity. Among the many attempts to determine the character of the publicity of the era (bureaucratic-representative publicity, restricted publicity, first and second publicity, third or liminal publicity, concentric publicity) the most subtle picture is given by the theory of concentric publicity that expresses the phenomenon that – from the extremely narrow corners of confidential information to the broadest circle of mass communication – different territories of publicity existed simultaneously with different – unwritten – rules, entitlements, therefore with different levels of freedom of communication. Trespassing between these circles was – in some cases – possible, but according to the fact that the rules were kept obscure, the majority of the conflicts of information disclosure derived from such ‘offences of the limits’.

Partly this concept of publicity was also reflected in the structure of the press. The most essential realignment took place in the relationship of the printed press and the electronic media: the world trends prevailed in Hungary as well, the press became a medium of the explanation of news and exposure of background information instead of the main source of breaking news. By the end of the 1960's the party leadership also attributed the strongest opinion-shaping effect to the television. While the organizations of press control only occasionally modified the structure of the press, most intensively in the sixties – and rather by establishing or permitting new journals than abolishing former ones – the deeper processes significantly rearranged the structure of the printed press, first of all in favour of the local newspapers, the provincial daily newspapers, but also the less remarkable group of factory papers has multiplied its number during the period. The other pervasive process was the spread of issues and programmes of entertainment, which – after 1968 – was not independent from the profit oriented management of companies – involving publishing houses –, a situation created by the new economic mechanism.

Nevertheless, the domestic publicity must not be interpreted as an isolated system: the evaluation of the first publicity should take into consideration not only the second publicity, the basically low circulation issues of samizdat literature hardly reaching further than a narrow group of intellectuals, but also the emigrant and foreign language publications that became available with the growing freedom of travel in the 1960's, and the half dozen of radio stations like Radio Free

Europe broadcasting from the West in Hungarian, whose existence and effect made the Hungarian party leadership reconsider its views on publicity in the mid-sixties.

The party clung to the right of the undivided control of the press and the media throughout the whole period. The party resolutions about the media were brought in responsible quarters of the party, the affairs of the party belonged to – and converged at – the Department of Agitation and Propaganda (DAP). However, the headcount of the staff dealing with media affairs never reached the number of 10: it is obvious that for the maintenance of the control of the expanding system of mass communication and for the follow-up of implementation it was necessary to share and pass the tasks and competences of control and managing functions. A row of party and state organizations had their roles in instructing, informing and controlling the press. Beside the different departments of the Central Committee, territorial party organizations (county, district and corporation), the Information Office, the press departments of the ministries and national bodies, the National Association of Hungarian Journalists, the news publishers and the proprietors of the journals all had different means and rights of control in at least a smaller field of publicity, and pursued many times parallel informing and control exercises.

This parallelism led not only to full coverage of editorial rooms of the press and the media, but also provided – due to the overlapping system of competences – greater space for movement and manoeuvring for political journalism. In addition to those competences of the different bodies of control and proprietors of media organs the HSWP laid down the principle of the single responsibility of the editors-in-chief in its resolutions after 1956, which positioned the editors in a central role. Between the editors-in-chief and other leaders of the editorial rooms and the institutions of control often diverted the flow of information to informal channels, therefore the exceptional position of the editors-in-chief weakened the weight of the party organizations of the editorial rooms, however it was also emphasized in the resolutions.

The whole system of press control did not undergo radical changes during the period. An old-new element of it was the Information Office as a kind of state equivalent of the Agitation and Propaganda Department, whose relevance was altering throughout the years. It came to the front after 1956, but soon the party took over the direction and also the leading cadres of it, then in the 1970's it regained greater scope of authority again. Its bureaucratic functions became wider, but never really played real governing roles. The press control often decided to react to the appearance of deficiencies in control mechanism by forming new bodies and committees, which further enhanced the almost tangled set of organizations involved in the control of the press. But there was no possibility for the reform of this mechanism without a basic correction of the political system, which the HSWP did not really face till 1987.

