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"Not a Political Virus": Manufacturing Consent by Czech Public Service Media in the Pandemic

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Abstract: The article presents an analysis of the news broadcast on Czech public television during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. Based on the concept of post-politics, the analysis illustrates how Czech Television created consensus, naturalized the measures adopted by the government, and transformed a potentially political space into one that privileged instrumental and technical solutions. The author argues that the later emergence of protest movements in Czechia may also be related to the first wave of the pandemic being presented in a consensual, post-political form in public service media. This activity prevented society from recognizing the socially unequal impact of the pandemic and the measures aimed at reducing its impact. Dealing with the question of how to represent a world that went through a rapid change, because of a pandemic, the article ends with a plea for agonistic media pluralism.

Keywords: Post-politics; pandemic; television; news; critical discourse analysis; deliberative democracy.

INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic hit the Czech Republic. The onset of Czechia's epidemic was mainly linked to the return from winter holidays in Italy, with the first three diagnosed cases returning from northern Italy. The media closely covered these and subsequent cases as they gradually mounted. The government's response in March 2020 was rapid, significantly restrictive and affected the whole of society. Most citizens in the Czech Republic agreed about the means to fight the pandemic, in supporting the government and its

delegation of the solution to scientific experts (epidemiologists).[1] This article is based on this consensus and aims to show by what means it was manufactured and how the image of the pandemic was constructed as a technical and administrative problem, and not a political one.

Our study draws on the theoretical framework provided by the concept of post-politics, which it understands as an example of risk depoliticization. Media presented the pandemic as an issue that transcends social and political antagonisms, or as a non-political, technical problem for which society must reach a post-political agreement, similar to the apocalyptic imaginary of the environmental crisis (see, e.g., Swyngedouw, 2010). The media and academic discourses of COVID-consensus contributed to the concealment and neglect of the deep and complex systemic interrelationships created and developed by the crisis, including the deepening of inequalities (Benach, 2021). One of the key public figures of the time, the epidemiologist Roman Prymula declared as Minister of Health[2]: "Covid is not a political virus" (iDnes.tv, 2020). However, by then, the depoliticization discourse could no longer be sustained, as protest movements against the government measures had emerged in society (ČTK, 2020).

This article argues that these post-political dynamics are one of the mechanisms by which Western societies respond to the conditions of a changing world. The change that we[3] are discussing here lies, above all, in the global dimension of the crises humanity faces and their connection to the conditions of the post-Fordist economy. Arguably, the initially depoliticizing discourse is offset over time by disruptive forces, which (re-)introduce forms of politicization that primarily originate from voices opposed to modern liberalism. This study starts from the premise that there is a need to understand how depoliticizing representations of consensus are constructed (in the first phase of the pandemic) and how the media contribute to this levelling of risk as an administrative and technical problem. For this reason we analyze public service media news at the onset of the pandemic, where the consensus-building mechanisms were most apparent.

1 As National Pandemic Alarm shows, in March-April 2020 trust in the state apparatus was 62–70% (European National Panels, 2021). CVVM research shows that the societal consensus was strong – 86% of people responded that they considered the government's anti-epidemic measures to be effective, 52% considered the economic measures to be adequate, 70% considered the work of the Central Crisis Staff to be good, 64% considered the work of the government to be good, and 86% declared their satisfaction with the performance of experts (scientists) (CVVM 2020).

2 Prymula was Czechia's Minister of Health 21.09–29.10.2020.

3 A Slavic language tradition forbids the author of an academic text to use the first-person singular (I) but allows the use of the first-person plural (we) as a replacement. Our text abides by this tradition.

