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Ethical aspects of a relationship between media and the politics power

Abstract

It is particularly important for media to respect certain ethical norms related to politics due to the fact that they are for the vast majority of their own customers the only source of political information. In as much as media recipients are able to get to know many areas of their reality in a direct way so as to confront any media coverage with their own viewpoint, the politics as such does not allow for such an opportunity. The recipients cannot therefore act according to the principle (which admittedly belongs more to the field of rationality than morality) requiring them to favour only direct contact with their reality when it comes to particularly significant matters[1], with political decisions belonging to such a scope of issues. It also appears that the recipients are obliged to formulate clear expectations towards media, so that they provide, if possible, a comprehensive and impartial set of information and opinions on matters of the politics. This approach can be effective due to the functioning of certain media mechanisms requiring to adapt the content to the tastes and expectations of the widest possible audiences[2].

Keywords: media, ethics.

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2   Compare with J. Fiebig, *Nadawca i odbiorca w procesie komunikowania*, Szczytno 1995, p. 19.

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The literature often treats the relationship between media and the world of politics as a threat to the freedom of expression and a form of violation of the main principles of democracy. Meanwhile, in many countries with established democracies, media links with the world of politics are common; they take different forms and generally do not pose any threats to the functioning of a democratic state. This is because for a healthy democracy it is sufficient that certain media are associated with different political parties, including the opposition, and this generally provides for an effective control of the authorities. Besides, even if we assumed that the condition of a democracy is the existence of free media, that is media not in any way related to the world of politics, this would not suffice to guarantee that all media operating in a given country would stay away from any ties or political sympathies.

However, it is a fact that to subject all (or the vast majority of) media operating in a given country to the current incumbent government would pose a threat to the democratic stability. Apart from only a few exceptions (for example, a state of war), such a subordination to the political power deserves a negative moral judgment. However, in some democratic systems, in addition to those media which try to avoid all possible forms of dependence on the government, there are also those that attempt to support the ruling political option. Some media do not even try to hide this relationship, especially if a specific convergence between their 'programme line' and the political programme of a particular party or government occurs. Therefore, what should be considered is the question whether there are any forms of a relationship between media and the politics which can be considered as compatible with the principles of media ethics.

One should first note that there exists a certain form of convergence of the objectives of media and politicians. Both these entities attempt to attract the sympathy of the widest possible audiences. Therefore, what is common for both of these sides is their tendency to flatter the tastes of their consumers, declare what people want to hear and present only one-sided, simplified and 'beautified' visions of the world. The ethical evaluation of such a behaviour is in both cases negative: any purposeful exposition of certain elements of the reality and omitting the others is contrary to the principle of truth, being applicable both to media as well as to the political ethics.

One should also emphasise that the relationship between media and politics is a mutual form of dependence. It is not only the politicians who can influence the operation of media, but media can alike influence the course of political events.

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2   Compare with J. Fiebig, *Nadawca i odbiorca w procesie komunikowania*, Szczytno 1995, p. 19.

Any such attempt to exert some impact by media should be considered contrary to their purpose of existence and functioning, and thus unethical. This ability to influence the political life can also contribute to the weakening of democracy, the essence of which is the possibility of the society to make a conscious choice with regard to its representatives in power. Meanwhile, due to the lack of journalistic diligence as well as objectivity and often because of ill will, careers of many politicians, especially at the local level, were laid in ruins.

Moral objections are also raised with regard to situations where media tend to acquire the mentality of political parties. This phenomenon occurs when editorial offices of media representing different political views fight against each other in the same way as politicians of the opposing parties do. This has the effect of reducing the quality control exercised by media over the politicians, and it also deteriorates the general level of public debate on the political issues. In its extreme, such an attitude takes the form of an overt hostility towards any idea presented by the competing editorial offices.

Certain attention should also be paid to some direct relationships between journalists and politicians. One can take two different assumptions here which will lead to two different ethical conclusions. Firstly, it can be assumed that a journalist is merely an intermediary between the politicians and their voters (consumers), and so therefore he should not interfere in the relationship between the politicians and the society. In other words, the role of a journalist (or, more broadly, the media in general) is to channel the flow of information between the realm of politics and the society, and any attempt to influence the content of information so channelled should be considered morally illegitimate.

According to the second assumption, a journalist acts as spokesman for the interests of the society versus the politics. His responsibilities include not only asking questions, but asking them in such a way as to prevent the politicians from concealing any information that is important to the public. Moreover, media are obliged to assess the statements made by the politicians in terms of their veracity, rationality, compliance with previous statements or any possible practical consequences that they may have, etc. The task of media is admittedly also to facilitate the communication between the politicians and the public, yet in relations with the the authority in power it is not a function of the biggest import.

When comparing both of these premises, it is straightforward to notice that the former is primarily characteristic of totalitarian systems where politicians do not wish anything to affect the way they communicate with the society. The second premise is typical of democratic systems where media are 'the fourth estate' and 'guardians of democracy'. However, the latter type of a relationship between media and the realm of politics is subject to several significant limitations which media sometimes seem to forget. First of all, media should be aware that the control function is in fact a function of service – both towards the public and the politicians. This means that media should not try to deliberately create political events, thus ceasing to be the fourth and becoming the first estate of authority. Similarly,

a journalist interviewing a politician cannot confuse the role of a reporter with the role of a prosecutor who does not ask but interrogates, waiting for every stumble of the panellist so that to use it against him.

