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Press distribution in Poland before 1989

KEY WORDS

press distribution, sales, subscription, press system, media, distribution market, Polish media system

ABSTRACT

The article attempts to present the history of press distribution in Poland between 1945–1989, predominantly for the sake of journalism students. The author is of the opinion that the distribution system is an integral part of the media system which, in comparison to press, radio and television, is relatively unknown. There is little literature on the subject and it is not easily accessible. Meanwhile, history of press distribution deserves attention since it illustrates the general media situation in communist Poland. It shows how dependent it was on the political authority (PZPR party) and its economic and political goals. The article discusses the three main phases of the distribution system's organizational development. In the first, between 1945–1949, press distribution was decentralized and diversified which meant that different publishers were also distributors and there was no organization responsible for the creation and realization of distribution policy. In the second phase (1950–1972), distribution was nationalized, monopolized and centralized. It was run by a state owned corporation. In the third phase, between 1973–1989, based on an administrative decision of the authorities, these duties were taken over by a party concern RSW "Prasa–Książka–Ruch".

Press distribution as one element of the media system is, in comparison to press, radio or television, not so well known. Authors of various papers on the structure and situation of the media system in communist Poland devoted very little attention to press distribution. The situation is similar with regard to works on the transformation of Polish media after 1990. For example, in a four volume work on changes in the Polish media system, edited by Alina Słomkowska, there is not one text on press distribution¹. It is no different as far as other publications, both those published some time ago and those more modern ones². Also, media studies periodicals very rarely discuss the issue of distribution, either from the historical

¹ Cf.: *Kontrowersje wokół transformacji prasy polskiej (1989–1992)*, ed. A. Słomkowska, Warszawa 1993; *Dylematy transformacji prasy polskiej (1989–1993)*, ed. A. Słomkowska, Warszawa 1994; *Pięciolecie transformacji mediów (1989–1994)*, ed. A. Słomkowska, in coop. with E. Ciborska, Warszawa 1995; *Transformacja mediów (1989–1995)*, ed. A. Słomkowska, in coop. with D. Grzelewska et al., Warszawa 1996 – these works were published as volumes 23, 24, 25 and 26 in the series *Materiały Pomocnicze do Najnowszej Historii Dziennikarstwa*.

² Cf.: *Media i dziennikarstwo w Polsce 1989–1995*, ed. G.G. Kopper, I. Rutkiewicz, K. Schliep, Kraków 1996; J. Braun, *Potęga czwartej władzy. Media, rynek, społeczeństwo*, Warszawa 2005.

perspective or the situation after 1990³. All in all, it can be said that works on press distribution are few and far in between⁴. Meanwhile, the history of distribution is interesting as it illustrates the general media situation during communist times. It shows how dependent it was on political authority (PZPR party) and its economic and political goals. Its dependence on the system was so great, in fact, that it eventually led to its collapse in the late 1980s.⁵

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The first stage in post-war press distribution is considered to be between 1945 and 1949. At that time, press distribution was decentralized and diversified which means that it was carried out by publishers themselves who did their best to distribute their materials as profitably as possible. It was entirely dependent on their organizational and technological means. Initially, most of them distributed within the city where they published but with time, or once they obtained means of transport, they widened their territorial scope. This was the situation until late 1940s.

The second stage falls between 1950–1972 when after central administrative decisions press distribution became centralized and monopolized. The first of these formal/legal decisions was the Ordinance by the Prime Minister and the Minister of Post and Telegraph from November 17, 1949 on the creation of a state run corporation, Państwowe Przedsiębiorstwo Kolportażu “Ruch” (State Distribution Corporation “Ruch”)⁶. The ordinance states that PPK “Ruch” was established in agreement with the Head of the State Economic Planning Committee and the Minister of Treasury, based on article 1 of a Decree from January 3, 1947 on the creation of state corporations. It obtained special status and its activity was determined to be “taking orders to distribute any press and other domestic or foreign periodic and non-periodic publishers (subscription) and also “distribution of all of the above”. Its special status meant that it was not just under the ministry but also the Prime Minister, regarding management it was subject to “the state [...] under the Minister of Post and Telegraph and regarding the coordination of publishing and distribution issues – the Prime Minister”.

