

Quality Press and (or) Economic Success? Commercialization and Tabloidization of Czech Quality Press: Key Dilemmas of Newspaper Editors

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Abstract

Czech newspaper editors still face a persistent dilemma after the transformation of the Czech media system at the end of the last century. They are confronted with a significantly accelerated process of commercialization in the entire media sector. Coping with this process is not easy for many of them. The presented paper is based upon the research project - "Czech newspaper editors" which was undertaken between June-August 2007. The main objective of this study was to show how Czech newspaper editors changed their editorial strategy after the collapse of the former media system in the 1990s and to what extent they have adapted to the pressure of economic rationalization and the commercialization of the media sector. The second objective was to describe criteria that editors instinctively use to evaluate what readers want to consume.

Commercialization and tabloidization: key conditions for successful transformation of Czech media system

First transformation phase of Czech media system at the beginning of 1990s affected newspaper market. Fast and unconsidered privatisation and commercialization of press media have affected journalism as well. Czech newspapers were faced the biggest challenge in their history. They had to reconsider old publishing goals and especially marketing strategies. The process of commercialization changed the aims of media production and some of functions of print media generally.

It was especially commercialization which cut old Communist and new post-Communist media system.

Today the majority of Czech media act as business corporations and try to satisfy the mass audience in order to increase market share. The market, commercial and entertainment functions became more determining basic nature of media system. The transformation of the Czech print media defined new "standards" which enable editors and readers to differentiate between high and low culture, information and infotainment, earnestness and sensationalism, between different journalistic practices.

The commercialization of Czech quality media started in the first half of the 1990s and was simultaneously tied to the following three key processes, which in some sense standardized the Czech media system with the situation in Western European media. These processes were:

1. the changing political function of the media;
2. the changes in media consumption patterns;

3. the rebirth of a market-driven press system after more than forty years of institutional and semantic expropriation of the whole media sector by the communist state.

This article is focused on only one key indicator of Czech media system transformation - the tabloidization of press media editorial strategies. It tries to analyze (un)acceptability of this process for Czech quality daily editors. The primary focus of this study, therefore, is to investigate the degree to which Czech print media editors are influenced by trend of commercialization and tabloidization.

The commercialization is usually seen as a process whereby the emphasis on market share and profitability in media production becomes predominant potentially at the expense of other media functions such as political, social and cultural roles (Gulyás, 2003: 84). In other words, most media are directed to a dominant objective to increase, influence and organize commercial transactions through advertising.

The key socio-economic variables which determined the process of commercialization of the Czech media system were:

1. an emergence of new media companies (most of them were international media corporations or were owned by global media players),
2. an increasing competition which became a dominant feature of the liberalization of media market. As a result, concentration rates fluctuated. Quality dailies segment tended to be more concentrated, while life style magazines operated in most competitive environment,
3. an changes in media finance. Getting revenue from product advertising became dominant way of financing print media,
4. an increase of new market (global) segments,
5. emergence of market research,
6. and last but not least it were changes in media consumption patterns. Media audiences generally became more fragmented. Especially print media tried to offer new type of newspaper content different target groups. There was vast proliferation of new media titles especially with life style editorial agenda. The most successful are still tabloid newspapers and women´s magazines – the print segments which had been underdeveloped in old regime.

This rebuilding of a free market-driven media system was strongly influenced by the fast rise of commercialization and tabloidization of so-called quality media in developed Western European media systems which started in the 1980s. As many theorists show, the processes of commercialization and marketization which included sub-processes of economization, rationalization and commodification of

media had profound effects on the transformation of post-communist media systems (Sparks, 2000). There is at least one clear ideological dimension within this global process - media never question the desirability of growing prosperity and the 'obvious' and fundamentally unlimited linkage between happiness and consumption.

Customarily, tabloidization is framed as a broad-based cultural movement, most visible in certain media forms, which is made possible by the increasing commercialization of modern life and a corresponding decline in 'traditional values'. Tabloidization first means an increase of less newsworthy elements in the news; second, it means that popular and tabloid elements of secondary importance in the news are consciously or unconsciously placed in the foreground and the news content increasingly deviates from its real source. Third, process of tabloidization of the news means less coverage of international stories, little attention to politics and the economy but more to human interest and entertainment news stories, sport, scandal, people's private lives. We can see shift away from the daily news agenda and towards editorially generated items, away from information-based treatments of social issues and towards entertaining stories on lifestyles or celebrities. Tabloidization employs tactics of representation which entrap and exploit its subjects.

