

by Wiesław Sonczyk

Polish media system transformation dilemmas (on the example of magazines)

Summary

This article is an attempt at presenting and evaluating some processes and occurrences on the Polish press market after 1990. According to the author, the most important result of the transformation is the change in the way of perceiving the media, their role in the society, etc. The media have become a commodity and the media market can hardly be considered stable. On the contrary, since 1990 it has been undergoing significant changes, mostly quantitative. Their evaluation may only be ambivalent, as the changes beneficial to the media owners are not always favourable to their recipients. The most alarming process, as far as its scope and the social effects are concerned, is the commercialization of media content.

Key words: Polish media system, magazines, Polish media market

Presenting a comprehensive characterisation as well as an assessment of the process of transformation of Polish media system is incredibly difficult. Firstly, the term “media system”, although frequently used, does not possess a normative definition so far (it should). Moreover, it is not even used in a uniform way enough in order to be universally accepted. Resulting, various people (authors, media experts, publicists) understand and use it in a different way. An example of this can be the way people treat the Internet, some include it in the media system while others consider this newest phenomenon something entirely new and different from the traditional media. In both cases many arguments can be presented in order to support either point of view. Secondly, the term “transformation” can also be understood differently. It not only means the complex process of change within the structure of media and their content as a result of development and the introduction of entirely new legal regulation (the creation of commercial media, the establishment of KRRiT, etc.) but also the evolution of social functions of various types of media, free, since 1990, from political influence.

It should also be noted that an imperative factor in the process of transformation is competition, intra- and intermedia which continuously takes place between all players on the market. This leads to some types of media becoming less credible, especially when their content is targeted at unspecified recipients. Wiesław Dębski accurately describes the situation in his assessment of the presentation of the sex scandal by the media, “(...) in Poland the media market is still being shaped. Over the years dominant was only one newspaper, the only ‘correct’ one which influenced people’s moral values and delineated the boundaries of social dialogue. Those who did not agree with its point of view or tried to go beyond it were considered halfwits. This limited the scope of discussion, also about media and their responsibilities. The onset of the first real information TV as well as new press greatly augmented the amount of various points of view. It also lead to increasing competition. The faster and more original the information, the better. Resulting are sometimes bizarre situations where insignificant events or news become completely blown out of proportion

and of interest to the entire country”¹. The constant search for sensation generally compromises the media as sources of reliable information and proper assessment of events. An example of this may be several days lasting reports on the event of US shooting down its own satellite and resulting from it the possibility of Polish people being hurt by fragments of it falling down on our territory.

Unfortunately, various people’s (intellectuals, journalists) attempts to prevent the media from going in this direction have, so far, been unsuccessful. For instance, there are the appeals made by the Ethics Media Council (REM) not to deform reality in media broadcasts, regardless the reasons. REM states, “it is harmful for public debate to distort the meaning of events that are transmitted. For example, 1) unreliable sources of information on deputy Paweł Kowal’s (PIS) alleged cooperation with WSI without stating when it took place (during communist or democratic times), [“Dziennik” January 14, 2008]; 2) quoting fragments of conversation between doctor Garlicki and his colleagues imputing malpractice [“Rzeczpospolita” January 12, 2008]. The reader does not read about the details, when the conversation took place, which is imperative in case of death diagnosis (whether it was before or after the patients’ brain death was diagnosed) and which determines whether malpractice has been committed; 3) deputy Palikot’s blog about the president’s alleged health problems [TVN 24, “Dziennik”, other media], a pitiful incident which the media have blown out of proportion.

The above mentioned are good examples of media sensationalism, or focusing on insignificant events and blowing them out of proportion which is not good, both for media and for recipients. Such presentations deform people’s view of the world instead of showing events in proper light and proportion.

REM also reminds that the use of taps, leaks and rumours is only justified when vital information cannot be obtained otherwise or it needs to be verified”².

In order to comprehend the process of transformation in most general terms, we could agree with the opinion that it is a process of various changes, on system level and regarding different institutions, which is continuous, although it may take place at variable speeds and scope. What is more, it has not begun in 1989, after the political turnover, but started earlier although it may have not been so visible. Back then the deciding factor were the Communist Party’s strategic and tactical interests as it was the actual media ruler³.

For the above mentioned reasons (and more), this article attempts to show the selected phenomena, tendencies, and processes of media system transformation after the turnover in 1989 and their consequences. These are

¹ Dębski W. – Media sięgnęły alkowy. „Rzeczpospolita” 2006, nr 292.

