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From the communist doctrine of media to free media. The concept of a new information order in the Round Table Agreements

As a result of the decisions made by the great powers after the second world war, Poland found itself a part of the Eastern Bloc, within the Soviet Union's sphere of influence and became the People's Republic of Poland (PRL) – one of the communist bloc countries, modelled on the USSR's communist political system and media doctrine, known as the “Leninist concept of the press”. This provided a complete subordination of mass media to political power, which in the People's Republic of Poland was given to the Polish United Workers' Party (the Polish communist party). The media became a tool of the communist party, which held the actual, absolute power and used it to force an ideological impact on society, hoping that it could use the media to shape the beliefs, attitudes, and even behaviour of the people in accordance with their expectations. The PRL media system was characterised by features typical to all totalitarian systems, such as the basic control of power over the media market through the control of licensing within the publishing business (publishing any press title required permission from the authorities), and enacting censorship. The initial control of media content was supervised by a specially appointed body, the Central Office for the Control of the Press, Publications and Performances (*Główny Urząd Kontroli Prasy, Publikacji i Widowisk*).¹

In the PRL, the press was only open to “collective” publishers (there was no private press, so only institutions and organisations could engage in press publishing). Market mechanisms did not function, because

¹ See: T. Goban-Klas, *Niepokorna orkiestra medialna: dyrygenci i wykonawcy polityki informacyjnej w Polsce po 1944 roku*, Warszawa 2004.

the press market, like the entire economy, was centrally planned and controlled. It was the party that determined the number of press titles published (by giving permission or refusing) and their market position (deciding how much paper will be allocated to the printing). Press development was limited by paper shortages, which meant that throughout the time of the PRL, there were not enough publications compared to the demand, and in addition their nature and contents reflected not so much the interests and expectations of the readers but rather the current information policy of the party. This press deficit was mainly related to magazines (colour press) in the entertainment or even non-political spheres: women's magazines, newspapers for children, hobby, travel, etc. The daily newspapers were not lacking, especially those published by the structure of the communist party of a clear political and propagandistic nature, as the party's power considered it as the most important and primary segment of the press market.

The monopolistic position in the press market was held by one publishing company – the Press-Book-Movement Workers' Publishing Cooperative (*Robotnicza Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza Prasa-Książka-Ruch* or RSW), owned by the Central Committee of the communist party (*Komitet Centralny PZPR*). It was established in 1947 (then called RSW "Prasa") and took over other, often larger, publishers and titles issued by them (in 1948, the publishing house Wiedza (Knowledge) and in 1951 the publisher Czytelnik (Reader), the biggest publisher of the post-war period in the popular press) and quickly gained the position of the largest press publisher in Poland. RSW established a monopoly in 1972, when it included in its structure the only press distribution company in Poland, Ruch (Movement). After the merger, during the two last decades of the PRL, RSW was publishing approximately 85 per cent of the press titles in Poland (more accurately: 92 per cent of newspapers and over 70 per cent of magazines). RSW was the exclusive distributor of the press, owned the majority of printing companies and printing houses in the country, and even its own research institution of high international standing, the Press Research Centre (*Ośrodek Badań Prasoznawczych*), which cooperated with media studies institutions around the world.

On the other hand, since 1960 radio and television functioned under the supervision of Radiokomitet (Radio Committee), an institution subjected to the supervision of the government and party. By the end of the PRL only the national Polish Radio (broadcasting four nationwide programmes and with 17 regional branches) and Polish Television (two nationwide programmes) were in operation. From the 70s, party authorities

considered television to be the main medium in fulfilling a political role and they fully controlled it, using it for the propaganda purposes.²

It was within this media system that the opposition found itself when it became active in the late 1970s. The democratisation of the media system was also one of the main demands of the Solidarity movement (*NSZZ Solidarność*) in 1980-81, with journalists active in the Association of Polish Journalists (*Stowarzyszenie Dziennikarzy Polskich*), which was fighting for change. By the end of the 1980s this was not yet possible, because the rulers believed that control of the media was essential for effective governance. The deep political, economic and social crisis in the late 1980s made them aware of the inevitability of change, which led to the decision of beginning talks with the opposition on the democratisation of the existing system.³