THE DEPOLITICIZED RISK SOCIETY

The sociology of the risk society claims that the conditions of every late modern crisis must be socially recognized and this process of recognition is scarcely linear. Instead, researchers should understand it as a field of struggle between diverse actors. This contrasts with how authors working within the field of deliberative democracy, such as Habermas (1996), paint an impressive picture of social change based on public reflection and consensus. The latter position implies that crisis solutions should rely on social homogeneity, beyond all the class or ethnic conflicts, as the old social struggles and collective identities are to be postponed when the risks affect everyone. But this perspective, Mouffe (2000) argues, has serious disadvantages because it ignores structural conflict and thus legitimates post-political strategies. The procedural model of the public sphere as put forward by Habermas (Mouffe, 2000, p. 84), which is in line with the neoliberal individualization of responsibility, makes the decision-making process merely a technocratic issue of setting the rules. The rise of right-wing populism and the collapse of trust in public institutions (Mouffe, 2005, pp. 64–65) are just some of the symptoms of the dysfunctionality of this vision: collective identities are not collapsing, and societies are not transforming into groups of rational and impartial individuals making decisions together, about commonly experienced risks. In contrast, consensus is generated in society using political strategies that either negate or side-track diversity, arguing that specific areas or topics are beyond politics. These post-political strategies (see post-democracy in Rancière 1999) imply a profound negation of the political in contemporary Western society. For Rancière (1999, p. 97), the power of parliamentary politics erodes, as the political power of unaccountable authorities (experts, judges, commissions, etc.) rises. Moreover, issues can be constructed as 'objective' and as transgressing all social discontinuities, which opens up spaces for technocratic solutions, that are still deeply political, but defined as outside or beyond politics.

SOCIAL HOMOGENIZATION

While there is no denying the severity of the pandemic crisis, it must also be recognized that the catastrophe is constructed in a universal way, which is "socially homogenizing" (Swyngedouw, 2010, p. 221). Contrary to the idea of homogeneity, the available research provides evidence of how the "consensual body" disintegrates into different groups with distinct attitudes and feelings (Bish & Michie, 2010; Bolarinwa et al., 2020; Carlucci et al., 2020; DiGiovanni et al., 2004; Rattay et al., 2021; Shinan-Altman & Levkovich, 2020). High fear accompanied by a lack of trust in government can lead to reduced lockdown measures, compliance

in the environment of social and economic inequity (Atkinson-Clement & Pigalle, 2021), low self-confidence and uncertainty in social institutions (Storopoli et al., 2020). However, other research, among tech-savvy people, suggests that trust in government and age are not the predictors, but belief in the efficacy of the measures and concern for personal health are (Clark et al., 2020).

The media and academic discourses of the COVID-consensus contribute to a neglect of the deep and complex systemic interrelationships created and developed by this late-modern crisis, including the deepening of inequalities (Benach, 2021). In media, the vulnerability to COVID-19 of elderly and those suffering from life threatening illnesses was widely discussed, but Davies et al. (2021) inform us that these vulnerabilities also have social and environmental aspects in that socially and environmentally deprived communities tend to have more significant increases in mortality. For instance, preventive measures, such as social distancing or a "stay-at-home" rule, do not affect everyone equally, because as Chang et al. (2021) found these measures are often difficult to maintain in lower income neighborhoods. Ignoring this diversity, supports social homogenization, which, in turn, supports post-politics. Arguably, this transformation of conflicting zones in society, into mere moral or argumentative issues, comes with a great cost, as it suppresses particular voices in society.

JOURNALISM IN THE POST-POLITICAL WORLD

There are many locations where these post-political strategies are deployed, but our focus here is on journalism, as it contributes significantly to the construction of symbolic frontiers in the public sphere. For this reason journalism merits particular attention, from scholars and the public at large. However, the research on how post-politics is reproduced in media discourse is sporadic. Our argument is like Herman and Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent* (Herman & Chomsky, 1988), albeit we differ in both the adapted model and epistemological position. There is some research pointing e.g., to the recontextualization of class conflict into a corporate perspective (Abalo & Jacobsson, 2021), or the articulation of consensus in dealing with climate change, reducing the field of disagreement to being merely the pros and cons of the agreement (Kumpu, 2016). Gackowski (2013) discusses how the image (including visions, hopes and desires) gains importance in political communication, overshadowing electoral programs, statements, and facts. Post-politics' anthropocentricity and orientation towards a personal axiological code enables theorists to deploy the concept also as a network game in the present multimodal communication field, when social actors transform their communicational influence into political power (Kostyrev, 2021).