³ Cf.: J. Kania, *Wpływ zmian w kolportażu na sprzedaż dzienników i czasopism w Polsce*, “Zeszyty Prasoznawcze” 2008, No. 3/4.

⁴ Cf. *Działalność wydawnicza i kolportażowa w warunkach wolnego rynku*, Warszawa 2004. The work includes five essays from a conference by Izba Wydawców Prasy i Ruch P.A. (Warszawa-Dębe, October 21–22, 2004).

⁵ Organization, structure and rules of functioning on the distribution market in Poland after 1990 will be discussed in a different article.

⁶ The text was published in *Monitor Polski* 1949, No. 86 (21.11), pos. 1066. The ordinance went into effect the day it was announced.

Following, on December 20, 1949, passed was Act on press and publishing subscription and distribution based on which the Prime Minister and the Head of the State Economic Planning Committee obtained the right to allow the state run corporation to have, “exclusive right to take orders for domestic and foreign subscriptions of dailies, periodicals and non-periodicals, as well as from other publishers and to distribute them in and outside the country” (art. 1)⁷.

The Act on press and publishing subscription and distribution also delineated the liquidation of other distribution services, part of various publishing houses. Art. 3 pt 1 stated, “corporations and institutions which, as a result of the state run company obtaining exclusive rights to distribution, will cease their activity and are to transfer their establishments and equipment to the entitled state distributor defined in art. 1, as well as all rights and responsibilities resulting from employment agreements with those working for them”. The Act on press and publishing subscription and distribution guaranteed compensation to those institutions and organizations deprived of their assets (art. 3 pt 2). The act was restrictive in character, as can be noted in art. 4, to take effect were punitive sanctions against all those who would undermine the monopoly rule regarding press distribution, “Anyone who takes orders from publishers and distributes, infringes exclusive rights [...] and is subject to punishment of imprisonment up to three months and a fine [...] or one of the above”. There is no doubt that the Act became the base for the establishment of an entirely new situation in the area of press distribution around the country.

On the practical side, there was the Ordinance by the Prime Minister and the Head of the State Economic Planning Committee from July 27, 1950 delineating PPK “Ruch” exclusive rights for the subscription and distribution of dailies and magazines⁸. It included, “taking orders for the delivery of dailies, magazines and other periodicals, foreign and domestic” as well as their distribution. The ordinance stated that PPK “Ruch” exclusive right could be realized “via other companies, kiosks and people”.

State authorities were interested in quick nationalisation of distribution since the ordinance also stated that, “PPK “Ruch” will begin taking orders for subscription of dailies and magazines and distributing based on exclusive rights, within three months of the ordinance taking effect”. What is more, reiterated was the statement from the Act on press and publishing subscription and distribution that on the day PPK “Ruch” begins its activity “all

⁷ Act was published in Dziennik Ustaw (Dz.U.) 1949, No. 63 (29.12), pos. 497; went into effect the day it was announced.

⁸ Dz.U. 1950, No. 35 (23.08), pos. 313.

other subjects will cease their distribution”. It should be noted that the regulation did not include the subscription and distribution of Dziennik Ustaw Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej (Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland), Monitor Polski (Official Journal of the Republic of Poland) well as all other government and military press.

The state monopoly of PPK “Ruch” (since 1952 – Przedsiębiorstwo Upowszechniania Prasy i Książki “Ruch”), was also sanctioned with a Decree from March 11, 1955 by the State Council⁹. Art. 11 of the decree, regulating post office communication, organization and functioning, noted that the state has exclusive right to “take orders for the delivery (subscription) of foreign and domestic magazines as well as their distribution”. Art. 13 pt 4 stated that, “the Council of Ministers can revoke the exclusive state right to take orders on the delivery (subscription) of some foreign and domestic magazines and to distribute them in the country”¹⁰.