Key role have played marketization of news product. Television journalistic approach strongly influence press media. The entry of the private television and radio channels and internet news has caused to change the ways in which the public acquires information. Most newspapers react on trend by mimic the model of television journalism to prevent the decrease of readers. This type of newspapers editing inspired by principles of television framing has included especially following editorial rules: a) entertainment must predominate, readership is the central goal; b) nothing is 'newsworthy' if there are no visuals (photos, graphic); c) every story must be 'news', there must be a new 'hook' and some kind of appealing 'story line' with 'broad appeal'. Taken together these aspects of commercial editorial strategy help to create a sense of 'spurious immediateness'.

This market driven orientation influence Czech journalists heavily. It was the most important framework of Czech "new" journalism which has started to form after collapse of old media system. We can identify following changes:

1. an strong visualization of news stories;
2. a gradual convergence with tabloid agenda;
3. more stories focused of everyday life agenda.

The process of commercialization and tabloidization means that newspaper content is marked by features that generally heighten commercial potential or marketability of newspapers. Splichal (2001) defines this process laconically as a competition for consumers which becomes the ultimate goal. Entertainment has superseded the provision of information; human interest has supplanted the public interest. Franklin (1998: 5) speaks about 'Newszak' to describe 'news as a product designed and "processed" for a particular market and delivered in increasingly homogeneous "snippets" which make only modest demands on the audience. Newszak is news converted into entertainment'.

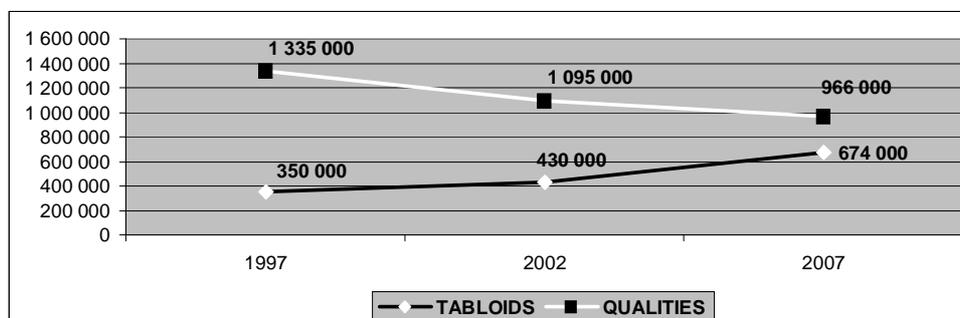
Tabloidization of Czech quality dailies: key condition for their economical survival

According to some analysts, the process of commercialization and tabloidization of quality press was one of the key conditions for a successful transformation of post-communist media systems (Sparks, 2000), as this mechanism stimulated media consumption and consequently stabilized the media market in the uncertain times of the ownership transformation which took place in the 1990s.

If we compare market share of Czech qualities with Western European and United States qualities, we see a completely different picture. The market position of tabloids is stronger in these countries (Bird, 1992; Sparks, 1992). This difference begs some questions¹. How is it possible that the market position of tabloids is weaker than the position of qualities? How can it be that Czech quality dailies have still managed to survive competition with tabloids? (Graph 1, Table 1).

This situation is, in our opinion, partly due to the fact that traditional Czech dailies transformed themselves in the 1990s into market type quality press and apply many tabloid editorial practises. They manage to be more like semi-quality press which have mixed formerly incompatible editorial ingredients.

¹ But trend of average number copies sold per day is clear and indicate future domination of tabloid press. In 1993 only 8 percent of the adult Czech population read tabloid newspapers regularly, but in 2007 it was 23 percent. While circulation of tabloids has been increasing since the 1990s, the total circulation and readership of quality dailies has been declining. Despite this trend, however, Czech qualities as the particular market segment including six dailies have still kept a higher market share.



Graph 1: Average number copies sold per day – qualities/tabloids (dailies).

It concurs with opinion of many theorists who see that rapid process of tabloidization leads to abolishing differences between qualities and tabloids. They see the commercialization of media as a process of substitution for professional journalistic instinct with expertise, through market analysis of audience habits and preferences. “Market-analysis journalism” gives up a great part of its personal and institutional autonomy to specialized agencies which imperatively define what readers want (Hardt, Brennen, 1995)². Editors as key co-authors, gatekeepers and agenda setters have played an important role in this process. Their role is irreplaceable and we hypothesize that it is because of their editorial policy and strategy that a surprising quantitative domination of qualities in the Czech press market has been maintained.