I have mentioned above that one of the tasks of media in their relations with the world of politics should be to mediate in the transmission of information between the politicians and the public. However, the definition of media presented in Chapter I suggests that these entities should also provide for a place of social discussion, where not only the politicians and media people, but also various representatives of certain social groups might take the floor. When creating this forum for social discussion on political issues, media should also endeavour to ensure that no social group is deprived of their capacity to express valid comments and opinions. In addition, media should not participate in such discussions as a party to the dispute, as this would be contrary to the principle of objectivity. It is unacceptable, for example, to present the postulates of any professional group on strike as rightful and any refusal to meet them as a lack of social sensitivity on the part of the government.

Yet, it is not contradictory with media ethics to get involved in politics by certain journalists or individual media groups. The only condition that should be fulfilled in such a situation is the obligation to clearly inform the recipients that the political content so presented is not objective, because the medium in question is in favour of a particular party or political association[3]. It is also worthwhile distinguishing between the engagement on account of the political conviction of any given media management or its employees and engagement resulting from various types of ties with a political force in question (financial, personal, etc.). The first type of engagement can be found particularly often in left-wing media, which aim to present a 'leftist' system of values and vision of the world. The second type of engagement is in turn characteristic of public media, financed by the state, and local media. One should mention that the point here is about media being dependent on the political forces currently exercising power that results in the political involvement. Only the first kind of engagement can be morally justified but, as I have already mentioned, this is so on the assumption of the full transparency of one's political sympathy.

Of a particular relevance when it comes to the 'official' media-politics relationship is the principle that neither media nor politicians should step outside their roles. With regards to media, this means that they should not seek to influence voters' political sympathies, because then they become the very political power themselves. "Media, as J. Jastrzębski points out, that step onto the political scene and tend to pursue politics, instead of watching and commenting on it, lose their identity, leave their role and commit a form of usurpation"[4]. This is particularly important in cases of political journalism whose essence is to evaluate the actions

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3   Compare with Z. Sareło, *Media w służbie osoby...*, p. 103.
4   J. Jastrzębski, *Misja, „czwarta władza" czy biznes? O potrójnej naturze mediów*, in: *Media a demokracja...*, p. 29.

of the politicians. The ethical evaluation of any journalistic material must therefore be subject to the prior journalists' intent.

The implementation of the 'programme line' should not therefore take the form of an uncritical support for concrete political programmes. In practice, situations where media take the side of certain political projects lead to populism and the weakening of public discussions that are limited to presenting only one point of view and only from one side. In order to persuade the public to support their own views, media often resort to a form of moralism, particularly evident in the younger generation of journalists. The recipient who wants to form his or her own opinion on a given issue is in fact forced to familiarise first with the opinions of competing media and 'centre' any extreme evaluations. While it may help to shape the audience's ability to formulate their own judgements on the basis of a wholly biased information, it certainly does not serve to build trust in media. A recipient who is less critical or simply has less free time is completely devoid of any careful and valuable analysis.

When evaluating the political involvement of individual media, the recipient should also remember to exercise certain caution in formulating opinions. The reporting about the political life raises many difficulties, which despite the good will might not allow media to produce reports fully in line with what the politicians actually do. This is because information about politics, and especially opinions, is largely concerned with intentions, plans, personal sympathies, weak and strong characteristics of the actors on the political scene, and so on – which philosophy usually refers to as mental phenomena. Any content that is absolutely definite and easily verifiable belongs in the political life to a sphere of rarity, whereas media are largely predestined for guessing and analysing based on intuition rather than reality. It is for this reason, therefore, that many accounts of political events may sometimes cause the impression of being biased. This does not, however, result from a deliberate promotion of any given political party, but rather from a specific way of perceiving the world of politics by journalists and columnists.

Moreover, the engagement in the political life is not the same as engaging in the public sphere, which includes the politics. As long as the purpose of any such engagement is the common good, and not individual benefits of media themselves, then it should be assessed positively. Such an involvement seems to be particularly needed in the context of political transformation. As Regulski points out, "through elections fundamental decisions are handed over to a large, unadorned and uninvolved majority. (...) The hitherto active people are then withdrawing from the public life, being tired and discouraged by difficulties. Particularly dangerous here is the refusal to participate by younger generations"[5]. One of the responsibilities of media should therefore be to 'activate' the society, that is to encourage its participation in the elections (what media in Poland actually do).

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5 *Samorząd i demokracja lokalna. Osiągnięcia, zagrożenia i dylematy*, as edited by J. Regulskiego, Warszawa 2002, p. 4.

Another such duty should be to reduce public distrust in state institutions. However, the problem of trust towards the state seems to be more difficult, because in many cases such public distrust is considered justified, and media cannot deliberately refrain from criticising the abuse and incompetence. On the other hand, however, any criticism which is not accompanied by reflections on the possible ways to improve the functioning of the state may in the long run bring more damage than good. Politicians are well aware of this fact, although many attempts to make media and the society more aware of these negative effects of presenting state institutions in a negative light are attacked on the grounds of interfering with the principles of media independence. Therefore, any evaluation of critical statements, especially those formulated by the politicians, is only possible with regard to specific situations. This process in any way must be left to the intuition of the person in question, thus allowing to evaluate the intentions of the criticism in a way more or less consistent with the reality.

