

Political TV Debates in the Czech Republic – from Bread Snacks to Sound Bites?*

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Abstract: *The paper deals with the topic of political TV debates in the Czech Republic, which political parties saw as the crucial feature when raising the awareness of voters in the 2010 general elections campaign and which has undergone major changes since the 1990 when they were introduced for the first time. The authors draw on the concepts of mediatisation of politics (Mazzoleni, Stromback and others), professionalization of political communication (e.g., Holtz-Bacha, McNair) and other general theories on the role and importance of the TV as a medium. The paper also briefly introduces the history of the TV political debates from the US and the Western European perspective. When finding the answers to the question of ‘how the TV debates have changed in the Czech Republic since the 1989’ the major part of the paper will be an analytical description of the changes, which took place before the 2010 election campaign and which resulted in the stage we were able to witness in the last general elections campaign of 2010. The authors mainly focus on the changes in format of the debates, role of moderators as well as the content and style of this specific TV programme on Czech TV of public service using data from TV companies, the opinion research agency, CVVM and the Czech Statistical Office. The paper should provide a useful overview and inside outlook into the profes-*

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sionalization of the debates by the TV producers as well as by the politicians, which will demonstrate how content got lost on the way from the chat over beer and bread snacks “chlebicky” in the early nineties to the prescribed exchange of sound bites in the limited time as featured in the 2010 elections’ debates.

Keywords: *Media and politics, TV, Political communication, Personalization*

Introduction

Televised debates among politicians have become an essential part of the Czech media landscape and political culture. Week by week, the general public could watch politicians appear on the screen arguing more or less intensively since the 1990. For these past twenty years of the TV political debates broadcasting, major changes and progress can be spotted. The tradition of political debates can be traced back to the existence of Czechoslovak Television (CST). Later on, they experienced a bigger boom with the influx of commercial broadcasters. While nowadays, the popularity of the debating politicians on the commercial channels is almost muted, the public service TV (Czech Television — CT) still carries on and explores new options.

In our view, the period of 2009–10 was specific due to several reasons connected most probably the fast train of several (elections to the European Parliament, to the two Chambers of the Czech Parliament and to the municipal governments) election campaigns. The biggest number of politicians has appeared on the air. Similarly, the frequency of the broadcasted debates went up unprecedentedly. The importance of an appearance on the screen can be demonstrated by the fact that all new and old parliamentary parties (the ODS, TOP09, VV, KDU-CSL, Greens, CSSD, KSCM) organised more or less sophisticated, but massive media training for their candidates invited to the debates. Moreover, the smaller parties saw their (non)presence on the programme as a crucial moment for their chances of entering the parliament or other elected bodies.

The number of broadcasted debates is, however, not the only change one can notice. The format of the programme, its role in the public and reception of the individual actors has shifted profoundly over the time. As both the politicians’ and the anchors’ performance has obviously professionalized a great deal, the important information about discussants got lost. The professionalization and detailed preparation on both sides has reduced the debate the repeting short messages and fights for space domination. The actual content has been partly replaced by the ‘box match.’ In other words, the ‘filosofical discussion’ has been substituted by the direct confrontation.

The following article represents a short recap of the political debates’ history on the Czech public service broadcaster, Czech Television CT (preceded by Czechoslo-

vak Television CST until 1992) and a reflection of the changes within this format based on the concept of mediatisation, personalization and professionalization of political communication. Therefore, we will be looking into how the political Czech (Czechoslovak) TV debates have changed since the 1990. Our goal is not provide an exhaustive description of all alterations and changes throughout the past twenty years, but to point out the major shifts, which may have accompanied the current status quo when the content got lost on the way from the chat over a beer and bread snacks '*chlebicky*' in the early nineties to the prescribed exchange of sound bites in a limited time as featured in the 2010 election debates.