Table 1. Average number copies sold per day – qualities/tabloids

QUALITIES	AVERAGE NUMBER COPIES	TABLOIDS	AVERAGE NUMBER COPIES
Mladá fronta dnes	300.000	Blesk	460.000
Deník (VLP - chain of 70 regional dailies)	324.000	Aha	124.000
Právo	154.000	Šíp	90.000
Lidové noviny	70.000		
Sport	69.000		
Hospodářské noviny	69.000		
Total	966.000		674.000

Source: ABC ČR

² But there are some theorists who see tabloid media strategy as a more inclusive, participatory, and democratic than official media, through their incorporation of the voices and experiences of social groups historically banished from media representation (Peck, 2000: 233, Sparks, 2000).

But their editorial priorities have changed. This change is dialectically bound up with shifting taste of the media audience in general. Entertainment has never been so pronounced in Czech quality press. It reflects an unprecedented congruence of longer-term changes in the financial, organisational and regulatory structures of news media combined with a deregulatory impulse provided by government media policy. The production of news has responded to this pressure by reordering principles of selection, composition and representation. Tabloidization is the outcome of the characteristics of the current media industry: especially the fierce competition between big media groups for ratings, the low investment in experienced employees and the consequent decrease in investigative reporting. What McLachlan and Golding (2000: 88) argue in the British case is true for the Czech case as well: it is related more to a 'broader shift in the political economy of the communications and information industries than to a transient loss of professional direction in one of its occupational spheres'. Basically speaking, the tabloidization of media means a change within the philosophy of journalism.

Generally we can say that tabloidization of Czech press media has affected the underlying journalistic norms and routines according to western liberal professional model. Especially, the ethical aspects of journalistic work were completely suppressed in the name of "freedom of speech". Actually it was "freedom to lower ethical standards". Contemporary professional role of Czech journalists has one key common aspect – the commercialization of their editorial practices and generally editorial media policy.

New editors: combination of creative and business skills

The professional role of Czech daily editors has changed dramatically since the beginning of the 1990s. Above all, they have played a more active role in a wider range of activities than editors who worked in state-controlled newspapers. Generally we can say that editors or sub-editors are responsible for the editorial policy of the newspaper; they control the gathering news and their processing and are partly responsible for the general design of the newspaper and participate in promotion and marketing. In this sense they have direct impact on the extent of commercialization in the newspaper. But in comparison with most of journalists they have played important role in the "backstage of media" institution. They are not visible but their professional behaviour is not only more authentic but especially more complex. Visual performance of their colleagues working "on the stage" – on print page or on television screen – is in some sense only products of editorial strategy created at Goffman's "back region" (Goffman, 1959). Today editors play de facto three creative roles- producer, director and writer. It is clear, however, that

so-called entrepreneurial editors³ tend to engage more and more in managing duties. Generally speaking, later-modern journalists are today forced to combine their traditional role as news reporters and interpreters of social reality with routine economic and technological requirements of media market (Volek and Jirák, 2007).

The commercialization of whole Czech media sector has affected journalists' professional values and generally professional ideology. This change has affected especially work of editors. The most momentous working imperative for them was to adjust most effectively market supply and demand. Czech editors became precipitously the content producers, which have to be market-oriented by conducting production in accordance with the audiences' needs. In other words, they have to be audience-oriented and directed. But they were not trained neither in this market driven professional philosophy nor mentally prepared to accept this new professional role. The majority of them defend it by arguing that they must react to socio-political changes that have transformed reading expectations of the mass audience. But it is necessary to stress that some changes of professional standards were due to the fact of massive personal transformation of editorial staff of majority of newspapers. A new generation of professionally untutored and easily-manipulated journalists - beginners appeared and the middle generation disappeared. This trend was especially significant in local and regional media where we identified a process of de-professionalization and proletarianization of journalistic profession in the 1990s (Volek, 2007).

It is questionable whether these Czech journalist can stand above ownership influences. But it is important to note that with the end of state media monopoly, Czech journalists has moved rapidly from ideologically centralized journalism to market-oriented journalism. Czech journalists are not primary ideologically manipulated. Newspapers' editorial agenda define economic influences. The commercialization of Czech media has replaced their old regime political centralization. However, it is clear that this process is not ideologically neutral. The ideo-censorship has been substituted by profit-censorship in Czech media.

Methodology and research questions

In our research we tried to answer the following research questions:

RQ I. What are their main professional dilemmas of Czech dailies editors?

RQ II. To what extent do these editors prefer tabloid editorial practises?

³ The term entrepreneurial editorship was at first used by Jeremy Tunstall to describe the increased business involvement of the editor, which is expected today to innovate and to take creative risk (Tunstall, 2001:116).

