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The Changing Landscape of Local Information Space in the Czech Republic: Consequences for Local Political Communication

Abstract

Due to the emergence of Internet-based media channels the character of local information spaces in the Czech Republic has undergone a remarkable change. Traditionally, dominant information sources: daily newspapers and municipally-owned media have become challenged by a variety of online sources run by groups of active citizens. Based on a systemic analysis of the local media sector and interviews conducted with representatives of local activist groups this paper discusses the consequences of these processes for local political communication. From the activists' perspective, the new communication environment has significantly influenced the character of the mutual relationship between different participants in local political communication. Trust between journalists and activists: the basis for their cooperative relationship, faces decline, whereas the self-confidence of activists in negotiations with politicians has increased. Online media also allow the activists to break the existing information monopoly and engage citizens in public affairs. These changes have resulted in the professionalisation of communication skills for the activists, who are thus able to become more important participants in political communication.

Keywords: political communication, local journalism, activist media, Czech Republic

Introduction

In the mid-2000s, after the fall of the communist regime and after rapid changes of political as well as media structures in the Czech Republic had taken place, the relationships between local journalists, citizens and politicians which combine to constitute the system of local political communication¹(Lilleker 2006, pp. 5–10) became relatively stabilised. During that time, the dominant independent source of local political information was the local daily press, specifically the newspaper *Deník* which was (and still is) published in almost all Czech districts². In this regard, local journalists were therefore the key gatekeepers who could highlight

¹This paper is focused on the change of information ecology from the perspective of activists in large Czech cities (45–75 thousand inhabitants). Therefore the term “local political communication” refers to the system of relations on that level. The character of local political communication, in a small village in a rural area, for instance, might be significantly different.

² Local media are often understood as a kind of media for which the content and (very often also) availability is limited to a geographically small area (Franklin 2006). Clearly this is quite a vague definition because this area may vary from cities to rural regions; the understanding

certain local topics, inform audiences about current affairs and influence the local public agenda. Besides such independent newspapers, many of the larger cities established their own, official communication channels, usually in the form of printed monthlies designed to provide a public service by publishing important information about the work of the municipal authority. However, despite such considerations for the public interest, the output of these media outlets largely adopted the logics of political PR (Oživení 2010, p. 14).

In this system of local political communication, journalists and politicians alike were the main holders of media power which allowed them to produce and reproduce elite discourses (Habermas 2006). This power, enhanced by the possibilities of technological change, was exercised through the selection of topics for discussions (information choices), the style and formatting of media output or in the shaping of distribution channels and manifest in various media effects like agenda setting, framing or priming (Habermas 2006, p. 419). On the contrary, Habermas describes communication power as one of the most important attributes of the public sphere, which arises from interpersonal relations and creates the basis of civil society (see Friedland et al. 2006, p. 11).

Since the digital media have multiplied the ways people are able to gain information, this situation of political communication has changed significantly. A new communication environment has formed in which media content can be disseminated quickly through society without the need for the established mass media (Jenkins et. al. 2013, p. 3). Understandings of the production of journalism now contend with the numerous ways through which people are able to engage with various types of information flow, such as personal blogs, different kinds of citizen journalism projects, Facebook initiatives or other genres of digital alternative and activist media (Lievrouw 2011, p.19). Although the presence of activist media voices is not solely related to digital media (c.f. Downing 1984), the speed and vibrancy of digital information spread are new qualities of public communication which cause its transformation at both national and local levels. Epitomised by Friedland et al. (2006, p. 19), it is perhaps the first time in history that “the informal public sphere has a medium that in principle allows for large-scale expression of mass opinion in forms that *systematically* affect the institutional media system” (emphasis original).

As Andrew Chadwick notes, all these changes result in the hybridisation of existing power balances between agents of political communication (Chadwick 2013). Firstly, there is evidence of a transformation in the role of journalists, accompanied by doubts about the future of the profession itself and its role

of local media thus depends on the country, especially on the size of its municipalities and its population density. In the case of the Czech Republic, the system of geographic division of administrative bodies allows us to define the local media as those institutions which operate within the borders of districts (Waschková Císařová 2007). Based on the historic development of the civil service, the Czech Republic is divided into 76 such administrative districts (which as of 2008 have belonged to EU system LAU 1).