Despite many idealistic assurances of dialogue and mutual communication, many politicians continue to treat media as a tool that can be freely used to win the support of certain voters. The degree of effectiveness of using them in the political strife is a result of technical proficiency that can be mastered through training. A few years ago, one of the political parties ordered a pamphlet that described this phenomenon as follows: "the knowledge of the latest developments in the field of affective psychology and persuasion techniques allows to increase the effectiveness of every sentence a politician makes in a radical and controlled manner. Obviously, we cannot guarantee a million of additional votes, but these methods allow any politician to influence their voters, deal with public debates and maximize the profits of every appearance in media in a more effective way"[6]. The popularity that professional political marketing people enjoy among the politicians indicates that this position is by no means isolated.

Should media remain passive in face of certain attempts by the politicians to use them for skilful political games or should they try to counteract it, for example, by displaying the real intentions of those politicians while convincing the audience that they actually witness a well-prepared staging? If media remain passive, they will be accused of 'complicity' in the political spectacle. Yet, if they dare to expose this form of political marketing as an ethically suspicious activity, then politicians will accuse them of interfering with the politics. How should the principle of objectivity be understood in this situation?

First of all, it should be noted that the mere fact of using media for some 'political' purposes (and thus for the aims pursued by the politicians) is not reprehensible as long as both the purposes of such use and the means so utilised are morally justified. One such goal can be simply to convey information about the current or planned activities, while convincing the public of their rightfulness. Ethical dilem-

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6   A. Batko, B. Messner, *Język perswazji w marketingu politycznym czyli dlaczego niektórzy politycy prawie zawsze zyskują poparcie większości wyborców*, Warszawa. Neither the publication date, nor the political party who had ordered the pamphlet was given.

mas arise when media become a tool of political fighting where the main purpose is the good of the politicians in question and not the welfare of the public.

Politicians are eager to use verbal means of communication to engage the imagination and emotions of their audiences. Persuasive statements are not characteristic of either a totalitarian or a democratic system. This is demonstrated, for example, by the fact that the amount of linguistic means impacting on emotions appears to be significant in statements made by the politicians both after 1989 and during the Polish People's Republic. According to a research conducted in the early sixties of the last century by M. Głowiński, when it comes to a political and journalistic discourse, irrational elements dominated over the rational ones. M. Głowiński distinguished six such elements: an arbitrary creation of values, striving for the ritualization of certain actions, the conviction of the great power of an effective language communication, describing the world with slogans, typical single direction of messages, treating oneself as an evaluator while not being subject to evaluation[7]. If we compare these observations with the situation in today's media, we might observe some basic similarities. First of all, all these phenomena can still be seen in media; only the 'evaluator' has changed: while in the period of the Polish People's Republic the quality of media was decided upon by the politicians, the same function today is fulfilled by the media themselves. As noted by I. Kamińska - Szmaj, the language of propaganda has ceased to be identical with the language of politics[8], but it has not been yet eliminated from media discourse. We no longer pay attention to it, because there is no single political power with an exclusive right to use it. The propaganda language of the Polish People's Republic was similar to a monophonic transmission, while the language of modern propaganda has become significantly polyphonic[9]. The hidden persuasion message is not only contained within statements made by the politicians. Also informational coverages, whose purpose should only be to inform about certain events, are often inundated with hidden persuasion. It can therefore be said that together with democratisation of the country, the right to use various means of persuasion has become an egalitarian law.

Of course, not every statement of a politician or journalist whose goal is to influence the sphere of imagination and emotion of the recipient should be regarded as a form of propaganda. Although the concept of propaganda is quite blurred, it seems, however, that in the media discourse it signifies a form of persuasion the purpose of which is to convince the society as a whole to the correctness of certain endeavours on the part of the government in question. In the period of the Polish People's Republic, propaganda was morally reprehensible because of its connections with the promotion of a communist ideology, which for many reasons

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7   Compare with M. Głowiński, *Nowomowa*. in: *Współczesny język polski. Encyklopedia kultury polskiej XX wieku*, as edited by J. Bartmińskiego, Wrocław 1993, V. II, p. 164 – 167.

8   I. Kamińska-Szmaj, *Słowa na wolności*, Wrocław 2001, p. 7.

9   Another reason may be that the language of political propaganda of the People's Republic of Poland was socially alienated, i.e. it began to be unequivocally recognized as a tool of the totalitarian system and was thus rejected. After 1989, the repertoire of a linguistic propaganda was changed. Compare with J. Bralczyk, *O języku polskiej polityki*..., p. 38. In order to avoid any associations with the totalitarian system, euphemisms such as 'political persuasion', 'political marketing', etc. are used instead of 'propaganda'.

was not accepted by the majority of the population (also because of moral reasons). Assuming, however, that the government's endeavours are rightful, could it be morally acceptable to convince the society of such rightfulness also through a form of persuasion and propaganda?

