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Television as a participant of the Velvet Revolution

A discreet brass sculpture of a human hand with its two fingers fixed in the 'V' sign for peace commemorates the first protest which was to grow into a movement that toppled 41 years of communism in Czechoslovakia. During that first fateful demonstration, demonstrators – who had come out into the streets to mark the International Students' Day on 17 November – were violently pushed back by cordons or armed police.

'We cannot stand like this, against each other, we are part of one nation,' the protesters cried, adding, 'We like you' and 'Freedom!'. The police used force to disperse the demonstration. Many were beaten with batons and dozens were detained. In comparison to the previous anti-demonstration police actions, when water cannon had been used, this time the actions of the police were exceptionally physically brutal. Images of students and young people being brutally beaten proved to be the final straw which brought many more people out onto the streets. Student demonstrators were joined by artists and a revolution was born.

After 21 long years of tight control, the protests were a critical test for Czechoslovak television. The situation was quite different from 1968: the country was not threatened from abroad, there were no calls to shut down the broadcasters, nor was it necessary for them to go into hiding. On the contrary. The question was, could television as an institution become a partner in social change, and was it capable of doing so at all? It was the most powerful tool for communication, and thus its behaviour became a sort of litmus test, 'a signal which helped people estimate the behaviour of the party and the government in various situations, and, in turn, what degree of freedom it would provide for them, as citizens', wrote media historian Milan Šmíd, who has written several accounts of the dynamic changes which took place within Czechoslovak television during the early days of the Velvet Revolution (Šmíd 2015: 100).

For several years, viewers had witnessed the tension between the thaw of perestroika, and the continuing sterility of Czechoslovak television. Whilst theater, film and music pushed the boundaries, television programmes which were critical of the regime remained rare, and were only screened at obscure times.

To anyone watching the main news programme of CST, it may have looked as though normalization was as tough as ever – coverage of events such as the officially permitted demonstration of the so-called Five Initiatives (association of five civic resistance platforms, including *Charter 77*) and demonstrations to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Prague (10 December 1988) were presented with a spirit of contempt towards the enemies of socialism. As was common for the era, it was suggested that these anti-socialist elements were financed by the Charter 77 Foundation from Sweden and by the western secret services. When on 16 January 1989, the day of the 20th anniversary of Jan Palach's self-immolation, representatives of the popular dissent and others wanted to lay flowers on the site, the police and the People's Militia closed Wenceslas Square and detained most of the participants. Václav Havel was among them. A TV announcer, in line with totalitarian rhetoric, reported from the scene: 'Now let's take a look at Wenceslas Square, where the anti-socialist forces have attempted a provocation'. The editors used a close-up of a young man with a 'suspicious' jacket with the sign 'Original American' written on it. A documentary about those who organized such demonstrations appeared in September 1989 bearing the ironic title *They Call Themselves Independent*[1] (Růžička 1998a: 14). Just as at the beginning of normalization, many other programmes started to stress the role of Czechoslovak exiles in organizing anti-state events, namely the 'CIA agent' Pavel Tigrid in Paris, Jiří Pelikán in Rome, the Voice of America, Radio Vatican, and Radio Free Europe. In October, the programme *Newsboy*[2] took aim directly at Charter 77 and the publishers of the samizdat magazines *Vokno* and *Voknoviny* (Růžička 1999b: 14) with the claim '[that] hardly one day passes by without the western media disseminating sensational news from our country. They do not care about objectivity; first and foremost, they promote anything which serves to challenge the construction effort of our country' (Růžička 2000: 12).

Changes could have been implemented at Czechoslovak Television in November 1989, had it had a courageous and enlightened chief executive, as it had been the case in the 1960s. Jan Zelenka can congratulate himself for deciding to retire in June 1989 (!) after twenty years of service in socialist television, thus bearing no responsibility for the course of events during the

[1] ['Říkají si nezávislí']
[2] ['Kamelot']

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broadcasting of the following November. His successor, Libor Batrla, his former deputy for dramatic work and educational programmes who had worked in television since 1979, was quite a featureless personality and could not quite handle the crucial situation.

Therefore, television employees themselves took the initiative. Four days after the first demonstration on the National Avenue (Národní třída), on Monday 21 November 1989, the broadcast technicians called a trade union meeting in the garage of the Kavčí Hory complex. They demanded 'truthfulness, completeness, and objectivity of television news coverage' from the director. He rejected those demands and argued that that gathering did not represent the opinion of all the employees. This reaction, however, triggered an avalanche. In the afternoon of the same day, some 1500 employees of CST gathered in the garage and their meeting was broadcast live on an internal circuit. They also radicalized their demands: they wanted punishment for those who violently attacked the National Avenue protestors, they wanted the government, and the Central Committee of the CzCP to resign and they gave vociferous support for the proclamation of the new (so far non-political) Civic Forum, represented by Václav Havel. Footage from these garage meetings was broadcast by the Austrian TV station ORF. The employees threatened to go on strike if they were not granted permission to broadcast live from the daily mass demonstrations taking place on Wenceslas Square.