TV Politics

As a result of the professionalization¹ process and acceleration of political communication [as characterised by Jay Blumler and Dennis Kavanagh (1999)], we can observe the *mediatisation of politics* in the sense that politics is continuously shaped by interactions with the mass media on one hand and politicization of the media on the other (Mazzoleni, Schulz 1999). Interaction between political public relations and political journalism become constant as the borders among politics, information and journalism are disappearing. Both subsystems of the political system (political PR/publicity) and the journalism subsystem (political journalism) still act under the constraints of their own system and according to the logic of the others. Politicians as political actors and journalists both have their own special interest but are dependent on each other for their attainment and therefore try to strategically influence the other side (Esser 2003).

Some scholars (e. g., Gianpietro Mazzoleni, Winfried Schulz and Brian McNair) have been very sceptical² about the proliferation of marketing, public relations and strategic communication techniques into politics, claiming it has caused a crisis of public communication and might further endanger democracy. The candidates' look and image is getting to be more important than their policies and content of their speeches. This can be seen in line with the Machiavellian approach to ruling. The renaissance philosopher was convinced that the prince does not have to have all the positive characteristics, however it is necessary *to make an impression* that he has them.

Thus, the effects of *televised politics*, *personalization* and *celebritization of politics* have been changing the traditional view and understanding of politics. This can be reflected in the communication strategies of politicians and their aids. The party prefers to choose strong personality politicians, however as a result these significant figures can than 'overshadow' the whole party and attract the audience for themselves. Therefore, some scholars assert that the TV screen is not good enough for

politics (or sometimes ruins it), the 'pure print' is more suitable for it (e.g., the debates between Lincoln and Douglas) (Van Zoonen 2005: 13). They argue that reading is a balancing of intellectual efforts, while TV consumption evolves passions and enthusiasm. Television made entertainment the natural part of all news reporting. The news passes quickly one by one as short clips aiming to entertain the public. Politics and political news reports tend to look like an advertisement. In addition, politicians act as celebrities and media present them like that as well (Van Zoonen 2005: 22).

Televised politics is rather like a soap opera. One can also find never-ending stories with hardly any action, long dialogues, lots of emotions and a tendency to provoke empathy. Moreover, it works with similar tools such as scandal, conflict, incompetence and spin control. In accordance with this, similar features can be found in the current political debates (never-ending stories, human interest stories, demonstrations of empathy, etc.)

1960: The Very First Nixon – Kennedy TV Debates

The history and tradition of candidates' debates on the TV without any doubts starts in 1960 in the US. For the very first time, the two candidates, Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy, for the presidential office stood face to face in front of the audience watching the black-white screens in their living rooms. Their encounter represents a classic case study and an actual example of the how the political communication has changed.

Nixon and Kennedy afforded the first real opportunity for voters to see their candidates in competition, and the visual contrast was dramatic. In August, Nixon had seriously injured his knee and spent two weeks in the hospital. By the time of the first debate he was still twenty pounds underweight, his pallor still poor. He arrived at the debate in an ill-fitting shirt, and refused make-up to improve his colour and lighten his perpetual '5:00 o'clock shadow.' Kennedy, by contrast, had spent early September campaigning in California. He was tan and confident and well rested. 'I had never seen him looking so fit,' Nixon later wrote. In substance, the candidates were much more evenly matched. Indeed, those who heard the first debate on the radio pronounced Nixon the winner. But the 70 million who watched television saw a candidate still sickly and obviously discomforted by Kennedy's smooth delivery and charisma. Those television viewers focused on what they saw, not what they heard. Studies of the audience indicated that, among television viewers, Kennedy was perceived the winner of the first debate by a very large margin (Allen undated).³

Since that moment, we need to perceive politics, which essentially became televised politics, as a contest between forms rather than contents. Following the

Nixon/Kennedy debate model, Germany, Sweden, Finland, Italy, and Japan soon established debates between contenders to national office. The Czech Republic was not an exception in this regard.

When speaking about the Czech experience, we also need to distinguish between 1) the newly occurring political debates in the nineties, which were provoked by a new experience and possibility to discuss political matters freely and loudly in the public space without any punishment and which served as some sort of interpellation, and 2) the political duels or encounters inspired by the US tradition, into which the Czech TV debates were transformed later on, when the politics became more competitive.