While some opinions on this issue are divided, any moral assessment of propaganda seems to be sometimes included in its very definition. In the common language, propaganda is usually associated with a form of manipulation, that is a morally reprehensible behaviour. According to some authors, however, such a view is not quite correct, as propaganda can also fulfil a positive purpose. Three Polish researchers, B. Dobek-Ostrowska, J. Fras and B. Ociepka, pointed out to five basic distinguishing features of propaganda: it integrates any given political system, it motivates individuals to act in accordance with certain intentions of the political authority, it interprets events, it misinforms (as it is typically used against one's political rivals) and it exposes fallacious information. No ethical dilemmas are evident when it comes to the very last feature, whereas any assessment of the four previous features is only possible with respect to a particular government, political system or specific intentions of propagandists in question, etc. If the intentions of the political power are, for example, to build civil society, then motivating people to certain civic activities does not seem to raise any objections[10].

Another form of using media for political purposes is terrorism. "The phenomenon of terrorism, as J. C. Bertrand writes, could not exist without the involvement of media: terrorism needs publicity and it is trying to convert media into a propaganda tool"[11]. In these situations media are faced with an ethical dilemma: on one hand, they are obliged to inform the public about different events, including terrorist attacks, but on the other, the very reason of there being such attacks is the fact that they are immediately reported by the media. Therefore, it can be even said that the relevant addressee of any terrorist attack are media. However, there is an important argument to support the act of informing about the terrorism. The fight against any form of organised violence is actually much easier and more effective when the public is well aware of the threats, when it agrees with the necessary restrictions of personal freedoms and when it cooperates with the law enforcement agencies. Hence, the achievement of such a state of social awareness is only possible when full information on the acts of terrorism are made available.

However, terrorist attacks are not the only events intended to draw the attention of media. Certain politicians alike, particularly in some situations concerning, for example, poor poll results or insufficient media presence, do tend to resort to the preparation of events in order to 'come out' in media and thus to reach their potential voters. This purpose is also served by some 'shrewd' speeches and press conferences where they do not have anything interesting or important to say, etc. Media are thus used as a tool for political infighting, and their situation is all the more difficult because any refusal to report of such political 'events' is confronted

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10 It should be noted, however, that in everyday language the mere description of certain media content as propaganda connotes a negative ethical evaluation.

11 J. C. Bertrand, *Deontologia mediów...*, p. 112.

with accusations of being biased or favouring one political association and not the other. By transmitting such information, media are generally aware of themselves as victims of manipulation by the politicians, but on the other hand, they are unable to oppose this influence by a mere refusal. The politicians also tend to make use of the fact that media have the capacity to influence the society. In order to deny any responsibility for all sorts of negative phenomena, politicians resort to putting the blame on media for their own failures. The most frequent allegations concern the impact of media on crime levels, widespread demoralisation, school aggression, manipulation of people, etc. This type of behaviour should be reported by media with a suitable commentary.

Certain attempts to exert the influence on media may stem from the conviction that unintended media actions might bring about a number of serious social evils. According to some authors, media contribute to the rise of social inequalities, the upsurge in crime levels or the break-up of social ties in traditional communities, etc. In such a situation, politicians have to choose to respect the principle of media independence or to act for the good of the society.

This choice looks like an ethical dilemma but in fact it is not, as there are indirect ways of exerting the influence on the society by media and these are ethically unobjectionable. The most important of these is the promotion of 'media culture'[12], that is the initiation of educational actions aimed at increasing the level of competence of the recipients. What also does not really seem contradictory to media ethics is the open criticism of certain phenomena occurring in media, but on the condition that it only serves to shape a social climate of dissent to any ethical violations occurring in media, rather than forcing on the public one's own party or government.

On the other hand, it is a perturbing tendency that media look at any attempts to assess their work by politicians or anonymous recipients with apparent reluctance and sometimes even hostility, while retaining the exclusive right to make such judgments. Their opposition to a critique by the politicians is justified only in cases where there is a fear that the interests of the politicians, rather than the welfare of the public, are taken into account. In any case, however, it does not seem appropriate to give media the right to 'protest' to every critical statement about them for the sole reason that it was formulated by the politicians.

The temptation to introduce certain prohibitions and instructions for media to follow can also be attributed to the belief (which is quite apparent) that they form an integral part of the society, influencing how everything works. The politicians might either seek to limit media's harmful influence on the society (as it has been just mentioned) or they might treat media as a tool to shape the society in a way they see fit. When it comes to the second assumption, one important objection should be made. The very fact that media are an element of the society as an institution does not mean that politicians have the moral right to direct them as they wish. The governance of the state is not the same as the governance of the

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12   P. Sorlin, *Mass media*, Warszawa 2001, p. 143.

society. And besides, the exercise of power should be about solving problems and not 'incapacitating' the society and managing all those who are subject to such governance. In other words, the politicians have no moral right to lead the society because this is not their constituent role. Of course, this logic applies to situations where we discuss the interference with media dealings.

It is clear that media compete with each other and in order to attract mass audiences, they limit their messages to sensation and entertainment. This phenomenon is referred to (also by media) as tabloidisation and it has had its impact also on the very way of conducting public debates. According to R. Skarżyński, media dominated by the art of words are long gone, and today we live in a media world where the image prevails. Analysing the author's reflections, one can draw the conclusion that he notices both positive and negative side of this state of affairs. A certainly negative occurrence is the levelling of public debate which is reduced to simple advertising slogans. While positive, according to the author, is the fact that it is now impossible to use media to promote certain ideologies.