² Cf. „Rzeczpospolita” 2008, nr 17.

³ On examples of party management of media and specific agencies see W. Władyka in “*Polityka i jej ludzie*” (Warszawa 2007).

considered to be most characteristic (a subjective opinion), with a choice of examples being limited to the printed press.

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The most positive result of the transformation seems to be the change in the way people view the media. In other words, since the media are not controlled by politicians and considered to be independent, they are seen as more reliable. During communist times, the media were treated as a type of a social benefit which the state provided for its people. In practise it meant that media were entirely controlled by the state (the ruling party). In case of printed press, the main decision maker was the Główny Urząd Kontroli Publikacji i Widowisk (GUKPiW) which acted in the name of the state and decided which titles were to be printed and which would cease to exist. Resulting were, often times, published magazines which nobody read and were futile (but whose owner had the support of the party) while others, those which were important from a social needs point of view, were often shut down (especially when they were in opposition to the party's programme or critical in any way).

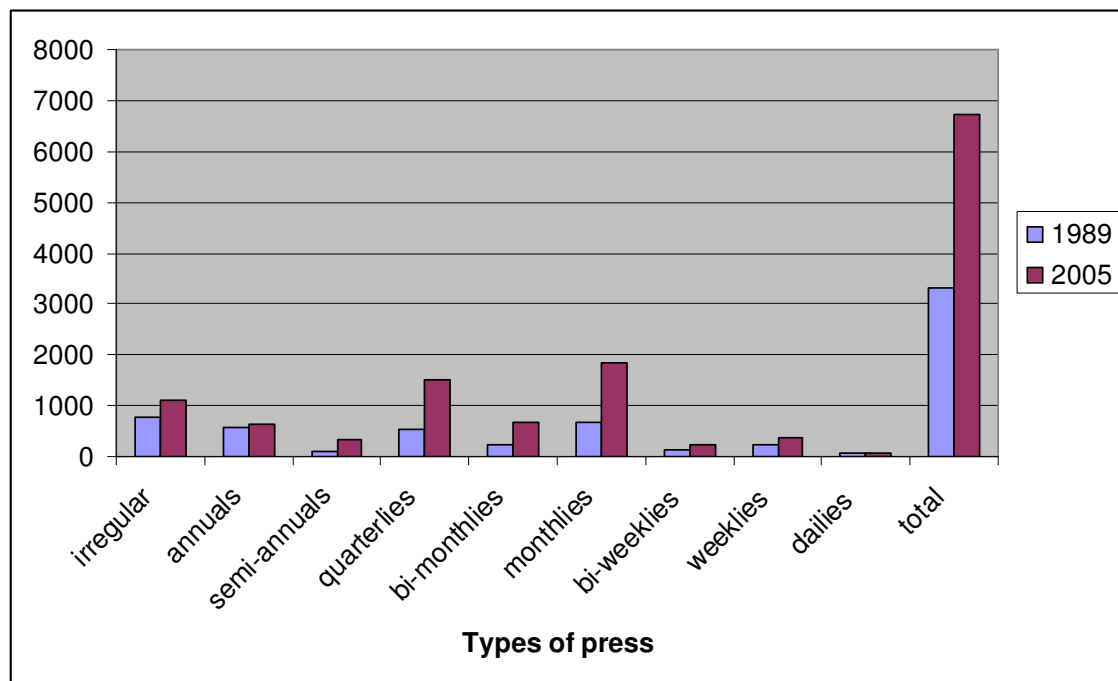
In such conditions, obviously, the media were not pluralist or authentic. This is what Jerzy Turowicz said on the subject in his speech during the opening of the "Round Table" talks on February 6, 1989, "If we want to have a society we need to enable it to control those who are in power and to accept pluralist values. Socio-political pluralism means the existence of authentic public opinion. It means doing away with the existing monopoly over mass media (...). It means that different socio-political opinions need to be presented by the mass media. It means a choice in the type of media we are exposed to, to meet people's diverse expectations. It means a change of the entire system, of concessions, circulation and distribution and giving it back to the people to be in charge of"⁴. As we know, after the "Round Table" talks and several months of negotiation in Parliament most of the above postulates were realized.