Work on the concept of a new information order

After several months of preparation and on-going exploratory talks between the years 1988–1989 the Round Table Talks began – the negotiations for the changes that were about to take place in the Polish political system, economy, society and media system. The Round Table Talks were held from 6 February to 5 April 1989 with the participation of representatives of the authorities forming the party coalition and representatives of the main opposition groups, concentrated around the management of Solidarity (*Solidarność*), also known as the civic side. The negotiations took place in the presence of observers appointed by the authorities of the Catholic Church in Poland. The result of more than two months of work was the signing of the Round Table Agreements (*Porozumienia Okrągłego Stołu*) on 5 April 1989 – a political contract under which Poland would begin the transition from the People's Republic's "real socialism" to democracy and a market economy.⁴

One of the points of the Round Table Agreements was a "Report on the work of the Sub-Committee on the Media"⁵ containing a description of the changes to the media system agreed on by the committee appointed

² See: K. Pokorna-Ignatowicz, *Telewizja w systemie politycznym i medialnym PRL. Między polityką a widzem*, Kraków 2003.

³ More about media's activities in PRL in: R. Habielski, *Polityczna historia mediów w Polsce w XX wieku*, Warszawa 2009 oraz D. Grzelewska, R. Habielski, A. Kozieł, J. Osica, L. Piwońska-Pomykało, *Prasa, radio i telewizja w Polsce. Zarys dziejów*, Warszawa 2001, pp. 143–210.

⁴ See: A. Dudek, *Pierwsze lata III Rzeczypospolitej 1989 – 2001*, Kraków 2004, pp. 32–42.

⁵ *Sprawozdanie z prac Podzespołu ds. Środków Masowego Przekazu*, [in:] *Okrągły Stół dokumenty i materiały*, ed. W. Borodziej and A. Garlicki, Warszawa 2004, Vol. 4, pp. 31–37.

specifically for this purpose, provisionally called the media sub-committee or *podstolik medialny* (literally, a media sub-table), which consisted of negotiators and experts representing both contracting parties, the ruling and the opposition. The media sub-committee was deliberating from the first meeting on 17 February to the last one – the sixth – on 22 March. The work of the team was led by two co-chairmen: representing the government side was Bogdan Jachacz (PAP editor) and representing the civic side was Krzysztof Kozłowski (editor of *Tygodnik Powszechny*).

Both negotiating sides “shared a belief in the need to build a new information order,” but “it was probably the only point upon which there was a consensus”.⁶ Rulers feared the consequences of introducing market principles in the media, and especially the loss of control over the media. They were also afraid of the consequences of breaking existing monopolies that were subordinated to them (the RSW publishing company and Radiokomitet), and above all, they were afraid of freedom of the media, as they were “brought up” on the communist doctrine of the media and were convicted that it is a necessary “tool” for those in power to have the media and journalists subordinated to their directives. The opposition demanded pluralism in the media market and ensured freedom of speech as well as the introduction of rules under which the media operates in Western democracies. Agreeing to specific solutions preceded by long and stormy discussions took several weeks, but because both parties wanted to reach a compromise and both sides emphasised their sincere intentions and respect for the opponents, from week to week their positions became closer.

“Report from the work of the mass media committee”

On 5 April 1989 the final version of the Round Table Agreements (*Porozumienia Okrągłego Stołu*) was formally signed, which included the “Report on the work of the committee for mass media” (*Sprawozdanie z prac zespołu do spraw środków społecznego przekazu*)⁷. Thus the concept “of a new information order” developed by the media sub-committee became part of the political contract signed between the then government and the opposition forces gathered around Solidarity.

⁶ J. Galewski, P. Osęka, J. Urbański, Z. Wóycicka, *Okrągły Stół: główne obszary sporów*, [in:] *Okrągły Stół dokumenty i materiały*, Vol. 2, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁷ *Sprawozdanie z prac Podzespołu ds. Środków Masowego Przekazu*, [in:] *Okrągły Stół dokumenty i materiały*, Vol. 4, *op. cit.*, pp. 31–37.