The monopoly was also confirmed by the Act from January 31, 1961 on communication¹¹. It delineated the basic rules of press distribution organization around the country, including the role of the nationalized Poczta Polska, Telegraf i Telefon (Post Office). Article 1 defines the term distribution as, “any activity with the goal to transfer dailies and magazines from the publisher to the reader, carried out on one’s own and for profit” (pt 2) and notes that, “the state has exclusive right” to distribute foreign and domestic press (pt 1 art. 2). Additionally, art. 5 states that, “press distribution activity is to be carried out: 1) domestically – by units subordinate to Minister of Posts and Telecommunications, [...], 3) abroad – by units under the supervision of Minister of Foreign Trade and with his permission, by units subordinate to Minister of Posts and Telecommunications”.

In late December 1972, the bill was amended, with one new, key change¹². It regarded art. 5 which now read that “the activity of press distribution, with state exclusive right, is to be carried out: 1) domestically – by units under the Minister of Posts and Telecommunications or collective organizations delineated by the Council of Ministers, 2) in the Armed Forces, as far as military and other press, as outlined by Minister of National Defence and Minister of Internal Affairs, by units or organizations enumerated in pt. 1, 3) abroad – by units under the Minister of Foreign Trade or, with his permission, by units or organizations mentioned in pt.

⁹ Dz.U. 1955, No. 12 (15.03), pos. 71; it should be noted that in the same Dz.U., pos. 70, published was a Decree from March 11, 1955 on the transformation of the Minister of Post and Telegraph into the Minister of Posts and Telecommunications as agreed by the State Council.

¹⁰ Art. 56 of the decree states that the Act from December 20, 1949 on subscription and distribution of press was no longer valid.

¹¹ Dz.U. 1961, No. 8 (14.02), pos. 48.

¹² Act from December 16, 1972 on changes in the Act on communication, Dz.U. 1972, No. 53 (22.12), pos. 346.

1.” In practice, it meant that distribution could only be carried out by collective organizations appointed by the Council of Ministers and was the legal base for the following decision to have press distribution under party rule.

The third period was between 1973–1990. On January 1, 1973, according to the decision by the PZPR party’s Central Committee, established was the Robotnicza Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza “Prasa–Książka–Ruch” (Workers’ Cooperative Publishing), the largest in Poland and among the largest in Europe publishing corporation. On the same day took effect the ordinance by the Council of Ministers from December 18, 1972 on changes in press publishing and distribution organization¹³. It stated that from now on RSW “Prasa–Książka–Ruch” will take over all press distribution as “it has been commissioned to distribute all domestic and foreign dailies and magazines on the territory of the entire country” (§ 1, art. 1). Other points of the ordinance noted that by permission of the Minister of National Defense and Internal Affairs RSW “Prasa–Książka–Ruch” can also distribute military and other press in units under the above ministries and that by permission of Minister of Foreign Trade, it can also export Polish press.

The cooperative was established, in order to “integrate activity” of three separate economic entities: the party controlled publisher RSW “Prasa”, the publishing collective “Książka i Wiedza” and the state distributor Przedsiębiorstwo Upowszechniania Prasy i Książki “Ruch”. The official announcement stated that, “the new organizational form was established in order to gain greater effectiveness in press publishing and distribution and to create better conditions for the publishing of public and political literature”¹⁴. It was a known fact that this was done mainly so that the PZPR party, already supervising the RSW “Prasa–Książka–Ruch”, could gain, through full monopoly on distribution, an additional tool of press market control and could also make use, without any formal and legal limitations, of the profits from press distribution. It should be noted that both the distributor Przedsiębiorstwo Upowszechniania Prasy i Książki “Ruch” and the party run press publishing and distribution RSW “Prasa–Książka–Ruch” had absolute monopoly which included: 1) distribution of Polish press around the country (domestic press), 2) export of Polish press, 3) import and

¹³ Dz.U. 1972, No. 55 (30.12), pos. 367.