On April 11, 1990, the changes in legal regulation went into effect, political censorship was done away with and the 1984 press law was amended. From now on, the press was free and anyone wishing to publish could apply for concession. Resulting was a dramatic increase in the number of published titles. Quickly dominant on the market became foreign investors, taking over old Polish publishers and distributors, ie. RSW "Prasa-Książka-Ruch" or introducing Polish versions of their own magazines⁵. According to National Library Bibliographic Institute data, in 1989 there were 3 300 press titles (including 59 dailies, 233 weeklies, 130 bi-weeklies, 678 monthlies, 229 bi-monthlies, 519 quarterlies, 99 semi-annuals, 570 annuals and 783 others published irregularly). In 2005, in comparison, there were 6721 registered titles (including 65 dailies, 359 weeklies, 228 bi-weeklies, 1838 monthlies, 653 bi-

⁴ Bereś W. – Czwarta władza. Najważniejsze wydarzenia medialne III RP. Warszawa 2000, p. 23

⁵ Sonczyk W. – Transformacja polskiego systemu prasowego w latach 1989-2005 (próba analizy ilościowej) [in] Media dawne i współczesne. , edited by B. Kosmanowa. Vol. II, Poznań 2007.

monthlies, 1503 quarterlies, 325 semi-annuals, 642 annuals and 1108 titles published irregularly). The dynamics of change between 1989 and 2005 are also illustrated in Chart 1 below:



Source: by author, based on National Library Bibliographic Institute data for 1989 and 2005.

As can be seen from the above, there is a significant increase in all categories in the number of titles published between 1989 and 2005. The greatest growth can be observed on the example of titles which come out more rarely, such as semi-annuals (increase by 328%), quarterlies (289%), bi-monthlies (285%) and monthlies (271%). Significantly also grew, but to a lesser degree, the number of bi-weeklies (75%) and weeklies (54%). The least increased the number of dailies (10%) and irregular press (41%).

It should also be noted that there are less and less 'pure' press publishers on the market while there are more companies or organizations which own press titles but are also engaged in other than press activity. In comparison, in 1989 there were 1327 'professional' publishers (40.2% of total) and 1973 'non-professionals' (59.8%), while in 2005 there were 1935 (28.8%) professionals and 4786 (71.2%) non-professionals. This means that there are more and more institutions and firms which add publishing to their activity seeing it as something advantageous (popularisation of company, added social prestige, staff training, etc.). Sometimes publishing is done in order to reach new clients or maintain present ones, as part of long term loyalty programmes carried out by banks, car manufacturers and distributors, large cosmetics companies, etc. According to some marketing analysts, "it is a great way to reach customers,

much better and cheaper than paying for advertising in different magazines”⁶. It is no wonder then that the value of the so-called consumer press (estimated in 2007 to be between 80-100 mln zloty) dynamically grows (by 20-20% annually) and such client magazines are something which even giant publishers do not ignore⁷.

It is undisputable that the dynamics of change on a free, pluralist and competitive press market are great, with new titles entering the market and older ones disappearing. According to CR Media Consulting, in 2003, 71 new magazines were published while 171 ceased to exist. In 2004, there was a similar trend, more titles went out of print (150) than were created (63). In 2005, on the other hand, the situation was opposite – there were 120 new magazines and 50 which were done away with. It is difficult to say so far whether it was just a temporary change or the beginning of a new trend. One thing is for certain, there are much greater chances that a magazine will stay in print if its publisher is a professional one, while “magazines which are published by entrepreneurs who do it for prestige or think that it is easy business are generally doomed to fail”⁸. Examples of such endeavours are “Ozon” magazine or “Tygodnik Informacyjny Fakty” which only came out for a short time. Of course, it also happens that magazines published by professionals fail, such as the free of charge daily “Metropol” (9 XI 2000 – 5 I 2007) by the Swedish company Metro International, as well as Agora’s “Nowy Dzień”, so far the shortest existing daily in Poland (14 XI 2005 – 23 II 2006).

Undoubtedly, on a free market there occur processes unfavourable from the consumers’ point of view but which are advantageous for publishers. It seems in general, although the media deny this, that increasingly they ‘work’ predominantly for their owners, in order to bring them profits. The common good and social interests are definitely less and less important. It is no wonder, though, since 1990 the media are, for the most part, commercial and therefore what they offer is a product which needs to sell. Growing commercialisation of the entire media sphere is a threat to the consumers. In case of private media (magazines, radio, television) it is given, but regarding public media people demand more. However, generally little can be done to reverse this trend. One sure sign that many persons object the direction in which the public media are heading is the fact that they do not pay the subscription fee and criticise public TV and radio’s programme offer⁹.