in democratic society (Witschge and Nygren 2009, p.56; Weaver 2009; see also Lee-Wright et al. 2012). The expansion of various non-professional media challenges the status of journalists who are slowly losing their position as the main source of information and compete variously with bloggers, citizen journalists and other information sources for audience attention, but also for the dominant interpretation of public affairs (Lowrey 2006, Robinson 2009). On the other hand, both professional journalists and non-professional/semi-professional news providers often incorporate some of the norms and standards from each other and thus the border between these groups is disappearing (Chadwick 2013, p. 185). Secondly, developments in the field of the media have important consequences for the political sphere. In previous decades, concurrently with the increasing importance of mass media as the mediators of political information, politics has become more professionalised; politicians have learned how to communicate effectively with the media and both individual and collective political agents often use externally hired media professionals to improve their public image, especially during election campaigns (Negrine 2008, Negrine et al. 2007). At the local level, the establishment of press departments and the use of press secretaries are the most obvious manifestations of professionalisation (Larsson 2002). In this sense, professionalisation refers to the relationship between media and politics and it assumes the interaction of politics with certain media logics. Nonetheless, contemporary political communication is characterized by a blending of “older” and the “newer” media logics in a hybrid media system. More non-elite actors are now involved in the dissemination of information about politics (Chadwick 2013, p. 86) and politicians adapt slowly to this new environment. Thus the concept of professionalisation is contested, as discussed in the last part of this paper.

The main aim of this article is to analyse how changes in political communication may influence the relationships of participants in local political communication. It presents the perspective of activists, to whom the new environment has brought important tools for spreading political information. The second research question is: How do new communication possibilities influence the daily work of activists and the ways they try to achieve their goals?

The level of local political communication is therefore, a good case for analysis, especially in the Czech Republic where the evolution of the media system has significantly influenced the distribution of media power. Firstly, based on a systemic analysis, I describe the current state of Czech local media to show the general framework within which changes in participants’ relationships occur. This is a starting point for the analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with representatives of various activist groups.

Methodology

In order to obtain a general overview of the circumstances of Czech local media a systemic analysis has been employed. It combines data from the official documents

of The Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting, The Czech Publishers Association, annual reports of the publishers of the local press, the analysis of municipally-owned press (Oživení 2010) and the official websites of some local media. Developing the work of Waschková Císařová (2007), who paid attention to the structural transformation of the Czech local daily press and described the network-based structure of Czech local media through the example of the Deník newspaper, it is argued that the majority of the “old” media channels are organised in organisational or at least advertising networks.

The main part of this article builds on in-depth interviews conducted with publishers of the community-based local press and representatives of local groups of activists. There is no simple definition of who can be regarded as an activist; nonetheless, in this case it is understood as any citizen who actively pursues an influence on political decision making. These are people who are often members of civic organisations and who, since the goals of many activists are no longer revolutionary but rather episodic, rapid-response movements of resistance use media as a tactical tool for achieving particularised goals (Garcia & Lovink 1997). Drawing on Atton (2001, p. 25), activist media can consequently be defined as those that employ or modify communication artefacts, practices and social arrangements of communication technologies to challenge or alter dominant, expected, or accepted ways of performing society, culture, and politics (see also Lievrouw 2011, p. 19).

The sample was compiled in a way to reflect the variety of communication strategies that are used by local activists to engage with citizens within their localities from one perspective and to affect political representatives from another. Both printed and online media were included. In particular, the interviews were conducted with five editors of the community-based local press and six local activists who, in their public activities, communicate through different online channels. Since the communication environment as well as the relationships between participants in political communication may vary significantly dependent on the size of a municipality, the respondents and the media were chosen from large Czech cities of a similar size (between 45 and 75 thousand inhabitants) in Central and Northern Bohemia, to compare similar experiences in this sense.

Selection of the respondents was based on the requirement of “appropriate experience”, meaning that respondents would have a particular level of experience within the environment, hence give relevant answers (Lindlof & Taylor 2002, p. 179). The respondents were sampled by snowball sampling until the criteria of sample saturation were fulfilled (regarded as repetition in responses to the questions of the study). The interviews, conducted between November 2012 and January 2013, consisted of a set of open-ended questions with only a general pre-prepared outline. This enabled the collation of detailed answers related to particular topics, situations or to the respondents’ perception of certain social phenomena (Lindlof & Taylor, p. 178).

The analysis of the interviews draws on the methodology of grounded theory

(Strauss & Corbin 2008). The combination of open and axial coding was used to provide an outline of what the respondents perceive to be the most important change.