Of note here is the work of Pieter Maeseele and Daniëlle Raeijmaekers (2020), who deal systematically with the problem of post-political journalism. In order to apply their analytical framework in a study of depoliticization of media, researchers must evaluate the *ideological cultures* and the *scope* and *form* of media texts. Maeseele and Raeijmaekers (2020) suggest analyzing the former as instances of "fault lines" representing "a struggle between competing analyses about what constitutes progress regarding particular politico-ideological categories" (p. 1598), and the latter concerning "whether different sides of (a debate on) a social issue are addressed" and "the way these different sides are portrayed" (p. 1599).

Key to this approach is the idea that journalism is not outside ideology, but rather that journalism is a professional ideology. Professionalization is a distinctly ideological development, resulting in journalists (working in elective democracies) holding similar values: public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy, ethics (Deuze, 2005, pp. 445–447). But journalists are also prone to aligning with the political hegemonies of their time, and sometimes support post-ideological consensual understandings of society. Raeijmaekers and Maeseele (2015) argue that researchers (and journalists) need to be sensitive to these reductionist journalistic practices. Rather than staying in the scope of "pluralism within the box" and producing evaluations "*within* the limits of social consensus", alternative analytical approaches are necessary to reach "pluralism outside the box", i. e. the evaluation of journalism "*about* and *beyond* the limits of social consensus" (p. 649).

METHODOLOGY

To analyze how journalists produce a post-political consensus in the news, we chose the Czech public broadcaster Česká televize (Czech Television, ČT) for two reasons. First, ČT was the most trusted television station in Czechia during the pandemic (Macek, 2020), and secondly, ČT relies heavily on traditional objectivity, as enshrined in the broadcaster's code of ethics (Česká televize, 2003). Despite the external political pressures and blurring borders between commercial and public service broadcasting (especially in lifestyle magazines and talk shows), ČT presents a benchmark of impartial and objective television journalism with its strict code of ethics and internal rules. These characteristics make ČT distinct from some of the public service media in other Central European states, e. g. Poland or Hungary (Herrera, 2019). Nevertheless, ČT's general manager—Petr Dvořák—did mention in a press interview at the beginning of the crisis that he was asked by the Czech prime minister (together with other media representatives) to back the government's decisions and to avoid anything that could hamper its crisis management (Klímová & Frouzová, 2020).

We selected six broadcasts from ČT's main news program Události (Latest Happenings) from March 2020, when the pandemic crisis started in Czechia, and the government ordered a national lockdown. We chose broadcasts on days of significant pandemic-related domestic events.[4] Every program was 54 minutes in length and on average consisted of 33.2 units.[5] The material, both visual and aural[6], was coded. In the first iteration, relevant fragments were marked and their timecodes registered. These selected codes were transcribed by the author and their language analyzed. The saturation of the data (Saunders et al., 2018) was achieved quickly, as the discursive formations in the programs were often repeated and their form was stable.

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

This study employed critical discourse analysis (CDA) on the six case studies. The foci were the consensus-generating mechanisms, as well as the gaps in them, revealing inequalities in the decision-making process between politicians, entrepreneurs, experts and citizens. Fairclough (2019, p. 17) explains, representations and identities must be understood in the context of action, which is "a way of reasoning from critique of discourse to what should be done to change existing reality, by way of explanation of relations between discourse and other components of reality" (Fairclough, 2019, p. 14). By applying Maeseele and Raeijmaekers (2020, p. 1600) argument to our study, we want to show how the pandemic was depoliticized, closing off the democratic debate by mechanisms of exclusion, presenting privileged (or established) actors as the only rational, moral or natural ones. In terms of the text's scope, the privileging of social actors will be analyzed; in terms of the text's form, the discursive strategies constructing "no valid (political) contestation" will be analyzed (p. 1601).