Obviously, the inability to propagate ideological content[13] through media does not in itself suffice to assume the tabloidisation of media as a positive phenomenon. In order to convince the society of the rightfulness of certain views, one needs to use the category of truth, because it is only through the truth that it is possible to create the impression that the presented content is in line with the reality. Meanwhile, any attempt to transform political debate into media show seems to exclude the category of truth beyond the range of content that can be presented in media. After all, there is some element of play or game, and a pretence inherent to the show, but this actually does not leave any room for the truth category. The tabloid media cannot be even claimed to convey a false image of the world, as such a statement assumes the possibility of referring the media image to the objective reality.

It is for this reason that many politicians tend to function in media not so much as the representatives of different political options, proposing different ways of problem solving, but as images aimed at building certain positive associations with given political parties[14]. This fact can be easily observed on the example of parties enjoying a somehow underwhelming support of the electorate, which try to attract the viewer's attention through various spectacular actions or scandalous speeches[15]. To replace the word with a picture might also lead to other disturbing effects. The range of matters that can be described through an image is much narrower and it is governed in its very own way. "We are mainly excited, as R. Kapuściński

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13   Media are an important part of ideological propaganda and this is proved by Adolph Hitler's statement: "Without cars, sound movies and radio, there would be no victory for national socialism." As cited in R. Grunberger, *Historia społeczna Trzeciej Rzeszy"*, Warszawa 1977, p. 288.

14   Compare with R. Skarżyński, *Koniec ideologii w demokracji medialnej*, in: *Doktryny polityczne i prawne u progu XXI wieku*, as edited by M. Maciejewski and M. Marszta, Kolonia 2002, p. 30 *et seq*.

15   In this way also ecological groups are active. Any attempts to cling to trees or hang banners on factory chimneys are in fact attempts to use 'tabloidized' media for one's own purposes. Compare with S. Czapnik, *Ugrupowania zielonych jako uczestnicy sfery komunikowania politycznego w Polsce w latach 1989 – 2004*, in: *Media masowe w demokratyzujących się...*, p. 186.

wrote, about what is happening in the narrowest political circles. They are the greatest fascination source for our media culture (...). Today, media tend to exploit the tertiary political games"[16].

On the other hand, one should remember that describing the political life forms only a part of the content, and for many national newspapers, not to mention electronic media, this is merely a marginal content. As noted by Jan Wróbel in 'Przegląd Powszechny' magazine, the majority of political news does not attract the viewers because they turn out to be terribly boring. Media often tend to marginalise or omit certain events only because they seem to be too little entertaining. Yet, one should also note that many media entities, especially at the local level, play virtually no role in the political life of the country, and so it is difficult to require from them to report on all important political events.

The problem of tabloidisation will be further discussed in the next chapter, but it is worth mentioning here that it can (and probably must) be one of the forms of communication of the politicians with their electorate, yet it cannot be the only or dominant form. Furthermore, it does not seem to raise ethical objections as long as the politicians do not attempt to reduce their own image and activities to simple slogans and images. The politics is a difficult operation because it involves a general choice of the lesser evil, that is acting for the benefit of the general public at the expense of certain groups. Fearing to lose support from some part of the electorate, the politicians are often reluctant to admit to actions that bring measurable but usually unavoidable damage to some social groups, and the tabloidisation of media certainly makes it much easier to hide the essence of certain activities from the rest of society[17].

A reverse phenomenon in turn can be observed on the side of media and it concerns the depicting of politics as inherently bad. The politicians are often presented as egoists interested only in their own careers and their own party interests. Journalists conducting interviews assume that the goal of any politician is to conceal the truth from the public, while the goal of a journalist is to unmask such hidden intentions. It is impossible to resist the impression that media consciously produce a sense of tension and distrust when dealing with the politicians, thus sending a clear message to the viewer that they represent his interests and in any 'clash' with the world of politics they are on his side[18].

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16   R. Kapuściński, *Zawód dziennikarz*, „Tygodnik Powszechny" 2001 – 06 – 03.

17   According to some theorists, the essence of any political activity in the modern world is to decide what should be displayed publicly and how. The argument is also about the 'telegenic' politicians, that is their ability to appear in media, and about the blurring of the border between the politics, 'political marketing' and public relations. Compare with Blumler, M. Gurevith, *The Crisis of Public Communication*, London 1995, p. 27 *et seq*.

18   J. L. Cury summarises the outcomes of such media attitudes in the post-communist countries as follows: "the media seemed to have convinced their audiences that their lives and the politicians were going in the wrong direction. Paradoxically, free media, being one of the goals and symbols of liberalisation, have become a symbol of 'non-civilization' of the new post-communist systems." J. L. Cury, *Transformacja mediów w Europie Środkowo – Wschodniej*, in: *Media masowe w demokratyzujących się...*, p. 113.

Often therefore we actually have to deal with two types of situations: a genuine media-politics conflict and a sort of hidden alliance, whereby both parties agree to present the debate in a form of quasi-theatrical spectacle in which each actor has to play a specific role. This spectacle is also presented in such a way that the recipient is given the impression that he participates in an authentic political debate and not in a media stand-up which sole purpose is to attract the attention of the audience.