Local media in the Czech Republic

Small municipalities and the network structure of Czech local media

One frequently criticised aspect of the Czech local media environment is in its lack of both ideological diversity and diversity of topics (Waschková Císařová 2009). This is strongly related to a reliance on advertising revenue which is a key factor in the continued existence of commercial local media (Franklin 2006, p. 7). Local media can potentially interest advertisers who usually do not advertise in national media as to do so might prove to be ineffective and expensive for them. However, due to the settlement network of the Czech Republic³ the potential reach of advertising in local media is quite small, resulting in the prices for local advertising being low and in some localities there is little chance of establishing and running independent local media platforms.

The structure of the advertising market therefore, compels local media to connect into larger groups which share advertising space and content. This is evident mainly in the case of local newspapers: the most influential local titles would be better described as national media institutions with local editions rather than purely local media institutions. Waschková Císařová (2009) describes this phenomenon in detail in the example of the local daily newspaper *Deník*, published by Verlagsgruppe Passau GmbH (VGP). This title holds a major share in all Czech regions of the local daily press sector and has often, therefore, been labelled a monopoly (Šmíd 2007). The structure of this network was built systematically from the 1990s up to 2006. Step by step, VGP bought local newspapers (mostly weeklies) and incorporated them into the network so that almost all Czech administrative districts now had their own daily title. Ultimately, all titles were consolidated under one roof with centralised management as well as a common layout in all local publications (Waschková Císařová 2009, p. 164). Currently, *Deník* is registered as a national daily paper with 71 local editions.⁴

³ The settlement network of the Czech Republic is characterised by a large number of small municipalities. Except for the capital city of Prague there are only five other cities with more than one hundred thousand inhabitants; 90 per cent of Czech municipalities have up to 2,000 inhabitants and only 2.1 per cent have more than 10,000 inhabitants. (Data from the 2011 official census. Available at <http://vdb.czso.cz/sldbvo.j>.)

⁴ Although the network of VGP's title *Deník* has no competitors in the daily newspaper market, two networks of weekly titles have recently emerged based on a very similar principle of common management and shared content and advertising space. The network of weeklies entitled *Mladá fronta Sedmička* was established in April 2009, but after an initially fruitful expansion (in 2010 it had 29 printed editions supplemented by a web service) it declined and in 2012 the title was sold off to a new publisher and transformed into a gossip magazine.

The media power of municipal governments

One considerable curiosity of Czech local political communication is in the powerful role played by the municipally-owned media. These publicly-funded institutions, established by local authorities in order to provide a “public service” for citizens, usually include printed bi-weekly or monthly newspapers. There are various models for the functioning of these media: some of them are prepared by external professional agencies, some of them are run by the press departments, while others are still a mixture of these models. Additionally, the level of political parallelism (Hallin & Mancini 2004) of these titles varies depending on the locality. Nonetheless, their power arises from their availability to the population: they are usually distributed for free to every household in the locality.

These media have faced sustained allegations of bias and for serving the interests of the ruling authority. The results of the analysis of a hundred municipally-owned newspapers conducted in 2006 confirm this opinion, stating that the municipal media provide limited opportunities for public discussion and the presentation of diverse opinions. Rather, they are misused by local governments to promote their successes and visions; although they present some useful information, they do not provide space for public debate and serve as a PR tool of ruling authorities (Oživení 2010, pp. 14–16). This is enormously important when we consider the power of these media and their ability to influence people’s opinions and behaviour. Regrettably, we lack studies which deal with the effects of municipally-owned media, but it seems, at least, that their ability to set the local public agenda plays a significant role, especially in areas which do not have other relevant information channels (Jirků 2011, p. 64). Despite this criticism, the municipally-owned media are currently not regulated. A new law was proposed in 2012 which is intended to allow the political opposition to publish its opinions and thus to increase the internal plurality of the municipal media (PSP 2012). However, the proposal is still (October 2013) being processed in Parliament and its future is uncertain. The criticisms therefore remain and, as the new media environment made the spread of information easier, representatives from different communities who wish to place issues on the public agenda have established their own channels and therefore, bypassed the “old structures” of local newspapers and municipally-owned media that they were dissatisfied with (see Carpentier et al. 2003). The rest of this article will focus on how this change is perceived by local activists and how it may, in their opinion, change Czech local political communication.

Following in the footsteps of this project a new network of weeklies entitled 5+2 dny was established by the well-known Czech businessman Andrej Babiš; after the first year of existence the title expanded to 77 local editions. The situation of broadcasting is a little different. There are almost no local television stations and the output of local radio stations is mostly music. I do not pay much attention to broadcasting media since they provide only limited space for newscasting. With regards to local media, print newspaper titles have maintained their status as the most important information source about current affairs.