Data and Methods

The research was conceived as descriptive qualitative content analysis of randomly chosen three debates of each of the three time periods of the early nineties, beginning of millennium and the latest election campaign (in total: 9 debates)⁴. Due to specific availability of the archived programmes the data were chosen by the method of convenience sampling. The public service TV was the only broadcaster broadcasting uninterruptedly a TV debate format since 1990 until 2010.

Based on our pre-research and with regard to the research goals (aimed at the changes or shifts of the TV debates' content and format), we have decided to work with two types of variables. Firstly, the format-related variables (studio setup, number of hosts, role of host, number of guests, type of debate, level of professionalization) and secondly, the content related variables (length of talks, issues vs. values, persuasive tools, interactions among speakers, level of professionalization). For the lack of strictly defined variables indicating professionalization in the specific field of the TV debates, we were reduced to making an arbitrary decision to define our own indicators suitable to our research goals.

Political Debates on Czech/Czechoslovak TV

The very first debate among politicians on the then Czechoslovak Television appeared on November 21, 1990, almost a year after the Velvet Revolution and a regime change in the country. The programme was called 'Co tyden dal' ('What the week brought'), and after the first broadcast no one could probably predict that this was the beginning of an eight-year long tradition of Sunday lunchtime political debating (Hronik 2010).

Of course, there have been marked shifts in the form and set-up of the debates as well as in the content and level (and to some extent also quality) of the communicated messages and information. This (sometimes revolutionary) evolution will be described in the three upcoming chapters. Each of them is a qualitative insight into the televised debating discourse of the day in the broader scope of interaction between politics and media.

The first chapter deals with the pioneers of TV debating (1990–1992), the second is devoted to the period around the year 2000 and finally, the third one is based on the current form of the debates (2009–2010).

1 Debating Pioneers: Beer, Cigarettes and Bread Snacks

The first debates could be marked with amateurism, but an obvious enthusiasm by both anchors and discussants. The whole programme looked more like a friendly gathering in a restaurant-style environment than a moderated debate with a strict structure. There was typical Czech refreshment such as beer or bread snacks ‘chlebicky’ served by properly dressed waiters, some of the guests were enjoying their cigarettes as well. The Czech-Slovak anchor couple, Ota Cerny and Josef Hubel, admit to some non-professional approaches. “*Often we had only prepared one initial question. The others came up de facto from the debate itself;*” Hubel is quoted in a TV interview made twenty years after he had moderated the first debate.⁵ Understandingly, the amateurism was caused by the lack of technology, time and other support the anchors were backed with. “*During the week, I worked as the head of the domestic news reporters and on Saturday evening, I was preparing myself for Sunday’s discussion,*” the Czech online magazine cites the other anchor Ota Cerny.⁶

The number of invited guests in the first debates was quite high and typically reached nine persons plus two anchors in the studio. Therefore, not all guests (not only politicians) always got a chance to talk or they would have a very limited time for their appearance. This was also a consequence of the anchor’s performance. They were not really moderating the debate, but rather participating in it. Their respect towards some of their guests was sometimes evident (e.g., when President Vaclav Havel was allowed to talk for more than seven minutes). Typically, they did not interrupt speeches, let the speaker finish and gave a word to everyone who wanted to comment on the issue. From time to time, they even expressed their own opinions at great length and asked the guest to comment. However, not even the politicians were interrupting each other. The debates’ tone was rather nonconfrontational as different solutions or measurements were introduced or suggested and the utterances were value-based. The aim of the interactions among the guests was to search for the best possible solutions across all parties, while party-based political statements were hard to find. Similarly, some uncertainty or unfinished concept or solutions (which

sometime originated on the spot) could have been noticed in the guests' answers. By no chance, the public could witness messages or slogans framing the answers and connecting the speaker with his party or movement. Thus, the unpreparedness (to be seen also in the way people were dressed on the programme) was obvious. "*Only towards the end (of the eight-year long show) they (politicians) started to go to the tutors, who taught them what to say to us,*" told the anchor Cerny to the online magazine *Parlamentni listy*.⁷