Commercialisation of media content can be observed based on various examples. For instance, we can easily see in the press that the length of articles in dailies and magazines is increasingly shorter and instead there are more pictures or infographics, etc. Generally, infographics are not reprehensible and

⁶ Więclaw E. – Banki wydają... prasę. „Rzeczpospolita” 2008, nr 24: Lemańska M., Mazurkiewicz P. – Supermarkety stawiają na prasę. „Rzeczpospolita” 2007, nr 280.

⁷ Lemańska M. – Boom na magazyny dla konsumentów. „Rzeczpospolita” 2008, nr 14.

⁸ Błaszczak A. – Zyskowe debiuty i plajty uznanych. „Rzeczpospolita” 2005, nr 303.

⁹ Lemańska M. – Nadal nieliczni płacą abonament. „Rzeczpospolita” 2007, nr 294.

are a rather popular and effective form of relaying information as they “allow the transmission of content in a quick and reader friendly fashion” (...) Infographics combine graphics and text, their number one advantage is that they are in short form, a synthesis of visual aids and transcript. It is the most condensed type of information transmission (...) Infographics are not solely graphic and they are an effective journalist tool”¹⁰. Infographics are often used in order to make difficult texts, economic or social, easier to comprehend. In such cases it is useful, however, infographics should not be used just to be a space filler or “to be a substitute for photography”. However, the reasoning that it is a result of growing visualisation present also in other spheres, is not convincing to all.

A dangerous trend as a result of commercialisation is focusing on sensational information, news that shocks public opinion, instead of on events which are most important to the country, society or the world. “Polish media, according to Maciej Wierzynski, the serious press, are obsessively focused on politics. If you listen to the radio in the morning, there are always politicians as guests of programmes, with further commentary following. During the day there is somewhat less of Lepper, Ziobro, Komorowski or Gosiewski but in the evening they come back full force. Additionally, different politicians’ statements are repeated many times throughout the day as some sort of exclusive sensation. The TV media focus on 15 to 20 politicians which go from studio to studio and eat breakfasts at the stations’ expense. Newspapers, to a lesser degree, are also fixated on domestic politics and they continually inform us about political intrigues, games and faux pas. All in all, people are exposed to information which is questionable as far as relevance, news which quickly becomes old and is of little value.

In order to better understand this irrelevant news overload let’s try to imagine a situation in which someone, since the formation of the new government in autumn, has not been exposed to any news, TV, radio or press, and ask him how much has he really missed? In general, everything is as was, the government, the parliament, there is no stable coalition and no new elections. Nothing really important has happened despite some sensational news or scandals without factual consequences which the media reported on. Was it worth then, being exposed to all that information?”¹¹. If we agree with Wierzynski’s opinion, then how can we rate the effective information function of media considered so imperative? And what about its educative or opinion forming functions?

There are, however, some positive results of media transformation. One is that of vertical and horizontal differentiation (stratification). Regarding horizontal differentiation, since 1990, published are more and more specialist magazines because of 1) the public’s growing interest in different issues, 2)

¹⁰ Pacholska K. – Czytać obrazem. „Press” 2006, nr 4.

¹¹ Wierzyński M. – Suma wszystkich wolności. „Rzeczpospolita” 2006, nr 101.

specific target groups of recipients. In other words, there are not only more magazines published but there is also growing specialisation, that is more specialist magazines targeted at niche recipient groups. One example of this are shopping magazines, these are the monthly “Avanti”, quarterly “Logo” (published by Agora SA) or quarterly “Hot. Moda & Shopping” (Edipresse Polska). These magazines include advice sections on what to buy, where to buy and are targeted at people who are increasingly busy and with too little free time to spend on shopping. It is predicted that in the future there will be more of such magazines aimed at not only the different sexes (“Logo” – men), (“Avanti” and “Hot. Moda & Shopping” – women) but at more specific target sub-groups within these groups¹².

