

1a. INTRODUCTION,

which includes the basic theses of the dissertation.

On 18 September 2006 the vast majority of Hungarians were shocked in their homes watching the late evening live coverage program of the first Hungarian news television's company / HírTV / from the heart of the capital. They could witness how in Budapest's Szabadság Square a few dozen distracted and savage, mostly young men – first with their empty hands, then armed with cobble stones and iron bars that they could gather on the spot – confronted the handful of incomprehensibly cowardly acting policemen defending the central building of National Television /MTV/ in front of some two thousand bystanders. After a few hours of rampaging they broke through the barricaded main entrance and occupied the building while the police were seen retreating.

The viewers' astonishment was not merely the result of the direct brutality seen on the screen: cars set on fire, clouds of smoke, a police water cannon made useless within minutes, and mentally and physically brutal and half naked people, evidently mismanaged policemen and resulting from their passivity an increasing number of injured police officers. The dismay or consternation of the viewers rooted from the realisation that similar pictures previously reached their living rooms through newsreel reports from foreign countries while this time they reported on a domestic event. Prior to this the last time they could see such reports was during the Paris riots. However, those reports were screened in newsreels as international events and not in special live coverage in their own neighbourhoods or a few miles from their homes. By the time the general public could digest these pictures and by the

time politicians could explain them it became quite evident to many that the “Hungarian myth” of over a decade and a half of peaceful transition was seriously injured and as a result of all this a considerable portion of both the domestic and international prestige, as fiduciary capital, had disappeared in front of their eyes. There were similar demonstrations at Szabadság Square, in front of the MTV television building in the so-called “media war” period of the transition but physical atrocities were unprecedented. In addition, as a result of the international press and media coverage of the events the general view on Hungary had radically changed. And surprisingly all this happened exactly ten years after the monopoly of the national broadcaster ceased to exist, which was the primary reason for this being the venue of the earlier demonstrations. By 2006 some two-thirds of all Hungarian viewers can watch 40-50 channels in their own mother tongue, while the number of foreign language programs subtitled and dubbed in Hungarian is over a hundred – available via cable, satellite or the Internet. Exactly for this reason this convulsion is incomprehensible. Under such circumstances public opinion has for a long time been determined not by the words, pictures and messages transmitted by Hungarian Television. The viewer indexes also generally prove that television viewers do not consider the national broadcaster to be more important than the others. Meanwhile the prestige of the broadcaster-journalist profession has receded when compared to that in the period of the political transition.

This is precisely the reason why a large number of questions require answers: Why did this happen right now? How did we manage to get this far? Who created this problem? Why was it organised? What was the message and did that message come through? The obvious answer provided to these questions whereby the Prime Minister’s speech in May that was unexpectedly published the day before the first

demonstrations were started in front of Parliament because the demonstrators lacked publicity is simply not true. All television stations and primarily the most widely watched three traditional broadcasters (MTV, RTL Klub, TV2) on the night of the 17th, the previous day discussed in detail the speech which caused political crisis. This was the reason for the demonstration at Parliament and on the pretext that their written demands were not aired the demonstrators moved on to the nearby MTV Headquarters and organised the demonstration there followed by the siege of the building.

Explanation to the above mentioned questions – based precisely on the slogans and speeches made at the series of demonstrations in front of Parliament – seemed to have been different. For instance, one widely used explanation is that this series of demonstrations were closely connected to the fact that the 50th anniversary of the 1956 Revolution was nearing. Some people often endeavoured to liken the events in front of Parliament to those half a century ago. Fits into this is the vesting of the MTV Headquarters with the distorted myth that came about on 23 October 1956 during the siege of the Hungarian Radio Headquarters. After all what happened here on this night was merely the prelude to the serious bloody riots one month later – an event that had attracted a large number of foreign television crews to the scene. And this coincided with the 50th anniversary celebrations when the leaders of 20 countries, including kings, heads of state, prime ministers and other international dignitaries commemorated the fact that the events in the autumn of 1956 in Hungary were considered to have been the first East European demonstrations that opposed the occupying Soviet Union. The example of the short lived revolution became an example of symbolic significance of the political transitions of 1989/90. In the hope of this, one presumed that the “cold civil war” sentiments of Hungarian politics would cease at

least for the time of the commemorations. These sentiments were carried on in public in the form of the “battle” of words within Parliament and resulted in street demonstrations.