RQ III. How do they cope with everyday professional situations when they are pressured to abandon those professional standards which they consider to be pillars of quality journalism but restrain circulation? To answer these questions we used data from two of our empirical studies. The first and basic one took place in August 2007. We asked 48 editors working at nationwide and regional newspapers⁴. Our method combined a quantitative screening (questionnaire) and qualitative in-depth interview. The category of editor we defined in the broader sense and therefore included both editors-in-chief or managing editors and sub-editors - journalists who are responsible for some part of a newspaper/column, etc. Table 2 shows basic characteristics of selected editors. The quantitative part of the research was designed to describe the general attitude of respondents to journalistic professional values and especially concerning their criteria for quality press. We aimed at reaching practical perceptions of his/her job and practical perceptions of particular editorial strategies which they commonly use. In the second qualitative part of the research we asked editors how to define serious editorial policy and to what extent they are disposed to agree with commercial and tabloid strategy.

For a general description of the whole Czech journalistic community we used some data which comes from research done in July-August 2003 and which focused primarily on the professional self-image of Czech journalists generally⁵.

Table 2. Socio-demographic characteristics of editors

SEX	%	N	Age	%	N
Male	70	33	30-39	30	15
Female	30	15	40-49	30	15
			50+	40	18
Total	100	48			48

⁴ The primary sample of editors consisted of 310 journalists working in 76 newspapers. The basic criteria how to select respondents was following: a/ at first we selected newspapers according to 12 sectors (South Bohemia, Southern Bohemia etc) and consecutively we ask minimally two newspapers a region to cooperate with our research, b/ in each newspaper we questioned maximally two respondents, c/ generally we tried to keep socio-demographical proportions of respondents which the survey "Czech Journalist" came to in 2003. The questioning was mostly carried out in the editorial offices and the average length of the interview did not exceed sixty minutes.

⁵ Research included: a) survey amongst journalists (406 journalists were interviewed), b) survey amongst adult population (1021 respondents were interviewed), c) in-depth interviews with selected journalists (41 journalists were interviewed). In order to define the probability sample, we utilized the database of Czech printed and audio-visual media. The selected criteria were a marked share in the media in current reporting-publication production for the general public. The category of journalists as a basic unit of analysis was defined according to the majority conception indicated in international studies as an editorial member, who directly shares in the formulation of the editorial agenda as their full-time or part-time work. The primary sample consisted of 2,585 journalists.

EDUCATION	%	N	Scope of Newspaper	%	N
University degrees	60	30	Nationwide	20	10
High School	40	18	Regional	80	38
Total	100	48			48

WORK POSITION	%	N
Editor-in-chief/ managing editor	20	9
Female	80	39
Total	100	48

Key dilemmas of Czech newspaper editors

Generally speaking our research indicates that Czech newspaper editors use two types of assessment of their work. The first is based on the idea of the journalist as an independent agent of the public whose duty is to cultivate readers. It is in some way form of manifest defensive professional mechanism. The second approach is not so apparent as the first approach. It is rather a latent legitimization of inescapable commercial influences and consequent editorial practice having sprung from dominant economic and market logic. The majority of editors see this logic as the antithesis of quality journalism, but they have resigned to it. They are split between the demands of professional standards of quality press and the unavoidable pressure of economic reality. In other words, Czech newspaper editors have to permanently resolve the same dilemma: to be a moral agent focused on heavy problems of society or a craftsman who has generally given up on higher standards of journalistic work and tries to conform to popular standard of general audience. They resolves the dilemma how to profitably sell ideas, attitudes and information which he considers to be important for the general welfare of society. In this sense, editors are continually testing the willingness of readers to consume offered media content, while their tendency to maintain distance and freedom from the dominant principle of economic profitability still plays an important role. The willingness or interest of readers to consume certain kinds of material is for the editor not the only criterion, but one of the key ones for publishing such material. We will try to show how Czech editors reconcile this conflict between different professional criteria.

First dilemma. How to increase circulation: to change content or marketing strategy?

The key dilemma which editors have to resolve concerns general economic-editorial strategy. How to increase circulation? To change content or to change marketing strategy – meaning promotion and distribution. As Table 3 shows, both groups of editors believe more in the effectiveness of marketing technology. In other words, they doubt their ability to address their readers effectively. But as we demonstrate in the following part of this paper, there is another explanation for this scepticism: the editors downgrade their readers' taste and reading competence.

Table 3. How to increase circulation?

	Nationwide Editors	Regional Editors
By changing content	44%	35%
By improving marketing strategy	56%	65%

An open question on how *to increase circulation* was answered by both types of editors without any basic differences. They offered rather unspecific suggestions, which we categorized into the following recommendations (Table 4). The three top listed strategies are the same. A really big difference concerns only the preference of "personalization function". Generally speaking, nationwide and regional editors consider entertainment and design appearance as a solution to circulation problems.

Table 4. How to increase circulation by changing content?