So information policy and the practice of the press came through a significant change without the transformation of the basic elements of the system. The so called press resolutions of the party in 1958 and in 1959 are the documents of consolidation, which confirmed the norms of partisan journalism. In these documents information as informing the public did not have a place, however they acknowledged the need of – constructive – criticism. The ‘information resolution’ of 1965 – and its repetition in 1968 – are the documents of a self-confident political leadership that believed in the victory of socialism in the struggle of the social and political systems, that it declared the principle of informing about everything. However it divided publicity into three fields, and mass communication was only one of them beside oral and party information. Unfolding all aspect of reality was rather possible in some – so called sensitive – questions in the latter two. On the other hand this resolution was a reference point for the workers of publicity to ‘extrude the walls’, but we must also notice that the party leadership ‘went far’: the economic reform, the new principles of autonomy and responsibility could not bring a change in political paradigm, not even in the field of journalism. On the contrary in some aspects the great enterprise of reform demanded discipline from the press. However in the everyday practice, to the cautious broadening of contents in articles and programmes it was a sufficient base later on, the attack against the reform process – though can be traced for example in the growing propaganda of achievements – did not turn back the trends in the public sphere. Nevertheless, the long awaited press law was not passed in the early 1970’s, only one and a half decades later, after years of meticulous preparation. But it was already the period of ‘clearing the mass’ in the 1980’s, and in spite of declaring the right to information of the press; first of all it thrived to anchor the already existing regulations of the press, while the provisions of the lower levels carefully locked the way to the back-stairs of publicity.

This meant that in spite of the shrinkage of the taboos and undebatable questions in the certain fields – e.g. foreign politics, home politics and economic journalism – and the fact that some newspapers and programmes informed the public in details far from the average, moreover some debates made it clear that there are different interests within the society, the party did not remove all the obstacles, and in those questions in which the party deemed important it expected the media to be observant of the political interests and aspects. Being a state party also had the consequence that the press had to respect the different, sometimes contradicting interests of the party and state actors – and many of the concrete conflicts stemmed from such situations. An insoluble tension arouse from the different information policy and practice of the neighbouring state socialist regimes and it lasted at least until the beginning of Gorbachev’s glasnost, which manifested in the information provided in the Hungarian media about the socialist and the

capitalist world. There was a tension in economic journalism between the support of critical journalism as part of internal affairs and the interests of foreign trade. In domestic affairs the portrayal of the existing configuration of social interests kept bumping into walls and the stubborn standpoint of reserving both the decisions and the corrections of the decisions for the party meant another serious obstacle in the way of preliminary debates, however, it was held a more effective method of opinion leading.

The Hungarian journalist society went through three main transformations after 1945: first in 1945 the former right-wing organs – and workers – of the press were excluded from the public sphere according to the ceasefire agreement, then new blood was brought in after the ‘year of the turning point’. The two near waves rearranged the sociological character of the journalist society: the rate of those with working class and ‘working peasant’ origin and of party members rose significantly, and by then – especially in fields of journalism closer to politics – formed the majority of journalists, since social origin and party membership had become the main indicators of political reliability and overshadowed the professional and educational considerations. This can be traced in the decreasing averages of school qualification and language skills. The third huge cadre-change came following 1956 but no more clean-ups followed. The system of the education of the journalists – settled at the National Association of Hungarian Journalists – and the increase in the qualification requirements resulted in the growing level of school qualification of the workers of mass communication, and social origin was not registered in journalism from the mid-sixties just like in other fields, while the rates of party membership – though it could help carrier-building – were lower than in the 1950’s, and were concerned in general statistics, but it was no requirement for single journalists. Figures of age statistics reveal that by the last decade of the period those who had been brought into action in the 1940’s and 1950’s reached the final stages of their carriers, and the new generations were on the alert in the second and third lines.