Relationships in flux

This section will focus on changes in the mutual relationships between the three most important participants in local political communication: the journalists, the politicians and the citizens. Representatives of activist groups seemingly regard these as the main changes:

- a decline in partnership between local journalists and activists;
- emerging possibilities to bypass journalists as well as municipally-owned media when activists wish to disseminate information;
- an increase in the confidence of local activists to pursue their interests.

Journalists and activists: the decline of a partnership

The relationship between local journalists and representatives of groups of active citizens was never quite perfect. The reason for this partially arose from their substantially different positions in the system of local political communication. Whereas activists are usually focused on particular problems or topics which influence life in the locality and have access to highly detailed, in-depth information about them, journalists: especially local journalists, have to cover a variety of topics and as such are not experts in any focused areas. Nevertheless, despite some misunderstandings and even disagreements in the normal functioning of their mutual relationships, until recently the activists perceived journalists as people with similar concerns as them and who “were sort of respected partners because they were on the same side of the barricade” (Respondent 1).

There is a consensus among the activists that this relationship has changed, starting five or six years ago, and that certain shifts in the field of media may be the decisive influence. Although they regard the quality of journalistic work to be in decline, they try to understand the pressures journalists have to face. Both changes in the organisation of newsrooms and shifts in media technology and the media landscape are perceived as being the inevitable consequences of external factors which influence the daily routines of journalists. Nonetheless, the activists heavily criticise normative journalistic values: “[A]s I see it, we always held the same values and tried to operate as a watchdog of the government. Recently, though, it seems like journalists have given up their old values. They write about every rock concert and newborn child but they are not interested in real affairs like the municipal budget. I’m wondering why this happened. Maybe they think that everyone can find this information somewhere on the Internet. But that doesn’t mean there is no space for the work of journalists, does it?” (Respondent 7)

From another perspective this change is perceived the a result of a decline in dialogue between local journalists and activists. The dual character of the

relationship in the past is addressed here. Furthermore, the nature of the relationship is described as more informal, with a greater proportion of face-to-face communication than today. Some activists claim that, before they had established their own communication channels, they were often asked by journalists to provide detailed information about certain issues. They were, in a way, accepted as spokespersons of local citizens as well as advisers to journalists, especially in expert areas. Although the activists often opposed the actions of the municipal authority, “journalists sometimes get on the phone to verify something with us, approaching us as an independent, expert source and a contact with whom they are familiar, just because they were careful about information the governors gave them” (Respondent 1). Such claims suggest that the relationship was based on two basic principles: a common cynicism towards politicians and a degree of mutual trust.

According to the activists, the first principle was broken by journalists after the onset of the influence made by organised political PR techniques on Czech local political communication. Since then, journalists need not actively seek information about political representatives and the current work of local governments: “They [journalists] can just wait to get information and then publish it, often with no editing. This means that they write about issues the government would like to be written about. If you consider the topics mentioned in the so-called independent media and in the municipally-owned ones, they’re almost the same.” (Respondent 5)

This subordination to political PR has led to suspicion on the part of the activists as to whom local journalists actually serve. They therefore cite this as the main cause of the decline in mutual trust, though not exclusively. They also admit that their public criticism of journalists may disrupt the relationship from the opposite side, since new communication tools allow them to publicly correct journalists’ mistakes. As one activist claims, “understandably, we are now a sort-of enemy because nobody wants to be criticized. But for me it’s still important to act in the public interest,” (Respondent 9) suggesting that journalists no longer seek a watchdog role. In the current communication environment, however, the activist can to some extent hold this role themselves.

A break in the information monopoly

As outlined above, the information space of most Czech localities was, until recently, controlled by the daily newspaper *Deník* and the municipally-owned media. The expansion of blogging tools, user-friendly website design software and Facebook has allowed the activists to establish their own media channels to spread what they think are the really important issues in their localities. A triumph, as the activists had always tried to establish direct channels to inform citizens about certain issues, previously these mostly consisted of leaflets, posters and other ad hoc media focused only on some, particular issues, since maintaining

periodical publications was beyond the funding abilities of the activists, in the past: “We can [now] disseminate information about a wider range of issues and establish a continuing information stream, which means that we can use media not only for attracting people [...] but also [to] keep them informed about the continuing development of an issue. Moreover, we can also provide information about other public affairs and keep people informed.” (Respondent 2) In this sense, local activists recognise their increasing responsibility. It may appear that in some respects they are able to substitute the role of journalists and they suggest that on certain occasions they do, even if it is not their primary motive. They claim to feel the “power of the public” (Respondent 7) in response to articles or Facebook entries that they publish, so they try to be precise and formulate honest statements in order to build and maintain their status as a source of trustworthy information.⁵