Categorized suggestions	Nationwide Editors	Regional Editors
More entertainment, celebrities, more gossip	30%	26%
Better layout, graphics, more photos	22%	24%
Content diversity and value plurality	12%	10%
Less extensive analytical articles	10%	
More interviews with famous persons	8%	14%
More human interest stories	6%	20%
Improving editorial quality - accuracy, objectivity, balance	5%	3%
More local information	4%	
More investigative reporting	3%	3%

It is no surprise that editors of nationwide dailies believe in design logic less than editors working in the journalistic periphery. There is no doubt that these editorial strategies on how to increase circulation are strongly contaminated by commercial logic – the key attributes representing traditionally quality press are at the bottom of the list. What is important, though, is that professional and personal values of editors are very different. As we can see in Table 5 the majority of editors do not see a clear relationship between the quality of a newspaper and its circulation. Conversely, they prefer press with low circulation.

Table 5. What are the indicators of good newspaper: the extent of agreement with following statements

	Nationwide Editors Completely + rather agree	Regional Editors Completely + rather agree
I agree that good newspapers are successful in building circulation	20%	32%
I agree that there is no clear relationship between quality and circulation	68%	52%
Newspapers that I admire Professionally are low in circulation	62%	58%

What are the attributes of quality newspapers

The editors were asked to designate attributes of editorial quality. They described in "open question" 28 different subjective criteria of press quality. Following that, they were categorized and editors were asked to rate the importance of each on a scale of +3 to -3.⁶ Then we averaged and ranked the items. We listed the ranking of the twenty two most highly-valued attributes of quality. Editors of both kinds of newspapers agreed on the first four and last three. As the most frequent indicators of quality presented - *accuracy, high ratio of staff written copy to wire services, impartiality and topicality*. At the bottom ranking editors found "*appearance-design*" and *tabloid attributes* (Table 6).

The greatest difference was between ranking "*stability and continuity*" in editorial policy (bold numbers). Nationwide editors explained the importance of this attribute by referring to the target group of readers who strongly identify with the political and value orientation of newspaper. In fact, editors stress the important role of hardcore readers of given media. Another important indicator of professional homogeneity is the fact that both groups of editors rated as less important "*appearance-design*" attributes – it means *layout and graphics, a front page photo, and high ratio of illustration to text*. These attributes,

⁶ We used a partly modified procedure applied by Bogart (1982).

however, editors regarded as the second most effective strategy for increasing circulation. It is an interesting indicator of inconsistency in opinion and we will focus on this problem in the following pages. In other words, editors are aware of the fact that top-rated attributes don't increase profitability of press and economic success. They legitimized very often their pragmatic attitudes by referring to the unstoppable trend of total commercialization of the newspaper sector.

Table 6. Attributes of editorial quality according to editors⁷

ATTRIBUTES	Nationwide Editors	Regional Editors
Accuracy	1	1
High ratio of staff written copy to wire services	2	2
Impartiality in reporting	3	3
Topicality, to be first - To set new agenda	4	4
Stability and continuity editorial policy	5	10
Content diversity	6	5
Diversity of political columnist	7	9
Investigative enterprise	8	6
High ratio of analytical materials to total content	9	11
The ratio of "people" story to total content	10	7
Value plurality	11	8
High ratio of cultural news and reviews to total content	12	12
High ratio of sports news to total content	13	13
High ratio of business news to total content	14	16
Total amount of non-advertising content	15	19
High ratio of national news to local news	16	15
High ratio of world news to local news	17	17
Literary style	18	14
Quality layout and graphics	19	18
A front page photo	20	20
High ratio of illustration to text	21	21
Esoteric, astrology and psychology column	22	22

⁷ Among less frequent attributes of quality presented by editors were the length of the average front page story, number of editorials per issue, number of political columnists, civic mindedness, number of wire services carried, high ratio of news interpretations to spot news reports, text of statements and speeches.

Second dilemma: to give or not to give readers what they want?

Generally speaking, the majority of interviewed editors acquiesce to the key economic imperative "to adapt content to reader taste", therefore leading us to ask "how Czech editors think about their audience-readers, about their reading taste"- do editors expect that their readers share their criteria for quality? According to editors, their idea of quality is completely different from attributes of quality which their readers prefer. Editors expected that among the five attributes to rank most highly only two would be accepted by readers- *accuracy* and *impartiality in reporting* (Table 7).

They assumed that besides the two mentioned attributes, readers would be more interested in a "high ratio of sports news to total content", the ratio of "people" story to total content and a front page photo. .