Fairclough understands discursive practices in terms of networks called *orders of discourse*, which are "constituted by all the discursive types which are used

4 The date of the broadcasts in March 2020 and (the significant events) were: 10.03 (first case of infection of unknown origin); 11.03 (closing schools); 12.03 (declaration of a state of emergency); 16.03 (closing borders), 20.03 (other measures); and 22.03 (first deliveries of material from abroad). All six broadcasts were aired at 19.00–20.00 on ČT1. Sports news and weather forecasts were not included in the study.

5 A unit is a clearly delimited sequence of the program, which its creators have separated from other sequences (by editing). Units are presented in the internet archive as separate videos, but they do not always form a complete news item, as they may only contain auxiliary or supplemental items such as a headline, a follow-up report, a human-interest story, etc.

6 Aiming to avoid a microscopic perspective, which is common in qualitative research (Figueroa, 2008), we initially analysed the audio-visual data as a unity to identify the main discursive formations. Next, language analysis was performed, identifying representations and identities, inspired by Fairclough's "third" model (Fairclough, 2019, p. 17). The discourse analysis aimed to reveal practical reasons for political action, simultaneously interpreting its structure in connection with events in Czech society at the time.

there" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 55). In the sample, we can distinguish three orders of discourse relevant for this analysis: television news, medicine and politics. There are two main constituent categories of these orders of discourse: genres (using a language associated with a particular social practice) and discourses (representing a social practice from a specific perspective). Orders of discourse strive to establish cultural hegemony, because as Fairclough (1995, p. 56) argues, "dominant groups struggl[e] to assert and maintain particular structuring within and between them." Critical discourse analysis combines a focus on the orders of discourse with the analysis of communicative events.

THE NEWS COVERAGE OF COVID-19 AND ITS POST-POLITICAL LOGICS

PEOPLE AS PATIENTS OR OBJECTS OF LAW

Czech media covered the pandemic as the first COVID-19 patients appeared. Thus, the defining identity from the beginning was of *an infected person*. This identity of ordinary people was constructed in the relationship towards (a) the virus and (b) the preventative measures. Oscillating between legal-administrative and scientific-health discourses, both constructions were combined and employed the genre of investigation:

> REPORTER (10.3.2020): According to the published information, he [the patient] is a male, born in 1976, of Czech nationality. He drove around Prague as a driver for Uber, one of the alternative taxi services. In the days before he was hospitalized, he gave rides to 90 passengers, according to the authorities, and arrived at the Hospital Na Františku in a more serious condition than previous patients.[7]

In this case, the journalist's words were complemented by those of the Minister of Health, clarifying the patient's condition with medical data (inflammatory disease, oxygen deployment, etc.). In this fashion, the government confirmed its role as the central authority, uniting administration and science.

This genre combines the two discourses through objective framing, showing to the audience information, evidence, and clues leading to the apprehension of the abovementioned individual as a perpetrator, being identified as the source of infection. For instance, the infographic accompanying the broadcast showed a silhouette of a man, with the caption "infected taxi driver", and data about

7 All news excerpts included in this article have been translated into English by the author.

his nationality, "possible place of infection", "place of capture", and information that he had come into contact with 90 customers and 6 family members.

The careful placement of the whereabouts and movements of patients and their nationality is typical for the reporting during the beginning of an epidemic – journalists used narrative techniques familiar in criminal genres, which allowed them to link the legal-administrative and scientific-health discourses, positioning the patients at the discursive node. This created a tension between (a) the identity of people *as patients* or *objects of law* and (b) the government as a regulatory force. For instance, in the following fragment, the reporter holds drivers responsible for the tightening of the rules:

> NEWS ANCHOR (20.03.2020): The government is tightening the rules for so-called [cross-border] commuters. As of midnight tonight, no one will be allowed out of the country without a cross-border worker's book. Border police will stamp it when they leave and when they come back. We have Andrea Čandová [Reporter] on the scene. Andrea, what is this measure supposed to help with?
> REPORTER: The regime that has been in place so far has been abused by some drivers, according to the Interior Ministry, so they have been trying to prove with fake or old certificates that they are working abroad, in order to shop or visit relatives abroad.