¹⁴ Cf.: “Zeszyty Prasoznawcze” 1973, No. 3, p. 160. In “Biuletyn Prasowo-Wydawniczy”, RSW “Prasa–Książka–Ruch” management bulletin it was stated, “As a result of long lasting preparations, as of January 1, 1973 effective will be the integration of three institutions: RSW “Prasa”, Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza “Książka i Wiedza” and Zjednoczenie Upowszechniania Prasy i Książki “Ruch” [...]. The name itself indicates the character of the institution. RSW “Prasa–Książka–Ruch” statute states that it will be the PZPR party’s central publishing organization. Its goal will be to raise public consciousness on socialist culture, public knowledge and to popularize the Party’s programme via publishing and distribution of press, books and other publications, as well as the support of artistic activity” (No. 159, December 1972).

distribution of foreign press, including Polish language press¹⁵. It is a fact that a large majority of the profits made by Collective were allotted to party activity, although the authorities did not officially confirm this¹⁶.

In another Act on communication from November 15, 1984¹⁷, art. 1 maintained state exclusive right to the distribution of domestic and foreign press (res. 2) stating that, “the Prime Minister can exclude from exclusive state right the distribution of specified dailies and magazines” (art. 2 ust. 2). Art. 5 of the Act, entirely devoted to distribution, stated that “state exclusive right to distribution is to be carried out around the country by: 1) units under the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications as well as collectives agreed on based on regulations between the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications and the management of the Workers’ Cooperative Publishing »Prasa–Książka–Ruch«; 2) in the PRL Armed Forces, in the scope of military and other related press, as delineated by the Minister of National Defence and the Minister of Internal Affairs in agreement with the Minister of Posts and Telecommunications – by organizational units under the Ministry of National Defence and Ministry of Internal Affairs and with permission of the above, by units delineated in pt. 1; 3) regarding the distribution of Journal of Laws (Dziennik Ustaw) and Official Journal (Monitor Polski) of the Republic of Poland and all other government dailies – by organizational units of those publishers; 4) abroad a) by units under the Minister of Foreign Trade or with his permission, by units or collectives outlined in pt. 1, b) in organizational units under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – by those units.”. There is no doubt that this way legally confirmed was the monopolistic position of the Collective. This situation remained without change until late 1980s.

It should also be noted that within this time distribution was also carried out, in cooperation with the Collective, by the state run Poczta Polska, Telegraf i Telefon (PPTiT) and, to a lesser extent – “by other state-owned corporations of public transport by land, water

¹⁵ Those titles which were deprived of a communication debit could not be legally imported and distributed. Individual decisions in this matter were made by Główny Urząd Kontroli Prasy, Publikacji i Widowisk, which were then published in Monitor Polski. For example, GUKPPiW director’s order from July 3, 1950 deprived “Kultura”, published in Polish in Paris, of its debit (MP 1950, No. 78 (8.07), pos. 920); it lost its validity in 1968 when a new GUKPPiW decree from September 16, 1968 prohibiting the distribution of all “Literary Institute in France publications” (MP 1968, No. 40 (24.09), pos. 284).

¹⁶ For example, based on information by W. Rydygier, the director of RSW „Prasa–Książka–Ruch”, in 1988 the Collective shareholders (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, Związek Socjalistycznej Młodzieży Polskiej, Związek Młodzieży Wiejskiej, Zrzeszenie Studentów Polskich, Związek Harcerstwa Polskiego i Liga Kobiet Polskich) received 35% of the net profit, while the rest was allotted to the “financing of our present needs and for development as well as statutory obligations” (Cf.: J. Baczyński, J. Poprzeczko, *Pluralizm musi kosztować*, “Polityka” 1989, No. 10).

¹⁷ Dz.U. 1984, No. 54 (30.11), pos. 275.

or air, obliged to establish transport in agreement with PPTiT and including the needs of post office” (art. 42, pt. 1 and 2 the Act on communication from 1961).

As we know, press then was distributed two ways: 1) by retail sale in newsstands owned by RSW “Prasa–Książka–Ruch”, 2) by subscription (individual and institutional), handled entirely by the post office.