Table 7. Editor expectations: which attributes of editorial quality would readers prefer

ATTRIBUTES	Rating according to all editors	Expected interest of readers	Difference in rating
Accuracy	1	2	1
High ratio of staff written copy to wire services	2	11	9
Impartiality in reporting	3	5	2
Topicality, to be first - To set new agenda	4	9	5
Stability and continuity editorial policy	5	16	11
Content diversity	6	10	4
Diversity of political columnist	7	19	12
Investigative enterprise	8	15	7
High ratio of analytical materials to total Content	9	17	8
The ratio of "people" story to total Content	10	3	6
Value plurality	11	18	7
High ratio of cultural news and reviews to total content	12	14	2
High ratio of sports news to total content	13	1	12
High ratio of business news to total content	14	20	6
Total amount of non-advertising Content	15	13	2

High ratio of national news to local news	16	12	4
High ratio of world news to local news	17	22	5
Literary style	18	21	3
Quality layout and graphics	19	7	12
A front page photo	20	4	16
High ratio of illustration to text	21	6	15
Esoteric, astrology and psychology column	22	8	14

The biggest gap between the two ratings was for the *front page photo, high ratio of illustration to text, astrology, psychology and esoteric column, quality layout and graphics* and *mentioned high ratio of sports news to total content* (bold numbers).

Those attributes that editors evaluated to be much higher in reader interest than as indicators of quality are undoubtedly indicators of tabloid editorial strategy. It seems to us that editors underrate their readers, who they assume to be indifferent to a number of attributes linked to quality - above all - *high ratio of staff written copy to wire services, topicality and stability and continuity of editorial policy*.

This attitude is held by a generally numerous group of journalists working for quality media. As Table 8 shows, more than one third of them would prefer a more educated audience and about a quarter of them perceive their readers as easily-manipulated (Table 8).

Table 8. How satisfied are you with your media audience

(Czech journalists, survey 2003)

REASONS FOR DISILLUSIONMENT	Completely + rather agree
I would prefer to address a more educated Audience	35,5%
I would prefer to address a less educated Audience	1,5%
I am satisfied with the composition of our Audience	63%

Table 9. Audience of our media is easily-manipulated

(Czech journalists, survey 2003)

REASONS FOR DISILLUSIONMENT	Nationwide Editors	Regional Editors
Completely agree	6%	8%
Rather agree	17%	18%
Completely + rather agree	23%	26%

We sum up that the second dilemma - *to give or not to give what readers want* - is resolved by a majority of the interviewed editors in the acceptance of a guessed reading taste of the audience, which they see as a tabloid. This intuitive conclusion is in many cases legitimized by market analysis, as Table 3 demonstrates. The quality of this market analysis is very questionable and to editors they serve as an alibi for potential economic failure.

It seems that Czech editors do not identify very much with their readers and regard their reading taste with scepticism. In other words, they produce symbolic commodities which they disdain.

Third dilemma: How to cope professional conflict – quality or tabloid strategy?

As a condition of entry into the professional field journalists have to display a certain attachment to journalistic norms and ideals. This process of identification with professional values is not without pain, though, as these values are often in discrepancy with the imperatives of commercialization and tabloidization. Quality Czech journalists declare that they feel some tension between a balanced, objective description of reality and the demands to strengthen readability and sale of media content (Volek, 2007). It is clear that this editorial-marketing strategy weakens power and autonomy of individual journalists on the one hand and inhibits individual activity and creativity on the other. The majority of interviewed journalists confirmed that they do not like to adapt to market philosophy of their media but that they must do it. Table 10 shows that the most important reason for disillusionment in their career is the pressure of commercial and marketing logic⁸.

⁸ In our research admitted 35% of journalists to "practicing self-censorship" by not covering stories that might offend advertisers or the owners of their news organizations. As well, 62% avoided stories that were 'too complex'.

Table 10. What is the strongest reason for disillusion in your profession
(Czech journalists, survey 2003)

REASONS FOR DISILLUSIONMENT	Completely + rather agree
Commercialization of content	47%
Low salary	45%
Political shaping of content	36%
Low professional autonomy	21%
Low prestige of journalistic profession	18%

To analyze more tangibly these attitudes we implemented 18 in-depth exploratory interviews. All respondents were told of anonymous character of the interview. The average length of the interview was about one hour and it consisted of open-ended questions. All of the interviewed editors addressed all of topical categories when talking about their work. We selected interview into four sections: a/ attitudes to tabloid press practices, b/ degree of work identification and satisfaction and c/ attitudes to readers. In the first part of the interview respondents tried to define their attitude to quality and tabloid press. Half of them refused methods of tabloid press. Their arguments seemed to be both professional and personal:

„In my opinion tabloid practices are disgusting. They produce only sewage. ...Well, I agree you could argue it's journalistic genre which has great audience. But it is nothing for me.”