The document opens with the statement that “the communication system existing in Poland is out-dated and inadequate for the changes taking place, and the condition of the material bases of the press, radio, TV and IT are desperate”.⁸ This diagnosis of the status quo was correct on both counts. The media system of the People’s Republic of Poland valid at that time was not only out-dated, but also incompatible with the principles of democracy and a market economy, which had to be implemented in the country. The statement about the “desperate” condition of the infrastructure suited reality. The printing infrastructure and television and radio’s technical base were in a disastrous condition; old technology was being used, the equipment was depleted, and the mentioned “IT” hardware simply wasn’t there. Our civilizational backwardness in this area meant that in international statistics we were one of the last in Europe.⁹

After diagnosing the existing situation, the next step was to formulate a prescription for it, concluded in the following statement: “We acknowledge the need for the rapid construction of a new information order, which must reflect the pluralism that exists in society, responding to processes of democratisation and rejecting any monopoly in this field. The aim of the new order should be the possibility of free participation of political parties, groups and individuals in all forms of communication, a result to be achieved only if censorship is abolished.”¹⁰

The rest of the report contained a description of the principles of the “new information order” and the specific changes to be made in the short and long term, for the existing PRL media system to turn into a typical democratic system. It began by defining the functions that the media should fulfil, by saying that regardless of political orientation, they should be “fair and present complete and objective information, expressing the opinions of society (...) control of power in a wide range of concepts and defend civil liberties and the interests of the individual (...) to cooperate in the work of democratic reforms,”¹¹ describing the future functions of the media in the way they are defined in democratic systems, and stating that the “new order” should be based on freedom of speech and pluralism clearly set the goal and direction of the change that happened in Poland to build a democratic media system.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

⁹ See: *Komunikowanie masowe w Polsce: lata osiemdziesiąte*, ed. W. Pisarek, „Zeszyty Prasoznawcze” 1991, No. 1–2.

¹⁰ *Sprawozdanie z prac Podzespołu ds. Środków Masowego Przekazu*, [in:] *Okrągły Stół dokumenty i materiały*, Vol. 4, *op. cit.*, p. 31

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

Successive subsections of the document contain a description of the specific actions that needed to be taken in order to achieve this goal. Most of them concerned the press market. It stated that it is necessary to ensure new entrants on the political and social stages the possibility of issuing their own publications. The press published by Solidarity, liquidated under martial law (1982), would be revived and illegal publications would not be repressed, and they would be legalised as soon as possible. Therefore, after the 4 June 1989 elections, the opposition gained the right to immediately create its own nationwide newspaper – *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

For a free and pluralistic press market to develop as soon as possible (as stated even in this term of the Parliament), changes needed to be made in the existing laws for the press (the press law and the law on the control of publications and performances) consisting in a change in the system of approving newspapers, by replacing the current licensing system with an application system (instead of having to be granted authorization from GUKPPiW [Office of the Censor], it was enough just to register the title). Ultimately, the abolition of censorship was planned, and by this time it was to be a significant liberalisation and reduction of the powers of the censorship office. Until the new regulations entered into force, the government agreed to conduct a liberal policy toward illegal publications (to not repress these publications, their authors and publishers) and the opposition committed to the fastest possible regulation of its publishing activities in accordance with the applicable legal order, that is to legalise independent publishing houses as soon as it was legally possible.

Much more difficult was finding a solution to the problem of paper assignment for new publishing initiatives. Eventually – from the beginning of 1990 – the commercialisation of its turnover was planned, but by that time the assurance of a fair division between existing and new titles was decided. In the final part dedicated to the press market, the opposition also expressed its position that “the predicted free paper market, as well as the postulated pluralistic democratised new information order, is not compatible with the current monopoly structure of the RSW Prasa-Książka-Ruch”.¹²

The arrangements for the press (especially the decision to change the licensing system for registration and the decision for free circulation of paper) ensured a basis for the creation of a fully free and democratic press market in the future. They were realised relatively quickly by making changes in the law; in the last days of May 1989, the press law and the law

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 34.

on the control of publications and performances (*Prawo prasowe, Ustawa o kontroli publikacji i widowisk*) was amended; on 22 March 1990 RSW “Prasa-Książka-Ruch” was liquidated; on 11 April 1990 censorship was abolished by abolishing the Central Office of the Control of Publications and Performances.¹³