Another serious problem here is the process of politicisation of public media, especially radio and television. When the National Council on Radio and Television was established in 1990 in Poland, it was assumed that its members, who chose to resign from any political participation for the duration of their six-month term in office, would retain their apolitical status. Yet, this assumption proved to be wrong. The practice has shown that the Council's members are elected to act for the benefit of the political parties which nominated them. The very institution which was supposed to guard the independence of media against any political pressures has itself became a tool of political influence.

From the point of view of media ethics, this is obviously a reprehensible phenomenon, although the blame here is to be put primarily on the politicians and not the media. The dependent nature of public radio and television is not characteristic of Poland alone, and the reasons for this state of affairs should be analysed particularly diligently when investigating the very foundations of the functioning of democracy without blaming this or another political party. As noted by P. Gross, conflicts over public media do also arise within the individual political parties, between the party leaders and the government, between the government and the president, etc. These conflicts very often concern some core competencies over such issues as dismissing members of media councils, controlling budgets or simply deciding on the programme content control[19].

The dependence of public media on the politicians is undoubtedly a serious challenge for democracy, but it is worthwhile to make some distinctions when looking at this issue from the point of view of ethics. Public media are subject to this form of dependence primarily through various formal and informal personal relationships. These connections do not, however, concern merely public media and commercial media are alike subjected to a certain form of political dependence. In addition, very often media and business careers of such people as Robert Hersant, the creator of the largest French news group, Leo Kirch, the owner of a few television stations in Germany, one of the major CDU sponsors and Chancellor Helmut Kohl's friend, or Robert Murdoch, the owner of News Corporation[20], prove the fact that media owners show a similar attitude to the world of politics as politicians show towards the media, namely they see this relation as an effective tool in achieving their own goals. In this case, there is a reverse dependence involving instrumental treatment of politics by the media.

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19   Compare with P. Gross, *Entangled Evolution*, Baltimore 2002, p. 76 *et seq.*
20   Compare with K. Cira, *Otoczenie polityczne a kształtowanie strategii przedsiębiorstw medialnych*, in: *Media a demokracja...*, p. 237 *et seq.*

Yet, the principal discontentment here seems to be aroused by the 'ideological' dependence of media. If a public media journalist does not join the informal backbone of the ruling party, and even dares to criticise it openly, he puts himself at a serious risk of losing the job. The very fact that there is usually a form of staff substitution concerning a significant proportion of public media journalists after each election confirms the very necessity for an ideological submission to the victorious party. Any such staff replacement in public media might sometimes give the impression that these media are treated by the politicians as a constituent part of their government administration, thus being responsible for shaping the society in a way that the party in question considers appropriate.

In addition, even if the ruling party failed to dominate public media, this would not imply the independence of the latter, nor any lack of their political links with the opposition. D. Roszkowska inventories the following manifestations of the dependence of public media on the politicians: almost direct state control, making the highest public television and radio authorities dependant on the ruling party, ensuring a high level of 'integration' between media employees and the politicians as well as strong ideological and philosophical divisions among media employees[21].

It is also important to emphasise the influence of journalists on the current political events, for example, by broadcasting various scandals. S. Mocek wonders whether media revealing such scandals are 'antidotes to politics', whether they form a factor 'depoliticising it' or maybe a form 'remediating one of its burnt fields'[22]. It is worth noting that the author does not treat politics as a way of acting for the common good but as everything that politicians do (except their private life). In this way, even an obvious violation of law by a politician is to be defined as politics. It should be noted that such an understanding of the concept of politics seems to be characteristic for the majority of media in Poland.

A separate issue here concerns the actual and usually financial state aid afforded to public media. While any such assistance by the state through a variety of subsidies does not raise ethical controversies, some disagreements arise in cases of unofficial support. Some examples of this type of backing can be provided by financial grants to large news agencies such as Reuters, which during the Margaret Thatcher government was not only ensured some loan guarantees, but also an investor. A similar form of support is received by various other news agencies in other countries even though they openly declare that they are not state agencies[23].

It is worth noting that not all of these ways of limiting media freedoms deserve a negative ethical evaluation. For instance, those actions with the aim to protect the public against any unethical media conduct are desirable and certain legal regulations mentioned above can be included in this category. However, this inter-

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21 D. Roszkowska, *Wyzwania demokracji medialnej*, w *Almanach 2002. Przyszłości mediów*, as edited by K. Doktorowicz. Katowice 2002, p. 141.
22 Compare with S. Mocek, *Dziennikarze po komunizmie*..., p. 14.
23 Compare with M. Komorowski, *Media za granicą*, in: *Dziennikarstwo a świat mediów*..., p. 113.

ference with the independence of media is not tantamount to media's dependence on the politicians. The argument that politicians have the moral right to subjugate media to their own goals as long as this serves the common good seems to be unsatisfactory anyway. It is also possible to plead here with the will of voters and argue that by casting a majority vote for a given political party, they have presumably opted to subjugate public media to that political party to carry out its electoral programme. Yet, this argument is based on a misunderstanding of the concept of common good. In democratic countries, one of the most important elements of the common good is the existence of the freedom of expression guaranteeing the right to information and so to free media. An action which is contrary to the principle of media independence is based on the assumption of higher and more important values than the freedom as such, but this assumption is actually incompatible with the system of values underlying the very democracy. Hence, this system recognises the freedom of expression as one of the fundamental values, the limitation of which might be sanctioned only in the name of protecting the good of an individual. It should be also stressed that an effective use of media in a democratic state is possible only through procuring lies, such as this that media are truly free and independent from the will of the politicians. Thus, by subjugating media to his own purposes, a politician is in breach of two principles: the principle of freedom and the principle of truth.