This comment concerns old debate about possibility of existence of 'high-brow' culture in mass newspapers. It is important that some of editors defined themselves as the „protectors of high culture“. But it seems to us that they use this rather hyperbolic comment to distinguish themselves from tabloid journalists:

„Their [tabloid journalists] key professional imperative is to write really hard-hitting stories to increase their sales. They are agents of mass culture industry and they are paid to dispraise higher cultural requirements.”

But curiously, editors have no problem with accusation of making their newspaper commercial. They see the process of commercialization as a standard professional method how to effectively address their readers:

„What it is commercialization? It is everyday decision-making about news selection, collecting of information, thinking about format. It's running the story and selling well.”

They strictly denied that commercialization must lower newspaper duality and overemphasized role of objectivity and „truth“. It seems to us that they use concept objectivity as a strategical ritual to keep higher professional status:

„We do everything to make sure we are accurate, and that is good journalism. We are searching for the truth, we reporting both sides of a story... „I assume that the qualities strive for some kind of truth. But they cannot use phrases like 'we have heard that'... „Truth is not commercial or uncommercial. Antonym of thuth is lie.”

Summing up, we identified many contradictions and completely different attitudes to criterions of commercialization and profitability. According to some editors these criterions doesn't discommend quality of their newspapers. Some editors see commercialization as a danger which destroy some of key professional journalistic principles and is connected with gradual loss of their professional autonomy:

„In some sense commercial principles makes journalist more autonomous and give him opportunity to tell stories more boldly. They are not so restricted by conventions.”

„This new (ironicly) market strategies push us aside. Our ideas and creativity is substituted by clear manipulation. Tabloidization makes journalist only puppet who have to strictly obey some basic professional imperatives.”

Throughout the interview we asked the editors about characteristics of the people who buy their newspaper. Their answers varied from sceptical comments: (‘majority of our readers is not very picky’) to very optimistic ones (‘some of our readers are intellectuals’):

„We write for the big masses which like scoops but do not want to read about hardhitting scandals everyday. They want something like semi-quality, semi-tabloid, but reliable and entertaining presshahaha. ... Sorry I have to laugh. [Interviewer: What are you laughing about?]. I realised that it is not standart quality press definition.”

Many answers referring to readers looked like citations from final research report. Some editors acknowledged that they use this type audience analysis. It seems to us that images of audience are for them more important than editor's know-how, codexes and specific journalistic routines:

„We want to offer people a bit of entertainment. Our readers do not want to be educated by media“. Our target group consisted of readers who have grammar school at most. Only about ten percent was educated at university.“

But, re identified attitudinal contradictions here too. Almost all interviewees perceived sales as key aspect of evaluation of media success. What is important they spoke about their readers as customers. But when they defined their editorial philosophy they declared very often the aim to strengthen role of civic society and the role of citizens, not customers. In many comments editors used their readers as a tools to legitimize their moral and professional superiority over tabloids:

„One of key and unique function of quality papers is to serve as the guardians of civic morality.“

„Yes, journalist is not here to change the world. But his goal is to offer readers some interpretations of reality. But problem is that these interpretations must be acceptable by readers, at least formally. If not, readers refuse them. We cannot judge them to be brainless They are as they are and we have to communicate with them in your mental code. It's the aim of editor to understand this code and to defend borders of elementary ethics and professional standards.“

Throughout the interview we asked the editors how they feel to be quality journalists. How they are identified with it. Some respondents strictly distinguished themselves from the 'other' (tabloid) journalists which they see as a „professionally deviant“. They attach to them some type of inferior status. According to them they are not „regular journalist“:

„They discredit our public image and profession generally.“

„It's tragedy of Czech journalism that we have no credible and influential professional association which could be able to keep standards of journalism high. ...In the old communist regime were journalists perceived by public as a collaborators. Today we are perceived as a crowd-pleasers and hyenas who are very well paid for scandalization of famous persons.“

According to majority of editors represents work for **quality** press significant part of their working satisfaction:

„I am happy to be quality media journalist. In fact I started to work in qualities by chance”...„It sounds funny, but I cannot imagine to explain my children that their mummy works in tabloids.”

Many of answers revealed that majority of editors working discomfort is connected with necessity to play a compromising professional double game strategy: to produce half-serious half-tabloid newspapers:

„I am completely dissatisfied with many of tabloid tricks. In my opinion they are not such effective as it is assumed. Our readers want to be adressed in serious form and by serious journalists. I am not tabloid journalist. But unfortunately I feel more often to be employed by tabloid.”

„Many of my colleagues, younger than me finished their job because they don´t want to play role of crowd-pleaser. It is hard to be really identified with such a work.”