What took place in the heart of Budapest during September and October 2006 had probably become an elementary experience for the Hungarian public precisely as a result of the wider than previous television publicity and resulted the second largest – the first one happened at October of 2000 during the so called „ blocked of the taxi drivers” – „catastropha marathon”. This expression was created by a communication professor of Jerusalem University, Tamar Liebes in connection of the terrorist bomb attacks and assassinations against the public transport vehicles of Jerusalem in 1996. (Szabo,2004 and Maria Vasarhelyi, 2006)

Since the birth of television (1936) whatever program appears on the screen – be that newsreel, current affair programs, documentary, or motion picture movies and original made for television movies, children’s, entertainment, sport, scientific or service programs – the vast amount of visual footage and the rarely seen production background appears to carry with itself among many other things the consequences of the given society’s momentary social peace or conflicts. Therefore the medium itself often gets involved in a “war” similar or even worse than happened in Budapest.

Summing up in one sentence: it may become the mirror, the tool, the subject and in most cases the venue of social conflict.

This phenomenon – including the attaching process that is followed from the very onset by special verbal expressions, special professional phraseology – is precisely and professionally defined and described later on. At this stage I only wish to note that their common existence or the dominant nature of one of them is always an integral part of the

phenomenon I refer to as “**television goes to war**”. In its effect this is considered to be far broader than the term “**fourth estate**” traditionally referring to the printed press. (McQuil, 2003: 133–134 and Bertho–Lavenir, 2005: 243).

In Europe – because of the outbreak of the Second World War – the two great rivals, Germany (1935) and Britain (1936) were forced to suspend the recently started public television broadcasting. As opposed to this, although the United States started broadcasting somewhat later (1939) it was not forced into suspension and managed to gain global superiority. (Dizzard, 1966: 23 – 24, 38 and Noam, 1991: 79 and 118). It is interesting to note that although the programs of the different broadcasters – and after radio this included television news programs, current affairs programs and sometimes even entertainment shows – were often blue-pencilled, mutilated, however, they were rarely banned in the conventional manner as in the case of some press organs. Although it has recently happened for example in Gruzija and Pakistan, where some independent, commercial television stations was closed by the state authority after the declaration of marshall law during November of 2007.

Moreover a characteristic feature of this “television phenomenon” is that if it is forced to it is often capable to oppose in a more determined and powerful manner the given power structure’s or political structure’s endeavours to “keep order” in violation of public interest than other, sometimes quicker information carriers.

It could be achieved mostly because this was the only way to suit its indispensable, organic nature – the essence of which is: if it is silenced and the screens go black in the homes this physical fact reflects the clear admission by political power of its own failure. Once broadcasting began and reached its viewers 365 days a year for a

determined number of hours, even 24 hours a day, the screens can blackout only for technical reasons. Some kind of program must always be on air. Once upon a time in between two programs television stations screened an intermission sign as a form of station identification. This is unimaginable today. Every single second needs to be utilised by commercials, “public announcements” or the promotion of the station’s own programs. Thus, all alterations that result in a change of programming generally have special reasons or carry special messages. If for whatever extraordinary reason the program flow is broken it is always explained by such terms as “breaking news”, meaning the program was interrupted for the presentation of some special news event.

However, television’s “enduring state of war” is not always an evident phenomenon for everyone. Nevertheless it certainly is clear when television (electronic) journalism happens to coincide with war correspondent activities during the circumstances of armed conflicts or in times of peace in the form of so-called “media wars”. In an endeavour to fulfil its social obligations television journalism carries on the multitude of its usual activities – that is, informs, entertains, provides knowledge, education and services – simultaneously it also writes the history of the war of independence of its genre, means and social institutions.