But these new generations had different historical experiences which also manifested in their attitudes, relations toward journalism and power. However conflicts between journalists and those on power erupted much earlier for the first time, in autumn 1954. The ‘revolt’ of the party daily Szabad Nép (Free Press) spread to other editorial rooms: the opinion leaders refused the mere executive role of the collective agitator, collective propagandist and collective organizer which meant the servile obedience to the party leaders, and demanded participation in the policy making process and also in the judgement of politics. The same debate was repeated in the summer and early autumn of 1956, then after the short-lived press pluralism that was squelched together with the revolution, János Kádár made it definite for the journalists on strike that the party leadership does not tolerate the cast in which the press demands the right of criticism

instead of the service of the party. In a broad one and a half years of clean-up and effective consolidation the conditions of the bargain were ready: the majority of the journalist society of the early 1960's accepted the existing frames and space for movement. There were those who fully embraced the official system of norms and the partnership of the power – and professed and pursued the 'common aims' in their work. They constituted the majority of the leaders of editorial rooms and the association of journalists. But there was a significant group of journalists, who tried to find a balance in their work, who accepted the compromises and complied with the restrictions, but held other norms than fulfilling the political requirements also important – like professional norms, informing the public, broadening the opportunities of information.

The traces of role models different from the official norms can be detected even in the early years of the era: party resolutions, press evaluations recurrently mention those, who held entertainment, the disclosure of sensations or unveiling errors and mismanagement their aims. Through the decades a kind of alternative 'ranking system' evolved in which the conflicts with the press control marked the place of the journalists. A survey in the early 1980's showed that there was a relatively small but characteristic group, consisting of about one sixth of the journalists, who supported the traditional propagandist role, who agreed that stricter discipline – maybe more unambiguous instructions – and more emphasis on the achievements would be necessary. On the other hand the younger generations estimated their opportunities, work conditions and autonomy negatively; they much more tended to name the public as their 'clients' than the press control, and they demanded a critical, muck-raking role.

The Kádár-era also brought a shift in the approach of the public compared to the Rakosi-era. The picture of those on power in the first half of the 1950's was quite simplified, it deemed the readers and the audience a blob to be worked, and thought propaganda messages have a direct effect in the heads. The relaunchment of research on communication theory and opinion polls – not only in Hungary – helped find a more sophisticated approach of public opinion. In the editorial rooms the ambition to measure the efficacy of their products, to get to know more about the peculiarities of their readers increased, and the journalists tried to use these pieces of information in their everyday work. This also brought the acknowledgement of the citizen, who – rightfully – demands information and coverage instead of the role of the passive receiver, while on the other hand feedback, the collection of reactions and opinions started to take over the place of the one-way traffic of information.

Finally, relating the personalities who had a decisive role in the field of press control we may risk the statement that there was no such central figure in the field of political journalism as there was in culture policy, namely György Aczél. Only in the broad decade after 1956 can we point at

István Szirmai as a politician at the top of party control of the press whose importance can be compared to Aczél's. Kádár had a key role in the repression after 1956 and stood determined in the way of any maverick journalism, and later on also expected the press to accept the essential political concerns. But mass communication somehow bears his mark more significantly in what it did not become like. Kádár thrived less to 'sit upon' the forums of publicity than his counterparts in the socialist world and to make himself unavoidable in the press.

V. Relevant publications

1. Initiation, Discipline and Order. 2000, 2011/3., pp. 61–76.
2. The Structure of the Press Control in the Kádár-Era. Médiakutató Autumn 2009, pp. 93–116.
3. The Czechoslovakian Press Control at the Turn of the Sixties and Seventies, from Budapest. Médiakutató Winter 2008, pp. 69–82.
4. The Structure of (Press) Publicity. Múltunk 2008/3., pp. 157–172.
5. Journalist Role Models in Hungary between 1954 and 1956. Médiakutató. Winter 2006, 7–24.
6. Journalists' Norms. In: History of the Hungarian Media. (With Balázs Sipos) Ed. By: Péter Bajomi-Lázár. Akadémiai, Budapest, 2005., pp. 53–88.
7. The Los Angeles Olympic Games in the Hungarian Newspapers. Múltunk 2005/3., pp. 255–297.
8. Press Control and the Self-Censorship of Journalists in the 1980's. Médiakutató Spring 2005, pp. 55–70.
9. The Representation of 'Bourgeois' Press, and the Journalism of the Coalition Years and the Rákosi Era in the Kádár-Era. Médiakutató. Spring 2004, pp. 85–99.
10. Educating and Inspiring the Hatred (Caricatures of the 1950's). Médiakutató. Spring 2003, pp. 45–60.
11. György Németh: The History of the Journal *Mozgó Világ*. (book review) Múltunk. 2004/2., pp. 291–293.