Another example of growing specialisation are magazines focused on visual communication such as photography, art, architecture, design or fashion. These are typical niche magazines targeted at specific recipient groups. They are: bi-monthly “Futu” (by Futu Group), monthly “ARTeon” (by Dom Wydawniczy “Kruszona”), quarterly Vox Design” (by Vox Industrie), bi-monthly “Visual Communication” (by European Media Group). As mentioned above, these are targeted at specific reader groups, in Futu for example “This is noticeable starting from the magazine’s first page with advertisements of Saaba, Porsche, Bo Koncept, Bang & Olufsen, etc. The magazine targets recipients who are single, DINKY (double income no kids yet), between 25-40, with a higher education, open to new trends and considered opinion leaders in their groups. These are active people with high salaries, conscious of their choices, well oriented and caring about quality. (...) The bi-monthly is aimed at approximately 3 000 readers in Warsaw and is delivered by a courier in special packaging. Its first edition was sent to people selected from Futu Group’s data base. The magazine is free of charge but what’s inside? First of all, there are many photographs and graphic elements supplemented by texts in Polish and English. It is divided into three sections: “Self” - presenting achievements of young creators and interesting personas, “People” – on original, new projects and ideas, and “Surround” – on culture, design, fashion and photography. Each of the three sections has its different type of paper of high quality making it nice not only to look at but also to touch”¹³.

Growing advertising budgets of many firms and institutions (especially private) as well as increasing expenditures on press advertising and higher profits (1.75 bln in 2004, over 2 bln in 2007) lead to companies publishing more specialist magazines. Other examples of this are Polish editions of the monthly “Top Gear” aimed at car and motorization fans and the sport magazine “Futbol.pl”. According to analysts, in the future there will be more such niche magazines because, “(...) promotion of such magazines is cheaper than mass

¹² Hankus-Matuszek G. – Czas „shopingu”. „Brief” 2005, nr 5.

¹³ Błońska K. – Obraz, słowo i papier. <http://www.media.wp.pl> (from 28 VIII 2006)

magazines, and they give the publisher a chance to draw in readers with various hobbies.”¹⁴.

Regarding vertical differentiation, it is one magazine category, targeted at one group of readers, with different sub-categories of magazines within. A good example of this is women’s press which is generally divided into three ‘shelves’. ‘Top shelf’ are expensive, exclusive magazines with high level graphics, authors and issues discussed, targeted at readers with higher incomes, independent professionally or well situated. These are “Twój Styl”, “Pani”, “Elle”, “Viva”, “Zwierciadło”, etc. From the ‘bottom shelf’ there are magazines which are inexpensive, of smaller volume, with more illustrations and shorter texts focused on gossip information about famous people or ordinary people who have experienced extraordinary events. However, many people are of the opinion that most of these stories are a figment of the journalists’ imaginations. These magazines are supplemented by extensive advice sections including culinary, health, legal and crossword sub-divisions. Typical examples of magazines from this sub-group are “Przyjaciółka”, “Tina”, “Naj”, “Twoje Imperium”, etc.

‘Middle shelf’ magazines, as can be predicted, are somewhere in between. In terms of volume, they are closer to the top shelf, however, but as far as content, style and presentation they are more similar to those from the bottom shelf but less impudent and perhaps with a bit more reliable information. These are magazines such as “Gala” and “Claudia”.

Generally, it can be said that processes of vertical and horizontal differentiation lead to an overall increase in the number of published magazines. This means that more people can find what they are looking for and satisfy their needs but, at the same time, it is difficult for many niche magazines to remain on the market for a long time due to smaller circulation numbers and high distribution costs. They can go out of business even if they have temporary financial problems. Their publishers, looking to save money, often decide not to pay membership fees to belong to the prestigious Związek Kontroli Dystrybucji Prasy¹⁵ (Press Distribution Control Association).

Another phenomenon which needs to be discussed regarding the changing press market is ‘gadgetmania’ or the practice of including more or less valuable, free presents with the sale of magazines. This became popular in the late 1990s when it was becoming more and more difficult to sell magazines. Publishers began organizing lotteries, competitions with prizes and finally adding various material gadgets to gain readers even if for a short time. In other words, without a gadget it is often impossible to sell an entire issue of any magazine.

Gadgets were initially added to national dailies as it was this segment of the press which became saturated first and where competition was greatest. The first daily to include a gadget was “Super Express” which, in 1999, added a CD “Osiem błogosławieństw” and sold its entire issue (800 000). Next, in December

¹⁴ Lemańska M. – Wydawcy szukają nisz na rynku prasowym. „Rzeczpospolita” 2008, nr 10.

¹⁵ Wyszzyńska M. – Nie opłaca się. „Press” 2006, nr 12.