Reaching this as our starting point, asserting the general theme of the dissertation

my first thesis is aligned to one of the basic theories of socio-psychology regarding the survey of human behaviour:

- accordingly, one of the most important natural forms of human existence is communication within the individual, between individuals and the most developed form of social communication – mass communication – of each society which

may be interrupted and remain suspended artificially but as a whole it is a process operating often unconsciously within us, and regardless whether we consider personal or social processes the theory remains valid:

“it is impossible not to communicate” (Terestyéni, 2006: 14)

It is therefore easy to see that television, the most modern, the most highly developed and most sophisticated form of human communication, as a means of communication is only capable of fulfilling the set requirements if it is

“ able to go to war as a participant of the political battles. This is referred to as “media war” or a means of mediation when it reports on actual war situations”.

In addition this process is not merely a necessity but under certain conditions it is also imperative. And – as it will be shown – this is the case practically regardless whether it is financed by private or public sources.

My second thesis – and one of the most significant topics of the analysis – is that television **as a mass media became a sophisticated, manipulative “weapon” shaping public opinion while its own influence grew.** Meanwhile it becomes an integral part of the system of mechanisms that influences and directs social processes and changes, and therefore, becomes a constant target of the different techniques of power. In the meantime it may also be defenceless to political battles if laws are adopted by consent within constitutional frames with the aim of hindering this.

My third thesis is that this process **shapes the means of mass communication in a detrimental manner. Sometimes by utilising it’s special, multi-dimensional mode of action, sometimes by creating**

temporary or definitive limits to its own operational opportunities.

On these occasions it will enjoy a privileged situation because its ownership becomes important not only as a result of its power of influence but also because it affects the everyday making of politics. At the same time it is invested with the technical and economic means to show, mirror the processes of power, as well as the ability to become an independent means of power in special cases by constantly renewing itself.

The epitome of this work considers some turning points in the history of television to be the most suitable framework of disquisition. This, of course, cannot be complete. Instead, with the help of hand-picked examples the most significant similarities and differences are shown. These are – in fact – case studies. The times, topics or venues are as follows:

- 1936: The Spanish Civil War,
- 1951 – 52 : The Korean War,
- 1952– 55 : The television “war” waged against McCarthyism (United States),
- 1964 – 75 : The Vietnam War,
- 1972 – 74 : The media battles of the Watergate affair (USA),
- 1979 – 80 : The hostage crisis in Teheran (Iran),
- 1956/1972 : The simultaneous analysis of the Suez Crisis and the Falkland War,
- 1982 – 1986 : The media war between Margaret Thatcher and the BBC ,
- 1989 : The Christmas „revolution” in Romania,
- 1989 – 1995 : The first stage of the media war in Hungary up to the birth of the so-called “media law”,
- 1991 : The Gulf War, the coup against Gorbachev in Moscow,

- 2001 : The destruction of the WTC towers in New York,
- 2003 : The second war against terrorism and Iraq by the United States and its allies,
- 2006 : The siege of MTV,

In summary : I wish to illustrate, explain and prove wherever required that the striking axiom by the Canadian sociologist, Marshall McLuhan – who came out with rather “avant guard” communicational imagery in his time – that “The media is the message” (McLuhan, 1964:314) may be changed in the 20th and 21st century - as a result of the development primarily of television broadcasting and then as a result of the information revolution, the appearance of the “screen” ensuring the multi-functional digital content – to the axiom of “The message is the media itself”. And about twenty years after McLuhan’s recognition, an original personality of American sociology, Neil Postman changed the axiom in his masterful essay on entertainment programs to “The medium is the metaphor itself” (Postman, 1985:3).

I wish to demonstrate and analyse this transformation which has happened in the last two decades with the application of a few examples of the history of electronic journalism the way it interlocks in the peaceful “media battle” and real war during the processes of the different forms of social conflicts.