Overall, the debate ran very slowly and the utterances were relatively long. The average length of the politician's speech was 57 seconds, while in the case of the anchor it was 16 seconds. From the current point of view, these figures are not surprising. However, the interesting number is the longest coherent uninterrupted utterance, which reached some 99 seconds in the case of anchors (on average they spoke for one fourth to one third of the air-time in total) and some 249 seconds. The extreme value of 444 seconds was registered when the then president Vaclav Havel was a guest on January 1991. He was well respected by the anchors as well as the other guests (which he chose himself). Havel was able to gain some 45 % of the total airtime for himself⁸

2 Millennium: Conflict at High Noon

With the new millennium and establishment of political culture, the TV debates' format changed profoundly. The state of euphoria of the regime change had been long gone and the parties' as well as politicians' own interests have entered the political game. This period was characterised with pushy manners and open confrontations by the anchors as well as by invited politicians. This can be depicted also on the names of the debating programmes in the 1998–2003 period such as 'Quarantine' (Karantena), 'Arena' (Arena), 'Debate' (Debata), 'At high noon' (V prave poledne), 'On the edge' (Naostro). Most of them evoked isolation, conflict, confrontation, competition, which necessarily needs a winner and loser. Contrastingly, the names of the calm debate programmes from the early nineties rather spoke about review or evaluation of the past week events without mentioning the conflict.

Similarly, the shift was obvious also in the set-up of the studio and formality of the appearance. The number of the guests went rapidly down to two or four. There were not only politicians, but sometimes also field experts or pundits. The guests were seated at one table against each other with the anchor in the middle in order to increase the dynamics of the clash. The programme was scripted in advance; the anchor was well prepared and provided the necessary background for the viewers every time he/she introduced a new issue. In line with that, the appearance of politicians as well as anchors became formalized. They were wearing formal dresses and suits only, which was not the regular case in the previous period. Moreover, the debating style has moved towards open conflicts and confrontations interrupted only by an

anchor trying to calm the situation down and moderate the show. Whether he/she was successful or not was dependent on his abilities, personality and fierceness of the guests.

Typically, the debates looked like encounters with politicians trying to gain as much attention as possible, catching up and interrupting their opponents in order to make them feel uncertain. The usual tactics included disapproving gestures, face-plays, growl, laughter, making notes and showing proofs, going through papers and notes with a lot of noise, etc. To some extent the authentic content was evaporating and the importance of repetitive slogans, messages connected with the party image was arising. A new phenomenon was also a new-speak — language full of vague, official phrases with general meaning. Therefore, we see a shift from value-based discussion to issue-based discussion. Also, as another new feature we can identify the use of wisecracks or *bon notes*. In addition to this, the invited politicians sometimes did not hesitate to correct the anchor's speech or they argued about his way of moderating. Thus, the viewers got less information, but were well entertained.

The growing amount of interaction among politicians is reflected in the length of an average utterance. In the monitored period, the guests spoke uninterrupted for 39 seconds on average (the longest speech took some 182 seconds), while anchors were talking for some 13 seconds without disruptions (max. registered length reached 126 seconds.) In total, the share of the anchor's utterances covered 15–20 % of the total airtime.

3 Politically Conscious Agenda-Setters:

What Issues will be Discussed after the Today's Questions?

The contemporary form of debates on public service television on the shows such as 'Without cover' (Bez obalu), 'Czech TV's questions' (Otazky CT), 'Vaclav Moravec's questions' (Otazky Vaclava Moravce) have not changed significantly since 2003. Naturally, some progress was inevitable due to technical development – high quality streaming, possibility to have pundits on the phone, interactive background, graphic presentations of figures and data, etc.). However, looking strictly at the format itself, we do not see many innovations.

The crucial factor is a well-prepared anchor, who is aware of his position and sometimes acts as a sort of celebrity or respected voice. This may also be reflected in the amount of show time he covers. Typically, the anchor aims to distribute time equally among guests, who are again not always politicians, but pundits, experts, etc. He is experienced enough to moderate strictly and tailor the discussion.