Another thing that should be observed here is that any public authority is a subject towards which media have certain privileges, the most crucial of which is the right to information. Although this law is not unlimited, because there is information whose disclosure would threaten the common good, any limits upon it cannot become an instrument of holding the power in the hands of the politicians. In addition, the duty of the public authority is not only to respond to media inquiries, but also to demonstrate a form of activity in the transmission of information. This point is not just about the sort of information that different government organs might arbitrarily consider important to the society, but above all about the information on the very authority itself[24]. Hence, any underestimation or conscious circumvention of these obligations by the authorities can be regarded as an attempt to manipulate media and indirectly through them also the public.

The relationships and dependencies between media and the world of politics pose certain threats not only to media freedoms, but also to their overall ethical standing. In pursuing their own goals, politicians often resort to methods which are contrary to ethics and by engaging the media, they entangle them in these obnoxious actions. Media are not always able to defend themselves against their reliance on the politicians, especially since the existence of some of them (typically public media but not only) depends to a large extent on the politicians' decisions. It therefore seems appropriate to claim that the principle of media[25] ethics, according to which all forms of media dependence on the world of politics are unacceptable,

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24   W. Adamczyk, *Prawo do informacji. Standardy europejskie a realia polskie*, in: *Media wobec integracji europejskiej. Wybrane problemy*, as edited by T. Wallasa, Poznań 2000, p. 31.
25   Within the ethics of the politics there should be a rule that it is unacceptable to exert any form of influence on media.

should be 'liberalised' by adding the phrase 'as far as it is possible'. The absolute nature should then have the rule with regard to the prohibition on any violations of the general ethical standards of media (the principle of objectivity, truthfulness, privacy, etc.) in the name of one's political interests[26].

One should also consider whether media should remain passive in face of a skilful manipulation by the politicians, or whether they should try to counteract any such attempts, for example by showing the real intentions of the politicians and convincing their audiences that they actually witness a well-prepared staging. In other words, this is about the right of media to intervene in the content of those messages that manifest violation of certain ethical principles (for example, if they are evidently untrue, they refer to stereotypes against certain minorities, they call on for illegal actions, etc.). If media remain passive, then they run the risk of being accused of 'complicity' in the political spectacle. But then, if they dare to unmask the 'political marketing' as an ethically suspicious activity, they might be accused by the politicians of getting involved in the politics and lacking the objectivity.

It seems that in the most obvious cases, media should have the right to refuse to convey certain statements or materials, hence they should be entitled to a form of censorship. In practice, however, this problem is more complicated, because any content that in an explicit and obvious manner fulfils the abovementioned conditions is fairly rare. In order to avoid the accusations of acting contrary to some generally accepted norms, politicians professing certain extreme doctrines do not tend to express such views overtly. Therefore, frequently the proper meaning of a given message is disguised in its content, although it is not too difficult for its intended audiences or for media employees to decipher the understanding. Every so often, the only way out from this situation is to provide a critical commentary, but it should be formulated in such a way that media will not be targeted with allegations of unequal treatment of certain political actors.

Furthermore, it is even more difficult to answer the question on the proper attitude of media to a phenomenon called black political PR. The term denotes a process of presenting a negative image of one's political opponents in media, often using methods that raise serious ethical concerns both in politics and in business[27]. This form of PR is often supported by certain media or individual journalists, which in the long run contributes to a considerable loss of credibility by media as such. These actions are obviously contrary to the principle of truthfulness and so they should not occur.

Despite many idealistic assurances of dialogue and mutual communication, many politicians continue to treat media as a tool that can be freely used to win the support of certain voters. The degree of effectiveness of using them in the political strife is a result of technical proficiency that can be mastered through training. A few years ago, one of the political parties ordered a pamphlet that described this

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26 This is necessary because of the fact that media do not have the impact on much of the political environment. Compare with G. Gierszewska and M. Romanowska. *op cit*. p. 78.
27 The reasons of a negative attitude to some PR endeavours are discussed by J. Olędzki. Compare with J. Olędzki, *Media, reklama i public relations w Polsce*, Warszawa 2005, p. 18.

phenomenon as follows: "the knowledge of the latest developments in the field of affective psychology and persuasion techniques allows to increase the effectiveness of every sentence a politician makes in a radical and controlled manner. Obviously, we cannot guarantee a million of additional votes, but these methods allow any politician to influence their voters, deal with public debates and maximize the profits of every appearance in media in a more effective way"[28]. The popularity that professional political marketing people enjoy among the politicians indicates that this position is by no means isolated.