The ability to create their own communication channels has consequences for the efforts made by the activists to communicate with journalists. Journalists are no longer the primary targets for activists’ communication activities, which are now focused instead more directly on citizens themselves. The frequency of mutual contacts between journalists and activists has decreased, but this does not mean journalists are no longer needed for activists’ promotions. Activists are well aware of the limitations of their online media channels; in recent years they have invented sophisticated communication strategies which combine their own media with activities related to local journalists. To put it another way: they engage in direct communication with only a minor part of the potential audience of political communication and are in indirect communication with a more general audience. Specifically, this strategy indicates that, where the activists wish to advance their arguments, they usually first contact audiences connected to their communication channels. However, if the information is of sufficient importance that they wish to disseminate it beyond such audience, they will attempt to contact professional journalists and place the issue on the news agenda that way. This allows them to strengthen the relationship with their supporters and followers as well as inform other people about issues they consider to be important. Interestingly, preparing the content for their own media before journalists are contacted is considered very useful. It points to a significant change in the position of activists in the communicative process: “[Publishing our own media content], something never done before, helps us in many ways. First, we organize our own thoughts and facts in a meaningful form of output. So when contacting journalists we know

⁵ On the other hand, they do not regard themselves as journalists and therefore do not observe the traditional rules of the journalistic profession, claiming that this is not part of their role. The public function of traditional forms of journalism, as well as the importance of journalism for local political communication, are both considered irreplaceable in their variety. As respondent 11 aptly puts it: “We are here to try to change things, not to write about them. And if we write something, it’s still written, from our perspective, to support our efforts to change things. We don’t consider journalistic values, or journalistic interests.”

what we want to tell them. And second, if something is already published, it's a good source for the journalists to find some background information or easily check facts." (Respondent 3)

Related to this spring in new communication possibilities for activists are questions which concern what their media should do and what they should write about. Besides using the pro-active potential of online channels to set the public agenda without any attempts to contact journalists, the activists also emphasise situations whereby online media are used as a re-active tool. In this sense, activists use their channels for responding to the content of local newspapers or municipally-owned media. The new communication environment allows them to control and correct the accuracy of information about public affairs. Moreover, besides factual correctness, attention is also paid to the way that topics are framed and which perspective(s) they contain. Activist media can offer different frames and perspectives. From the perspective of the activists, the main consequence of these new possibilities is that correcting and disrupting the privileges of thus-far unchallenged media "may force both the journalists and the politicians to do a better job" (Respondent 1).

New self-confidence: Getting out of a ghetto

So far I have discussed the influence of online media on the character of the relationship between journalists and activists and on the amount of information and diversity of perspectives presented in media content. This section will focus more directly on the psychological dimension, exploring how the new communication environment has affected the self-confidence of the activists.

Criticising local governments and trying to change the way they govern has always been quite a solitary battle. Activist groups had their circles of supporters, these were usually their friends or relatives and very often active people sharing similar opinions. In such circumstances, activists had to struggle with limited feedback on their activities. They doubted if their work and their requests were actually meaningful, sometimes feeling as though they were a "forlorn soldier on the field" (Respondent 6). This impression, of separation from the majority of citizens, was elsewhere described as a "feeling of living in a kind of ghetto" (Respondent 4), and this would on occasion influence their position during negotiations with local authorities.

The difficulties associated with getting their attitudes onto the mainstream public agenda were cited by the activists as a reason why they were quite often pushed into a subordinate position of "troublemakers with whom they [the politicians] had to deal with instead of someone who is worth listening to" (Respondent 2). In relation to the quality of political culture, the prior position taken by the activists was characterised as weak, with their ability to get proposals through local governments described as minimal, unless the issue was taken and processed through local or even better, national media. From this perspective, it

was primarily not the inhabitants of the locality themselves but the media who were able to influence which issues inherited the status of high importance. If the topic was not interesting for the media, it was usually not discussed at all since there was no public demand to do so. The testimony of an experienced activist epitomises this: “In situations where we didn’t have a petition with hundreds of signatures, the politicians just asked whose opinion we represented. We didn’t have visible supporters; there were no Facebook groups, no supporting web pages. That meant no threat for the politicians if they refused all our suggestions.” (Respondent 2)