Number of invited guests varies from two to six. The frequency of broadcasting becomes more dense with elections approaching. Shortly before the general elections

the duels between two possible prime ministers, leaders of the two strongest parties, are televised. These duels than have special rules and more attention of media and the general public.

As for the guests, it was common for them to arrive at the studio prepared with notes, charts and data showing them to the cameras. By presenting the actual figures they hope to act with more relevance. They tend to speak in short and clear sentences and repeat the same messages all over again. They use words relating to their agenda or their party. Their explicit goal is to conclude the debate as the more competent winner. Usually, this could be demonstrated by power games in the debate (interposing, interrupting, and gestures, heavily using nonverbal language.) Obviously, this debating style is a result of training (conducted in-house or by contracted trainers), which most parties have organised for their leaders.

Open and sharp criticism of opponents was also not an exception. Actually, with the Election Day approaching, the number of attacks and negativity was raising. For example, the election campaigns research done by researchers at the Masaryk University in May 2010 proved that some 30 % was negative campaigning, while 50 % of all utterances devoted to the program in the final duels between the two party leaders.

Even this period was characterised by more dynamics in the discussion as individual speakers interacted among each other quite quickly. The pace of their utterances is also faster. On average, politicians spoke for some 35 seconds without breaks (max. 126 seconds), while the moderator talked uninterruptedly for 18 seconds; however, his longest utterance provided a lot of background on the presented issue and took some 418 seconds.

All the results discussed above are summarised in the two following tables.

Table 1: Evolution of TV debates format

FORMAT	I. period (1990–1992)	II. period (1998–2002)	III. period (2009–2010)
Studio setup	Restaurant style, refreshments (beer and bread snacks)	“Classic” TV studio, graphic decorations, refreshment is water (no alcohol)	Professional studio with many technical features (split screens, video calls, interactive charts etc.)
Anchors	Two; unprepared, no script, rather passive (weak control over debate), no (or small) support team, own comments and opinions	One; prepared; with script; starts with background, moderates, still “weak” (sometimes not able to interrupt politicians), notes, main topic, not assertive, has additional questions	One; very good prepared; with script; starts with long background incl. hard-data, charts; Enjoys moderating – celebrity style, active, tough on politicians, has control, addresses with names
Guests	Up to nine; not all were politicians (philosophers, artists etc.); Not prepared; Casual (semi-formal) dress	Mostly two of four; not all were politicians (but relevant experts); media trained; prepared; Formal dress	Up to nine, mostly two or four (depends on occasion); not all were politicians (but relevant experts); Very good prepared (own printed charts and tables etc.), (some of them) hard media trained
Broadcast debates	<i>Co tyden dal</i> (evokes retrospective evaluation of issues and events)	<i>Karantena, Arena, Debata, V prave poledne, Naostro</i> (evokes conflict, winners and losers)	<i>Bez obalu, Otázky CT, Otázky Vaclava Moravce</i> (evokes questioning, agenda setting, no secrets)

Source: Authors

Table 2: Evolution of TV debates content

Avg/max length of talk (guests; seconds)	57.5/443 (time distributed unequally among them)	39/182 (time distributed almost equally)	35/126 (time distributed almost equally)
Avg/max length of talk (host; seconds)	16.5/99 (~30 % of show time)	13/126 (~20 % of show time)	18/418 (~25 % of show time)
Issue/Value-based discussion	Value based	Issue based, strongly party focused	
Interaction among speakers	Almost none; no conflicts; politicians don't interrupt, wait for the floor	Nonverbal communication, politicians interrupt, repeat arguments, slogan and lines, prepared, write notes, (theatrical) gestures, metaphors; arguing with host; political "new-speak"; ignoring questions, repeat slogans and lines, have solutions and competence, write notes, shows documents	
Persuasive tools	Almost none - deliberation	Catch-phrases, nonverbal tools, printed materials (charts and tables etc.); negative attacks, rhetorical devices	

Source: Authors

Conclusion

This short text proved general evidence of professionalization both on the side of the politicians as well as the media. As a result, the nature of the debates' content has changed. The politicians' goal is not to supply viewers with the information, but to *be seen on TV* and stun their opponents. The pub-style chat and philosophizing over a beer and bread snacks from the early nineties was replaced by serious partisan combat between interests and ideologies at the beginning of the millennium. Later on, the debates got even more sophisticated and looked like a prescribed exchange of catchphrases, sound bites or campaign messages.