And thus, the events inside the stagnant institution, drowsy with normalization lethargy, took a rapid turn. On the following day (22 November), short live broadcasts from the Wenceslas Square demonstrations were included in the programme *Contact*[3] although they were abruptly interrupted by the censors when two people started to openly criticize the government to the camera. On the following day (23 November), it was not possible to broadcast live from the demonstration of two hundred thousand people; however, representatives of the protesting citizens were invited to participate in the news broadcast. On the same day, a crowd booed Miroslav Štěpán, the Secretary of the Prague communist party's municipal committee, after he had said: 'There is no country, neither developing nor socialist nor communist, where fifteen-year-old children would decide when the president should stay or go, or who should become the president'. In response, the crowd chanted: 'We are not children'. This was a turning point in the way in which citizens communicated with representatives of the regime and the scene was now broadcast on television. For CST as an institution and its role in the whole situation this was a key moment. CST chief executive Batrla knew that the stakes were high and that it was going to become more and more difficult to toe the line of socialist television. It may have been him who asked for the TV

[3] ['Kontakt']

building to be protected, and during the following night the area of Kavčí Hory was besieged by 100 emergency unit policemen. When confronted, Batrla asserted that it was merely an exercise (Růžička 2015b: 287). One of the chief executive's secretaries later remembered that there were 20 uniformed policemen present in the conference room, in charge of 'the director's security' (Růžička 2015b: 288). And, quite naturally, people were afraid that the regime would activate the *VLNA* anti-revolutionary measures. A banner asking: 'When will we hear the truth on Czech Television?' was draped across the CST garage (Cysařová 2002: 536).

The coming two days (Friday 24 November and Saturday 25 November) proved to be critical. An extraordinary session of the Central Committee of the CzCP was held and despite the proposal to keep the mass media under control in any circumstances (using violence if necessary), the central committee decided to resign and a new committee was to be elected. Thus, the communist party central committee publically displayed its reluctance to use power against the opposition and the media.

Viewers could not believe their eyes when they saw the Party's General Secretary, Miloš Jakeš, resigning from his post, and welcomed it with extraordinary joy. The news spread like wildfire: a concert of classical music in Smetana Hall in Prague was interrupted and everyone applauded. People stood, yelled and some cried tears of joy. At a demonstration in Wenceslas Square, Alexander Dubček, a key figure in the Prague Spring, appeared in public for the first time after twenty years in seclusion. The TV broadcast authentic footage of the police brutality on National Avenue captured by students of the Prague Film Academy (FAMU) (Kotek 2000).

The next day, even Wenceslas Square could no longer accommodate the thousands of protestors and the demonstrations were relocated to Letná Park, where the annual May Day Parades usually took place. This time, television covered the protest in its entirety. That same morning, in Saint Vitus Cathedral at Prague Castle, a pontifical mass was held in honour of the recently canonized Czech patron, Saint Agnes of Bohemia. This too was broadcast on television. People could see that 'their' television was changing radically, as this was the first broadcast of a religious event in the history of Czechoslovak television. 'The CST management was already on the defensive and caught in the whirlwind of events' (Šmíd 2015: 100). Director Batrla agreed to the creation of a Central Programming Board which was to have 26 members from across the political spectrum, including the opposition. He further consented that the live evening debate programme *On Current Issues*[4] could feature representatives of the political opposition, namely the director of the Institute of Prognostics of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, Valtr Komárek and, for the very first time, Václav Havel. The artful

[4] ['Na aktuální téma']

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argumentation which Valtr Komárek presented during this debate brought him a great deal of public popularity and he came close to becoming a presidential candidate. He was a representative of an official organization, while Havel at that point was still mostly unknown to the general public.

Now television had become an active agent in political developments. Its attitude persuaded the remaining, hesitant citizens that the situation had changed to such an extent that they would be able to openly express their free will in the general strike planned for the upcoming Monday (Šmíd 2015: 105–106). On Sunday (26 November), television covered the speech of the federal Prime Minister, Ladislav Adamec, which legitimized the opposition. The Prime Minister even guaranteed that State Security would not resort to any more provocations. On the day of the General Strike (27 November), Václav Havel introduced on camera the programme of the Civic Forum[5] movement, the CST founded an all-television branch of the Civic Forum and the chief executive Libor Batrla was removed from office.

FIGURE 13.1 *Václav Havel, symbol of the resistance against totalitarianism, who became the first president after 1989, in the CT talkshow* Beautiful Losses *['Krásný ztráty'] in 2003 talking to Czechoslovak-born Madeleine Albright, former US Secretary of State. (© Jiří Červený, 2003).*

[5] [Občanské fórum]

He was replaced by the communist federal government spokesman and former CST commentator Miroslav Pavel. His role was twofold. On the very first day in his new job he announced to the TV employees that 'television has ceased to be the ideological tool of one political party' (Růžička 2015b: 289); however, at the end of December he issued a controversial reorganizational decree (*26/1989*), claiming that CST continued to be a state medium, but employees' resistance forced him to revoke it at the beginning of January. Some television employees still remember how difficult it was for him to keep reorganization within the socialist limits. They recall the conflicts that arose when dramaturgy was ordered to prevent the broadcasting of the so-called Student Broadcast prepared by FAMU students or the live broadcasts featuring various personalities (e.g. Kotek 2002).

During the ten days between 17 and 27 November 1989, television embraced radical change. If the democratic tendencies in the CST broadcasting in the 1960s had taken several years to be pushed through and climaxed in the days of the occupation, that same process took only a matter of days in 1989. The communist regime now had no strong foreign power to back it up. The Soviet Union kept Gorbachev's promise and did not interfere. The weak chief executive could not oppose, not even with the help of the police, the desire of TV employees to document the unfolding events. After the first massive Saturday demonstration at Letná Park, it became obvious that any attempt to cling to the original concept of television as a propaganda machine of the communist party had become obsolete, ridiculous even.

On 29 November 1989, twelve days after the clash on National Avenue, the Federal Assembly voted to annul the constitutional article which guaranteed the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia's leading role in society. President Gustáv Husák, the face of normalization, resigned and two days before the end of the year, playwright Václav Havel became Czechoslovakia's President.

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From the First Democratic Republic to the Fall of Communism

MARTIN ŠTOLL

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