The news translated basic human needs, including meeting with relatives, into a legal discourse unconcerned with personal feelings and the context of everyday life. There might have been an allowance for the democratic-institutional fault line between people's everyday lives and government action. However, this space (and the opportunity for potential conflicts and negotiations) was closed through the legal claim of objectified measures, the violation of which has a moral character ("the regime has been abused"), and not a political one. Any private action thus becomes depoliticized, interpreted in *moral* or *legal* terms and patients become objects of investigation rather than human beings with their own narratives and knowledge.

GOVERNMENT AND PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

The government's measures (which included closing schools, restricting movement, wearing masks, lockdowns, etc.) became personified, as all social reality was presented being moved by "objectively" understood regulations, without revealing a further causal link to politics and the particularity of decision-making. The government (synonymous with "Czechia", "the state", "ministers" or "the Security Council of Government") was identified as a mere executor of the demands, imposed on the nation by "the virus", an external and inscrutable

actor coming from abroad. The political character of the governmental decisions (with the possibility to disagree) was omitted in favor of a focus on the instrumentality of power: "the state" was "deciding", "declaring", or "tightening up".

The active voice, used to speak about authorities (including the police, army, firefighters, and health workers), was in sharp contrast with the passive voice used to refer to the social effects of the measures and emerging issues: "schooling *is* interrupted", "there *are no* reserves", "*there is* an urgent shortage" (emphasis added by the author):

> NEWS ANCHOR (16.03.2020): Czech Deputy Prime Minister and Czech Interior Minister Jan Hamáček is a guest on Události. You have advised people to wear medical masks. But how should they proceed? What should they do when there is a shortage of masks in the Czech Republic?
> INTERIOR MINISTER: Good evening. I have tried to appeal to our citizens to keep their noses and mouths covered when they leave their homes. Of course, the best thing would be a mask, but in the current situation, there is a shortage of medical masks, and I want to assure everyone that we are doing our utmost to import millions of masks into the Czech Republic as quickly as possible, but the only country that is able to export this material today is China, and we are working on setting up a supply of masks from China.

The news coverage ignores the structural and systemic conditions of the shortage (e.g., the abandonment of local production in favor of a globalized market), while portraying China as the only possible supplier of medical devices. This line of supply is presented in the ensuing days as international aid, and proof of China's goodwill and the government's excellent negotiating skills. The symbol of this translation of a structural problem into an administrative-logistical one was the government's press conference at the airport, beside the plane that brought the material to the Czech Republic on March 20. News reports then spoke of an "air bridge" between China and the Czech Republic; this term can be understood as "bridging" the global structural issues of the pandemic, reducing it to the problem of cooperation, negotiation, and agreement between governments, again neglecting the political dimensions of this kind of global solidarity.

A COLLECTIVE "WE"

In television broadcasting, the language that journalists use regularly mingles with the information they mediate. In our study, the coverage was enriched by the rhetorical figures and propositions employed by the Czech government. This had a profound effect on identifying the actors in the news, because the

borders between the government, administration, journalists, and facts became blurred, as were the boundaries between the utterances of the news anchors and politicians. That is how a collective "we" was constructed, omitting citizens as actors able to act independently:

> NEWS ANCHOR (20.03.2020): More than ten thousand people have already died worldwide due to the coronavirus; in the Czech Republic, health officials are currently registering 833 cases of infection and no deaths. A total of four people have been cured. The state is also considering a complete lockdown because of the disease. According to Roman Prymula, head of the Central Emergency Committee, this would be an extreme decision if people ignore the existing prohibitions.