On media side, the TV management and the anchors changed their manners too. The moderating style changed as they devoted more time to preparations. The studio set up became modernised using new technologies enabling more interactivity with viewers. The format of the debate is understood as a service for citizens, therefore it is conceived as a neutral public forum, where the candidates and politician can be virtually met.

However, it is not the most attractive TV format. In fact, the commercial stations prefer talk shows with celebrity hosts, who sometimes invite politicians. We can hardly speak about politicotainment as it is developed in the Western democracies; however we see its first signs.

In general we have identified shifts in the format of the show, role of the hosts, content, character of the speakers, length and pace of utterances, interactions among speakers and intentions of the debaters (see Table 3).

Table 3: Outlook of the observed and described shifts

	From	To
GUESTS	10 (non)politicians (artists, philosophers, newcomers to politics)	Duels/forum of regional politics ("hard core and skilled politicians")
HOST	Enchanted, unprepared, w/out script	Very well prepared professionals
CONTENT	Cheap talk over beer and bred snacks	Exchange of negativity and party slogans
UTTERANCES	Never ending stories about world-values	Carefully distributed space filled with catch-phrases/comments on hottest issues
INTERACTIONS	Friendly chit-chat	Personal disputes
INTENTIONS	Deliberation	Campaigning/persuasion

Source: Authors

When speaking about politics on TV, there is no doubt that the medium became the message. As it is common in other democracies, Czech politics is shaped by media logic. The research has clearly shown the change in the content of political debates on the public service TV. In the early nineties, the viewers received a lot of information, point of views and were part of a consensus-seeking process. Later on, the differences in ideologies, party affiliation and the rising competition produced a very different, prescribed content. This may also be a by-product of the democratization process. In the last election campaigns, the performance of politicians in the debates became even more sophisticated and prepared. This is in line with the concept of professionalization and we may expect further development towards popular and entertaining politics.

Our short study is an initial step into the research of this fruitful area. More and deeper research and investigation of the form and the content of the mediated political messages should be done in order to reveal the persuasive features and techniques.

Notes

- ¹ By *professionalization* we understand a general and not culture-bound concept, which follows the modernization of the society and will take place in similar political systems sooner or later. However, its actual appearance and the degree are dependent on the country's social, historical and political specifics (Holtz-Bacha 2007).
- ² On the other hand, there are other opinions (such as Pippa Norris, Margaret Scammell, Lance W. Bennett and Jarol Manheim), which are less sceptical about the fatal effects on the democracy.
- ³ <http://www.museum.tv/eotvsection.php?entrycode=kennedy-nixon>
- ⁴ The programmes 'Co tyden dal' (21. 10. 1990, 20. 1. 1990 a 27. 12. 1992), 'V prave poledne' (12. 7. 1998, 28. 3. 1999), 'Naostro' (9. 6. 2002), 'Otzaky Vaclava Moravce' (or 'Otzaky Vaclava Moravce Special' 19. 5. 2010, 27. 5. 2010, 10. 10. 2010). The last three debates were analyzed in their full length. In the case of the older samples, we have always used the first broadcasting hour.
- ⁵ <http://www.ct24.cz/domaci/95325-moderator-hubel-porad-co-tyden-dal-byla-casto-improvizace/>
- ⁶ <http://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/parlament/169566.aspx>
- ⁷ <http://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/parlament/169566.aspx>
- ⁸ From the nowadays perspective, it might be interesting to point out the 'dynamics' of the show as anchors were telling technical information to their guests during the live broadcasting; some of the guests arrived later on in the show and the waiters regularly entered the scene to bring new refreshments.

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