The price for these far-reaching concessions to the government concerning the press was leaving the audio-visual media system in an almost unchanged form, especially television. The authorities believed in fact that the control of TV was a priority for them, and the opposition, aware of the adamant position of the authorities in the matter of giving them power over television, decided to “earn as much as possible” on the press market. Therefore, decisions on the radio and television media were not as dramatic as in the case of the press and concerned more the programme of TVP and Polish Radio than the structure and legal framework of the future “new order in the ether”. Airtime was provided for the opposition, in which programmes presenting candidates were shown as well as opposition programmes, and in the future similar programming windows would also receive different, newly legally acting entities of public life, and after the appropriate agreement between the episcopate and the radio committee was signed, this also included the Catholic Church. Radio committee management was required to ensure a greater plurality of views on radio and television programmes and the posting of corrections if the need arose. The inclusion of the representatives of various communities into the management of the radio and TV (radio committee and Programme Council) and the beginning of work on the act for future regulations was announced – a more democratic “new order in the ether”. A small number of specific assignments in relation to radio and television were complemented by an extensive “catalogue of discrepancies” containing different positions of the negotiating parties on various issues related to the functioning of electronic media and the very concept of a legal and organisational future “new order in the ether”. The ruling party consistently insisted on leaving radio and television in an unchanged structure and under its direct control, while the opposition insisted on bringing in solutions that would ensure democratic principles of pluralism and freedom in radio and television as well. Despite different ideas about the future of radio and television, however, they agreed to set up a “proxy for the opposition’s programmes”, extending access for the new political entities to antennas, TV programmes

¹³ See: T. Mielczarek, *Monopol, pluralizm, koncentracja. Środki komunikowania masowego w Polsce w latach 1989–2006*, Warszawa 2007 and W. Sonczyk, *Media w Polsce: zarys problematyki*, Warszawa 1999.

and Polish Radio; starting work on “a more pluralistic model of managing radio and television” (without specifying what it would consist of), and presenting their own visions of the future third television programme and fifth national radio programme (the opposition believed that “these programmes should be made available to the opposition of social forces, trade unions, the Catholic Church and other religions and ethnic minorities”).¹⁴ It can therefore be concluded that the arrangements of the Round Table fully changed the functioning of the press market, while for radio and TV they only pointed the way towards future changes, leaving the media in the current system for now.

Discussions on the future, democratic “order in the ether” lasted for three years after the end of the Round Table, and ended with the passing of the Radio and Television Act on 29 December 1992, which established a free and pluralistic system of electronic media, created the typical European model of dual public and commercial sections, and called into being the National Committee of Radio and Television Broadcasting (*Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji*), which was to ensure freedom of speech on radio and television, to defend the independence of broadcasters and the interests of consumers and to ensure the “open and pluralistic nature of radio and television”.¹⁵ The building of the radio and television markets in the coming years is presented in further chapters devoted to commercial broadcasting and public media in Poland.

At the end of the report, reference is made to the verification journalists conducted under martial law,¹⁶ to assess where the parties have not agreed on a common position (the opposition believed it to be unjust and immoral, the government believed it to be necessary in those conditions), but it managed to reach an agreement on the future of journalists, which was reflected in the statement: “the parties consider it necessary to

¹⁴ *Sprawozdanie z prac Podzespołu ds. Środków Masowego Przekazu*, [in:] *Okrągły Stół dokumenty i materiały*, Vol. 4, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

¹⁵ Act on radio and television of 29 December 1992, Art. 6.