This example shows the ways television news broadcasts intertwined not only health information with the government's intentions but also an objective tone with apolitical decision-making. The handling of the crisis became a mere technical problem. The journalist's report was accompanied by quotes from the Prime Minister and the Chairman of the Emergency Committee, followed by a "warning before the weekend" report (urging people not to travel). The use of this legal-administrative discourse again obscured the distinctions between journalists, government, state, and certain politicians.

The television news discourse did construct binary opposites other than "we, Czechs" versus "them, the measures and the virus". One such binary opposite became apparent when the identity of "other countries" (mainly in Europe) was sharply distinguished from the collective "we". Often the genres of statistics or reportage presented other countries as "failing" and "mishandling" the pandemic. This strategy enabled the public to understand "we" as successful and decisive, even when serious issues emerged (i.e., the lack of health material, the unpreparedness of the health care system, etc.). This construction reflected also global power relations and divisions. The discourse was however overtly nationalist, even anti-European, as "they" (including European countries) were portrayed as detached entities, i.e., the places from which the virus came.

REPRESENTATION OF CITIZENSHIP

Citizen agency in *decision-making*, as we have seen, was very limited in these representations. In the context of binary opposites there was a middle-ground between "we" and "they" which ordinary people filled. The language of the television broadcasts used modal verbs, such as "have to", "must not", "can" or "cannot" for representing citizens' actions. Television news did not construct citizens as active in making decisions about their common future, at the policy level, but more as consumers, or subjects of law or rules the government imposed,

which government's expert (mainly health oriented) discourse emphasized in speaking about the everyday issues.

The news coverage presented people as active in the contexts of demonstrating against the measures, volunteering to mitigate the impact of the crisis, especially by helping the elderly and vulnerable, filling material shortages, etc. Therefore, solidarity was linked to the logistical nature of the crisis and did not take on any structural significance. As a volunteer, the individual was seen to complement the state, to help in contexts the state could not operate. But this inability of the state was not presented as a structural problem, but was seen as a necessary consequence of the immensity of the crisis. As the systemic dimensions of the pandemic became naturalized, citizenship was often confused with loyalty and assistance to the state, and solidarity was stripped of its subversiveness. People were thus deprived of the possibility of actively shaping the world in times of crisis.

The news coverage employed a similar strategy in translating the legal-administrative and scientific-health discourses into an economic issue. In the afore-mentioned example (20.03.2020) concerning the taxi driver, the broadcast ended with a report about his employer's measures to restrict the spread of the virus, which included the purchase of disinfectant. The same mechanism is visible on 22.03.2020, when the news discussed the economic effects of the government measures and a serious political fracture almost occurred. The trade union's demand for the suspension of economic production was, however presented as mere information, not as a conflict between employees or employers, nor did the news coverage place the demands in the context of the structural problems of late-capitalism:

> NEWS ANCHOR (22.03.2020): Jaroslav Souček, chairman of Kovo, the most powerful Czech trade union, called on company owners and managers to suspend production for at least two weeks. He said only companies whose production deals with life-threatening situations should be exempted. Souček said the government should provide their workers with protective equipment such as masks or disinfectants.

A typical aspect of this representation strategy was to relegate customers, patients, or employees to a passive role, or omit them altogether. Conflict between any social groups or classes did not emerge. Whenever society or an institution made a demand, the news coverage focused on economic, administrative and technological solutions and did not present it in the context of a democratic-institutional fracture. The solution to managing the virus was thus negotiated along economic and techno-scientific fault lines, with logistics being its crucial node. The news coverage did not reference employees' or customers' personalities, lives

or emotions but constructed them as signifiers of, and representatives of actions, by employers (government, institutions, businesses or the law):

> NEWS ANCHOR (11.03.2020): Some institutions and companies have arranged contactless delivery of letters and food for people in quarantine. The Czech Post is extending the time of deposit at the counter and now also puts parcels intended for the recipient's hands in the mailbox. Today, it also began distributing almost five million health information leaflets.
> REPORTER: Marcela Bačinská [Czech Post employee] is making sure that these leaflets reach every mailbox in Prague's Průhonice [municipality]. She came out with a bag full of them this morning.
> BAČINSKÁ: It will probably take all morning to distribute them throughout Průhonice.
> REPORTER: She also delivers regular mail for people in quarantine in the so-called contactless mode. Even parcels addressed directly to the addressee are left in the mailbox or at the post office.