Even though the intentions of politicians have not changed over time, the current situation is perceived as different. Besides an increasing general knowledge of civic rights and better developed civic identity (which may be caused by a temporal distance from the communist era), online media is often mentioned by the activists as an important accelerator of this change. For the first time, the media environment has enabled the creation of a platform for direct communication between (the) activists and the general population. Activists can therefore engage more easily with people outside their usual circles of friends and supporters and quickly receive feedback on their activities and thus improve them. Facebook groups and Facebook pages, especially, are important contributions to the more dialogical character of this relationship. Facebook seems to represent a fairly useful tool for the activists since it can fulfil the function of information source as well as discussion forum.

This change, however, did not only influence the possibility to find followers and supporters and to disseminate their messages to a greater number of people: meaning, generally, getting out of the former ghetto, but it also has important consequences for the self-confidence of the activists and their enthusiasm to continue in their work, even if they are aware that only a minority of people become actively engaged: “Knowing that it [our work] resonates in people’s minds is an absolutely basic thing if you don’t want to become mad. And we don’t need them reacting on every triviality we publish. But if our Facebook page has a thousand ‘likes’, it’s great because we know they are with us, at least in their opinions. [...] It makes us stronger. I mean, not only is our voice stronger but also viscerally we feel stronger. I think we now have more energy, more courage and more desire to do our work.” (Respondent 6)

This important shift in mentality naturally influences the approach of activists to politicians and vice versa. Increased self-confidence facilitates the activists in becoming more emphatic in their dealings with politicians, helping them realise what may have seemed obvious but was not explicit: that they “represent the interests of particular groups of people just as the politicians do” (Respondent 3). However, the activists perceive a shift in the attitude of politicians towards them which is currently characterised by a greater respect than ever. Although the relationship is still far from ideal, from the activists’ perspective the new communication environment forces the representatives of local government to

be more transparent and more open to dialogue with citizens. The activists are therefore “slowly leaving the position of mere »complainers« and [they are], instead, becoming respected players in the field, because they are no longer seen as solitary agents but as people who can significantly influence citizens, i.e. potential voters, to see things from the perspective of politicians” (Respondent 6).

Conclusions

This analysis of activists’ perception of the process has shown how the system of political communication has dealt with certain changes in the communication environment. These changes have been accompanied by the transformation of communication patterns as well as by the position and mutuality of the relationships between participants in political communication. Online media platforms have allowed the activists to disseminate, more easily than previously, information which they regard to be important for their locality and their interpretations of public affairs which may differ from those found in mainstream communicative areas. What the activists perceive as the general change in the character of Czech local political communication can, to employ the terminology of post-Marxist discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe 2001), be described as the strengthening of various “counter-discourses”. Online media can play an important role in this process, as the thus-far dominant position of the local press and municipally-owned media can be disrupted by a multitude of online channels run by the activists. Consequently, due to this variety of media channels which inter-connect different groups of people, the local public sphere is thus able to become a space for discursive contestation (Dahlberg 2007, p. 837), which is seen as a newly emergent quality of Czech local democracy. As the analysis shows, there are two major aspects to this shift.

The first aspect is an important change in the distribution of media power among the main participants in local political communication. In the case of Czech localities, the activists often describe the media as one of the most important tools to sustain and exercise power. Until recently, information was available to citizens according to that which was produced by journalists, who are subordinate to many pressures and whose main role is not necessarily to serve the interests of local citizens, and by the political use of PR techniques which represent the will of politicians. However, with the heralding of activists utilising their own media platforms, through which it is possible to address large groups of citizens, they gain new power at the expense of journalists and politicians. Trust in journalists has declined and, moreover, the activists indicate that their media to some extent assumes and provides a replacement for journalists’ traditional watchdog role. In relation to politicians, increased self-confidence is considered to be an important accompanying consequence of media change. The results suggest, therefore, that online media has an important role to play in increasing the influence of activists in the system of local political communication.

The second aspect is closely related to the concept of professionalisation in political communication. Usually, the term is used in relation to the communication competencies of politicians or the communication strategies of political parties. However, the present analysis points to another possible dimension of the term: the professionalisation of activists in the way they use media. Prior to the emergence of current changes in the communication environment, activists usually created ad hoc campaigns with little to no long-term communication strategy. Now that they have access to their own media, they can not only differentiate their communication channels more effectively, according to their different purposes, but are also able to maintain direct contact with citizens.

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