¹⁶ After the introduction of martial law in Poland on 13 December 1981, in winter 1982, the journalist’s verification action was held. Each journalist had to appear in front of the verification commission, composed of high officials of the party, and make a declaration of loyalty to the government. In order to obtain the right to return to work, they had to receive was a positive decision of verification. As a result, the journalism environment of Poland permanently split into those who were deprived of the right to practise the profession and those who were in the official editorial offices, because the party considered them to be loyal. However the entire journalistic environment was deeply humiliated. See: W. Pisarek, *Polityka informacyjna*, [in:] *Komunikowanie masowe w Polsce: lata osiemdziesiąte*, „Zeszyty Prasoznawcze” 1991, No. 1–2, p. 40, K. Pokorna-Ignatowicz, *Telewizja w systemie politycznym i medialnym PRL...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 191–193.

make a clear, unambiguous and meaningful public statement by meaningful, official factors, that all media personnel persecution for their political views will never and under no circumstances in the future occur.”¹⁷ The opposition also appealed to guarantee journalists access to information and to respect the right to make corrections. The document concluded by saying that “the parties are convinced that having created a new multi-stakeholder communication system, the principle of mutual respect must be adhered to even more firmly, striving for a high level of political culture free from hostility, hatred, or prejudice towards ethnic or religious groups while preserving their own outlook, political and social identity, by the various forces of pluralistic society”.¹⁸

The media section of the Round Table contract, developed by the media sub-committee in the form of the “new information order”, became the basis for the changes in the media system. Almost all of the arrangements contained in the report were implemented, which resulted in the creation of a democratic media system in Poland within a few years, based on freedom of speech and pluralism. Changes in the press market occurred relatively quickly – within the first few months. Two factors had a fundamental value in this process: political – including the changes in legal regulations (changes in the press law that released publishers from the obligation to obtain permits for issuing newspapers and magazines and the abolition of censorship); and economic – the introduction of market principles in the economy, and therefore also the on the press market.

The hardest operation was the privatisation of the press and elimination of the RSW “Prasa-Książka-Ruch” monopoly (it was one of the key conditions of the “new information order”). On 22 March 1990 the Parliament passed a law to liquidate the concern.¹⁹ By virtue of the law the Liquidation Committee was established, whose task was to carry out the liquidation process, the valuation of the assets of RSW and transfer it into the hands of new owners. Plenty of excitement was especially felt in the journalistic environment because of the way newspaper titles belonging to the liquidated concern were to be privatised. The provisions of the Act gave the Liquidation Committee the right to sell by tender or free transfer of the title to journalists if they established journalist cooperatives (*spółdzielnia dziennikarska*).

¹⁷ *Sprawozdanie z prac Podzespołu ds. Środków Masowego Przekazu*, [in:] *Okrągły Stół dokumenty i materiały*, Vol. 4, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 37.

¹⁹ Ustawa z dnia 22 marca 1990 r. o likwidacji Robotniczej Spółdzielni Wydawniczej „Prasa–Książka–Ruch”, Dz. U. 1990, No. 21, item 125.

The commission deciding the fate of the privatised titles had to include conflicting expectations: the journalists, who were interested in taking over titles created by them and those who believed that the incomes from the sale of party concerns should be credited to the state budget. To be able to satisfy these contradictory expectations, the commission decided that a little more than half of the titles would be given to newly formed journalist cooperatives, and a little less than half would be sold. It is worth noting one particular title, because it did not have to be guided by the criterion of the highest price.²⁰ Many of its decisions aroused controversy, which ended with a public accusation of secrecy and bias, and even lawsuits that stretched for several years, but as a result of its activities in the first half of the decade, RSW's press titles passed into the hands of new owners. The fate of the biggest one was described in the following sections of the book devoted to daily newspapers and magazines and their publishers.

Today, more than 20 years after these events, only a handful of people remember the heated debates of 1989 and some of the concerns and concepts seem to be naive and ridiculous (like fierce disputes about an equitable system of paper distribution). They are worth remembering, as thanks to them the participants of the media sub-committee, representing the authorities and the opposition, developed the concept of a "new information order" and thanks to the good will of both negotiating parties at the Round Table, it was possible to bring that order into life, creating the basis for building the current Polish media system.

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²⁰ See: L. Strzyczkowski, *Likwidacja RSW „Prasa-Książka-Ruch”*, [in:] *Polskie media w okresie przemian*, ed. J. Olędzki, Warszawa 1991, pp. 112–118, K. Schliep, *Prywatyzacja prasy*, [in:] *Media i dziennikarstwo w Polsce 1989–1995*, ed. G.G. Kopper, I. Rutkiewicz, K. Schliep, Kraków 1996, pp. 129–138.

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