In this example, the identity of the employer or institution was transferred onto the employee, through an action that was presented as a solution to the crisis, or as a response to the naturalized situation of the spread of the virus. The mail was the node that connected the infected (people in quarantine), the employees, the institutions, and the government (who ordered the quarantine), but it signified an economic and administrative entity in the news. Because the dominant administrative discourse dominantly employed the language of law and logistics, even the volunteers were absorbed into this discourse, as role models of civic activity. The need for masks, which could be depicted as the government's failure, was transformed into heroic acts of national self-help and the evidence of national integrity.

DISCUSSION

In the analyzed news broadcasts, the transformation of an administrative discourse into economic discourse was apparent, omitting the democratic-institutional fault line. In a global context, this is situated within the background of an overall convergence of news narratives, which in March 2020 were focusing on economic, social and mortality concerns and mitigation measures (Ng et al., 2021). In presenting the crisis in primarily logistical terms (e.g., "where we get masks"), the objectification of the crisis resulted in the technologization of the solutions. The administrative discourse, in absorbing all the questions in relation

to solutions, depoliticized the crisis and proposed entrepreneurship as the key solution.

Moreover in the news broadcasts, objectivity—the traditional principle of journalism—became detached from the morals and emotions of the people, restricting the public discussion to mere instrumental rationality.[8] In this manner, the news order of discourse enabled the democratic deficit and closed off the debate. We can suggest that this alignment of media with the state arises from the traditionally *paternalistic* role of the public service media in Europe (Fickers, 2012), which is different from the situation in America where COVID-19 news was highly politicized and polarized (Hart et al., 2020).

If we are to ask—with Maeseele and Raeijmaekers (2020)—which discursive strategies were employed to close off the debate and who was excluded from the representation of the crisis, the answer lies in a focus on the identities (with their respective relationships) that were featured in the news broadcasts. Firstly, there was the strong presence of the *virus* and the preventive *measures*, which were both personified and active. The character of measures as an outcome of the decision-making process was overshadowed by the instrumental rationality of the *government*, which ceased to act as a political body and became instead an institution of crisis management. This strategy also connects with how the identity of *ordinary people* was constructed in relation to the virus and the measures. The news coverage in both cases did not present ordinary people as active, but merely as reactive or passive "objects". A collective identity, in its political sense, did not emerge as the public was translated as private. The news presented the e*xperts, businesses,* and *technology* as participants in governmental solutions, as the expected economic ideological fault line was transformed into merely technical problems of logistics or administration.

Hence, the first strategy the news broadcasts employed was to naturalize the measures and governmental decisions. Secondly, they privatized the governmental and economic solutions, translating them to the private realm, as stories of patients, employees, volunteers, or abusers. Arguably, this public-to-private translation is typical for the news' order of discourse (Fairclough, 1995, p. 37), as this "communicative ethos" presents the world as "ordinary, mundane, accessible, knowable, familiar, recognizable, intelligible, shareable and communicable for whole populations" (Scannell, 1989, p. 152). In this study, the translation between private and public was asymmetric and unidirectional. The government was in charge of the public agenda, not as an actor *per se*, but as the executor of *vis maior*, through a cluster of naturalized and objectified demands. The private domain was constructed only as a mirror to this public agenda, deprived

8 For the discussion on the public sphere employing Aristotelian notions of ethos, pathos and logos, see Chambres (2009).

of its activity levels and deliberative power. The private was translated into the public only when its language was adjusted to the dominant lexicon and binary opposite discourses (administrative: logistics, health: experts). The economic and scientific-technological ideological fault lines were not presented as a struggle or a negotiation between antagonists but as frontiers of morality. In other words, those who consented to or cooperated with the government's measures were moral, whereas those who did not were amoral, illegal or non-rational.