1999, was “Gazeta Wyborcza” which included a CD with Christmas carols by Zbigniew Preisner. Later followed “Rzeczpospolita” as well as regional dailies (“Gazeta Olsztyńska” and “Nowa Trybuna Opolska”). There is great popularity of such CD gadgets as a natural consequence of entertainment music popularity, especially among young people. This is what publishers and advertisers aim for, “(...) before they decide to invest in a gadget, they make sure that they are offering something which cannot be bought in a music shop. This way they reach new customers. The readers are happy to get something for free (...) and so are the advertisers who sponsor the CDs. They pay approximately 2 zł (per CD), put their logo on the cover, sell several hundred thousand copies and are sure that their advertisement will not get lost among all others inside a magazine. Moreover, people keep the CDs and use them a numerous number of times”¹⁶. Although gadgetmania first started with CDs, it has now spread to many other types of gadgets. In case of women’s magazines it is often cosmetics, handbags, bathing suits, spices, etc. Hobby magazines add small accessories or equipment associated with a given interest (flower seeds, fishing corks, children’s toys, etc.)

It may at first seem that the phenomenon of gadgetmania is entirely positive for all interested parties, publishers increase sales of issues (much greater with gadgets included, ie. Gazeta Wyborcza with Arka Noego CD sold over 1.4 mln copies!), readers are happy with free supplements as are advertisers whose logos appear on the gadgets. However, it is the publishers which are increasingly pointing to the negative effects of gadgetmania as this phenomenon falsifies the true sales and thus the position of a magazine on the market. Maciej Tyśnicki states that, “generally a magazine sells much better with a gadget than without one, then from an advertiser’s point of view it does not make much sense as it does not guarantee that people will buy a particular magazine in order to look through it but only because of the gadget. Advertisers want to pay for readers who look inside an issue (...) this leads to a competition for the best selling magazines within a segment. Presently, it is enough to spend money in one quarter on great gadgets to attain the position of best selling magazine in some market segment. Obviously the situation can be entirely different the following quarter or month after a publisher has ceased so pump money into gadgets (...). All in all, it is not the publishers who gain in this gadgetmania war but people around it. Nobody ever calculated whether it paid off, in terms of profits from advertisers or for how long it was profitable. The people that gained most were those who manufactured CDs, imported cheap gadgets from China or sold copy rights to films. Publisher generally lost”¹⁷.

Another popular form of press promotion are coupons. They are printed inside newspapers or magazines and allow people to buy certain products at reduced prices. These are also considered to increase the sale of a magazine, ie.

¹⁶ Romanowicz J. – Prasa gra i śpiewa. „Newsweek” 2002, nr 9.

¹⁷ Tyśnicki M. – Koniec gadżetomanii? <http://www.media.wp.pl> (from 12 IX 2006)

“Glamour’s” April issue with a coupon for products bought during National Glamour Day (21 IV 2007) was sold in 208 000 copies while the average sale of an issue is about 135 000 copies. Such practices, however, are also questionable as it is difficult to estimate their influence on a magazine’s image among readers, especially over a longer period of time. It is quite probable that instead of resulting in reader loyalty or positive image, the readers become used to buying magazines only when they have something in them¹⁸.

Is it at all possible to return to non-gadget days? Probably not, as gadgets are, so far, the simplest way to boost sales even if they do not influence reader loyalty. That is why, in the future publishers will continue to do the same although perhaps more rarely or they will need to give more thought as to what to include to attract buyers. It seems that so far what is fashionable is more effective than a well thought out, long term strategy¹⁹. However, some people are becoming increasingly annoyed with this gadget trend and are no longer motivated or lured by cheap gimmicks when they buy a magazine²⁰.

The above analysis of positive and negative consequences of the process of media transformation leads us to an obvious conclusion that there can be no uniform assessment. The speed, scope and results of the transformation are influenced by interests of at least three parties – publishers/broadcasters, recipients and advertisers. Generally these interests are hardly ever the same, it is good if they complement each other but for the most part they are entirely opposite. One more thing, the media transformation process in Poland, although a dozen years or so long, is still in its early phase. The changes that can be observed are still largely quantitative, a result of changes in legal regulation or new possibilities due to technical and technological advancement in communication. Qualitative changes are still ahead of us.

¹⁸ Wiczerzak A. – Gazeta z promocją. „Press” 2008, nr 2.

¹⁹ Lemańska M. – Bez(cenne) rady. „Press” 2006, nr 6.

²⁰ Bierzyński J. – Szalony wyścig prasy. „Rzeczpospolita” 2007, nr 294.