„Above all we select and publish marketable stories. ... I know it is a little bit tabloid practice, but it is my occupation. I have to do it. Sometime I am disgusted to do it... Often I don´t agree with such editorial philosophy. But it is my job. It is job which is not for everyone”(ironically).

„My colleague will finish his work next moth because he is completely fed up with such journalism – big photo, short text, no analysis. In my opinion it is one of reasons of great job-hopping in quality media generally”

These interviews shed light on the ways in which the Czech quality press editors cope with everyday professional situations when they are pressured to abandon those professional standards which they consider to be pillars of quality journalism. Majority of them described this professional situation as a troublesome. According to them commercialization of editorial policy made by marketers and advertisers reduce their professional autonomy and freedom. They feel helpless and alienated when they are urged to apply tabloid practises. Description of this mental state is close to the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance, defined as a situation in which we act in a way inconsistent with our beliefs or attitudes

(Festinger, Carlsmith, 1959). To cope this situation editors use more or less uncsciously two types of "defensive mechanisms". At first they use utilitarian strategy which transforms public service function into a service for mass taste. By this they legitimize their semi-tabloid double game editorial practices. At second they compensate their tensions by deep identification with superior professional role and self image of quality journalist. To identify with it help them to cope unbearable feeling to be like tabloid journalists.

We sum up our observations in three points:

1. there seem to be ambivalent attitudes to the tabloid practices. Editors de facto articulated a dual assessment of their occupation,
2. this ambivalency indicate increasingly blurred lines between tabloid and quality journalism and serious doubt about identity of print media journalists,
3. majority of our respondents declared strong psychological discomfort caused by pressure to play compromising role – to be semi-quality and semi-tabloid editors. They strive to master this mental discomfort by strong identification with work for quality media, which helps them to disguise real state of their journalistic practice.

Conclusion: double game of Czech editors and its effects

The debate concerning the threat of commercialization and tabloidization began belatedly in the Czech Republic, starting likewise as in many post-communist countries in the second half the 1990s and since then trying to react to the key professional dilemma of Czech quality press journalists: to be a moral agent focused on heavy problems of society or a craftsman who has generally given up on higher standards of journalistic work and tries to conform to popular standard of general audience.

Czech quality newspaper editors experience this dilemma more intensely. Every day they have to deal with how to sell profitable ideas, attitudes and information which they consider important for the general welfare of society.

Basically it seems to us that Czech newspaper editors use two types of editorial strategies and assessment of their work. The first takes the form of a manifest defensive professional mechanism which is based on the idea of the journalist as an independent agent of public whose duty is to cultivate readers. The second approach is not so apparent. It is rather a latent legitimization of inescapable commercial influences and consequent editorial practice having sprung from dominant economic and market logic. The majority of

editors view that logic as the antithesis of quality journalism, but they give the match up. They resigned fight against the dominant logic of commercialization and tabloidization of media sector.

We can conclude that both groups of editors - nationwide and regional - accept standard criteria for a quality newspaper but they do not believe that these criteria will be accepted by readers. They deal with this professional conflict by playing a compromising professional double game strategy: they produce half-serious half-tabloid newspapers. This professional situation is not psychologically comfortable for them, though. It is close to the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance, defined as a situation in which we act in a way inconsistent with our beliefs or attitudes. When we experience this type of psychological discomfort we have a tendency to restore our sense of equanimity by forming attitudes that are consistent with our behaviours (Festinger, Carlsmith, 1959). It seems that Czech newspaper editors and generally all Czech journalists perceive this problem to be very serious. In depth-interviews revealed that majority of editors acknowledged that their working discomfort and sense of being burned out is connected with necessity to play this professional double game. They perceive the schism between their professional values and values of their audience negatively. When they are pressured to bridge this gap with the acceptance of reader taste, they experience it as a psychological discomfort. As Table 3 shows, the strongest reason for disillusionment in the profession is connected to commercialization – that is, the automatic acceptance of market criteria⁹.

In other words, Czech editors are stuck between a rock and a hard place. On one hand, they have little respect for their readers and underrate them. On the other hand, they consider effective marketing strategy, and not their individual journalistic work (Table 4), to be the most important factor determining newspaper success. They feel strong inner professional conflict concerning dilemma - to give or not to give the readers what they want.

This stressful state is confirmed by many editors who are not satisfied with their professional autonomy. They declare that the ideo-censorship has been substituted by profit-censorship in Czech media. However, it is clear that this process is not ideologically neutral. It is only that totalitarian strategy of ideologically violent domination has been replaced by a more sophisticated strategy of market-hegemonic forming of audience attitudes and tastes.

⁹ More than eighty percent (81%) of Czech journalists experience their work as a stressful.

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