The news thus established a clear separation between public and private with the latter being translated into these legal-administrative, scientific-medical, and economic discourses. Even volunteering was recognized as an expression of loyalty, not as a form of subversion or as an alternative political attitude. That is how the public became post-political – as the realm "where an overlapping consensus can be established over a shared conception of justice" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 90). The news did use the tropes of "war" or "struggle", but mostly to support this process of naturalization. The only war to wage was with the virus, which "was not a political one".

CONCLUSIONS

Critiques on post-politics in journalism emphasize the need to shift from maintaining professional distance to paying attention to a synthesized and contextualized diversity (race, gender, sexuality, class experience), not only at the level of media content but also in the way media are organized (Nettleton, 2015). Our analysis shows how a public service media participates in manufacturing consent—to use Herman and Chomsky's (1988) formulation—rather than in helping to recognize social differences. The collective "we" merges the government with journalists' voices and the nation but omits many discussions on the diverse experiences with the pandemic and the government measures.

Although the news did not address and articulate private emotions and everyday experiences as public matters, the "objective" distance of journalists perpetuated this separation between the public and the private. However, as Mouffe (2000, p. 91) argues, it is impossible to separate the two, and to operate in a detached realm of mere instrumentality, procedurality and expert knowledge. In conclusion, we want to suggest that the rise of the protest movements against the COVID-19 measures, which occurred in the fall of 2020 should be understood as an effort to re-politicize the pandemic, and not as a mere manifestation of irrationality or irresponsibility.

As Maeseele (2010) also argues, journalists should avoid "the consensual type of science journalism" (p. 4) in favor of "a conflictual type of science journalism that frames risk conflicts as conflicts between opposing responses to uncertainty,

by revealing the competing sets of assumptions, values, and interests underlying these responses and making them subject of public debate" (Maeseele, 2010, pp. 4–5). This argument does not mean breaking down all the boundaries that protect journalism, and letting in unsubstantiated opinions, disinformation, or propaganda. Research on pandemic news informs us that providing an unfiltered diversity of perspectives is equally problematic, because in a polarized environment (as in the U.S.) it reinforces individual beliefs rather than challenge them (Dhanani & Franz, 2020). The solution may be to strive for *agonistic media pluralism*, as media present different preferences in the form of politicizing discourses (Maeseele & Raeijmaekers, 2020, p. 1604). The alternative actors and demands can thus be introduced, and as a result, "several discourses of action are presented as alternative ways to move forward" (Maeseele & Raeijmaekers, 2020, p. 1600).[9]

Česká televize (ČT), the Czech public service media broadcaster revealed itself, at least in the broadcasts we studied, to be a rather hegemonic actor, both in scope and form, instead of a media organization that opens up the public discussion to diverse experiences and political expressions. In a normative sense, our analysis should be understood not merely as a warning but rather as an encouragement for media change.

In a changing world, societal risks should be recognized, discussed, and allowed to be the subject of political struggle. To paraphrase Roman Prymula "every virus is political". Therefore, media also needs to change. This will help to increase the participation of ordinary people in the future world, which might help society to deal better with forthcoming crises, in more just and truthful ways. The COVID-19 pandemic is hardly just a scientific or technological issue, and a neoliberal instrumental consensus on solutions could not be considered democratic. Media coverage of moments of crisis and the change they bring should recognize these aspects and include a broader diversity of social experiences, and thus promote a more democratic handling of the risks we are facing. Otherwise, media are scarcely anything more than government heralds.

9 The authors elaborated this approach empirically in their previous research (Maeseele et al., 2017; Pepermans & Maeseele, 2014).

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