It is also worth emphasising that when dealing with the politicians, the duty of media is to take the utmost care of the quality of public debate rather than of one's own interests. As noted by K. Cira, "many media entrepreneurs operating especially in the so-called young democracies were deluded by the assumption that because they bear the 'fourth estate' status, they can effectively control the other three pillars, thus neutralising any adverse legislative and structural measures"[29].

In non-democratic states, a means of limiting media freedoms is the preventive and repressive censorship. While in democratic countries politicians usually seek to adopt indirect and informal forms of media pressures. One of these is an open criticism of media (or some part of them) for the alleged lack of objectivity, where the underlying aim is to induce media to apply a form of self-censorship. Yet another way to limit media freedoms is to introduce certain legislation that either forces them to or prohibits them from broadcasting specific content. Special regulations may also limit the advertising time, specify how to mark the content that children should not watch, prohibit excessive consolidation, etc. In democracies, however, an exception here are the provisions regulating any contacts between the politicians and media (an example could be the rule prohibiting broadcasting election spots two days before the election or the rule requiring to present programmes prepared by the election committees of certain political parties)[30].

In general, the reason why media seem to be unable to retain full independence as against the world of politics is that it is virtually impossible to establish a healthy partnership between these two realms. The politicians treat media as a tool for achieving their political goals (with a general belief in the effectiveness of this tool) or they treat media as an adversary who needs to be fought against just as it happens with other rivals on the political scene. These two fundamental positions towards media can be termed as instrumental and authoritarian. The authoritarian stance consists of the desire to subordinate any entity which is considered to threaten one's own existence and to include it in the realm directly under one's own control. This stance is related to the problem of the attitude that political elites

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28   A. Batko, B. Messner, *Język perswazji w marketingu politycznym czyli dlaczego niektórzy politycy prawie zawsze zyskują poparcie większości wyborców*, Warszawa. Neither the publication date, nor the political party who had ordered the pamphlet was given.

29   K. Cira, *Otoczenie polityczne a kształtowanie* strategii..., p. 235.

30   It is also worth adding that any attempts to regulate contacts of the politicians with media expose the former to certain allegations of violating the basic principles of a democratic order. Examples here could include the accusations against the Speaker of the Polish Parliament, Juliusz Dorn, who put forward a proposal to restrict journalists' access to certain places in the Parliament.

show towards the concept of power as such, and its final result is often the actual 'appropriation' of media. The practical manifestations of both positions are similar: the desire to impose on media one's own rules of the game, hostile reactions to criticism, personal attacks on journalists, etc.

The role of the politicians should be to protect media, both public and private, from being possessed by individuals or narrow groups of people. The desire of the politicians to take control of media is contrary to this principle, and it furthermore gives the impression that media need some sort of shielding from those who have been in fact elected to guarantee this protection. On the other hand, it is quite difficult to make politicians take the full responsibility for this state of affairs, all the more because clear divisions as to various political sympathies are also visible among the very media employees. Legal regulations may, to a certain extent, improve the situation[31], but they cannot guarantee the independence of media if they do not want to be impartial in the first place.

It is also difficult to assess the degree of media dependence on the politics in Poland, especially if it was to be the evaluation of all media, without dividing them into local and national, electronic and printed. As noted by W. Chorązki, what is particularly strong in local media is the phenomenon of 'silent interference', whereby politicians take the advantage of possessing certain goods (thus enforcing positive behaviours) and use technical means of repression such as withholding information, obstructing the work of editorial offices, resigning from subscriptions for state offices, etc.[32] Any such assessment is difficult also on account of the need to consider various processes involved in the political transformation. "Ironically, as J. L. Cury notes, the reaction of many former oppositionists, journalists, communists, who did not deal with the politics but who changed into democrats, was an attempt to control mass media in ways other than through a formal censorship."[33] Among these limitations the author mentions the following: the aspiration of political parties to have their own press bodies (among other through the privatization of communist magazines), attempts to allocate airtime on radio and television to political parties, verbal aggression against journalists' criticism, using defamation laws or disclosure of state secrets regulations against the journalists or controlling the process of filling media posts. Similar attempts to restrain the freedom of media were also made by businessmen in the first phases of the transformation. These included, among others, holding press conferences where journalists were given sample of goods, expecting positive reports in return, or even handing out ready-made articles[34].

Any of the abovementioned relationships between media and the politics can be effective as long as the recipient is unaware of their existence, because only then can he be led to certain desired behaviours (voting on specific politicians and buy-

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31 Such a function can be fulfilled by the ban on concentrating media in the hands of one owner. This prohibition applies to the press in Germany.

32 W. Chorązki, *Prasa regionalistyczna a okresie transformacji*, in: *Regionalizm, lokalizm, media*, as edited by E. Chudziński, Warszawa 2001, p. 122

33 J. L. Cury, *Transformacja mediów w Europie Środkowo – Wschodniej*, in: *Media masowe w demokratyzujących się...*, p. 101.

34 *Ibid*, p. 106.

ing media-advertised products). This means that the recipient can easily defend himself against the effects of media-political alliances simply by refusing to relate to those media which act unethically. And because in many cases it is the only way to counteract any ethical violation, it might be true to assume that media recipients are morally obliged to break their contact with such media or withdraw their support for those politicians who manipulate media to present a false but beneficial for them image of the reality.