Statistical data on press distribution between 1980–1988, excluding press export and the distribution of foreign press, is included in Table 1.

Table 1. Domestic press distribution between 1980–1988 (in thousands)*

Year	Total (100%)	Retail sale in newsstands		Post office subscription		RSW subscription	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
1980	3 569 061	2 560 659	71.7	512 125	14.3	496 277	14.0
1981	3 227 579	2 301 958	71.3	465 748	14.4	459 873	14.3
1982	2 883 049	2 221 505	77.1	258 091	8.9	403 453	14.0
1983	3 444 916	2 728 831	79.2	283 552	8.2	432 533	12.6
1984	3 543 255	2 774 120	78.3	295 720	8.3	473 415	13.4
1985	3 382 287	2 570 830	76.0	313 219	9.3	498 238	14.7
1986	3 363 864	2 539 972	75.5	302 296	9.0	521 596	15.5
1987	3 355 125	2 525 530	75.3	294 627	8.8	534 968	15.9
1988	3 237 098	2 426 576	75.0	275 155	8.5	535 367	16.5

*excluding press export and the distribution of foreign press

Source: “Biuletyn Nakładów Prasy Krajowej i Zagranicznej” RSW “Prasa–Książka–Ruch” between 1980–1988 as well as own calculations.

The table shows that since 1983 there is a gradual decrease in the sales of press from newsstands (79.2% in 1983 r. down to 75% in 1988) and an increase in subscription (20.8% in 1983 r. up to 25% in 1988). The increase regarded subscriptions by RSW “Prasa–Książka–Ruch” (from 12.6% in 1983 to 16.5% in 1988) but in practice realized, as far as individual subscriptions, mainly by the post office.

Since mid 1970s and especially in the 1980s, Collective management, taking advantage of their monopolistic position, began putting PTTiT in a really unfavourable situation, particularly since there was an increasing group of subscribers. This resulted in PTTiT’s suffering financial condition as well as its organizational effectiveness.

In the late 1980s, the situation on the press distribution market in Poland was terrible. In some regions of the country, especially outside larger cities, it was dramatic. This happened as a result of various legal, political, technical or organizational problems growing, often ignored or concealed for years. It was predominantly due to the Collective's monopolistic position. On the one hand, it was favouritized by the PZPR party, on the other – it could not make any decisions on its own regarding its development (i.e. building a chain of modern newsstands)¹⁸.

Among the most imperative factors which lead to the breakdown of the press distribution market mentioned should be a decreasing number of newsstands. Many of them, built in the 1960s literally fell apart and there was no money to build modern ones. What is more, the remaining newsstands were becoming less and less functional as due to their limited size they could not accommodate a growing number of various new newspapers and magazines.

Table 2 includes statistical data on the number of press titles in different years as well as a percentage change (+ or –) in comparison to the previous year.

Table 2. Press market quantity change dynamics between 1980–1989

Year	Total	Dailies	+/-	Magazines	+/-
1980	2570	56	x	2514	x
1981	2259	55	-1.8	2204	-12.3
1982	2045	55	+/-0	1990	-9.7
1983	2399	57	+3.6	2342	+17.7
1984	2710	56	-1.8	2654	+13.3
1985	2943	56	+/-0	2887	+8.8
1986	3083	57	+1.8	3026	+4.8
1987	3128	56	-1.8	3072	+1.5
1988	3128	56	+/-0	3072	+/-0
1989	3300	59	+5.4	3241	+5.5

Source: "Ruch Wydawniczy w Liczbach" between 1980–1989 and own calculations.

¹⁸ One example of the Collective's special treatment was its exemption from paying income tax, i.e. T. Mazowiecki's government spokesperson M. Niezabitowska stated that until 1989 the PZPR party, aside from central budget donations (13 mln), "had profits from its shares in RSW "Prasa-Książka-Ruch", taking advantage of several types of tax exemptions. These amounted to 52 mln zł." (Cf. "Rzeczpospolita" 1989, No. 257 (4/5.11).

Table 2 results show that the dailies' situation during the 1980s was fairly stable, with minimal changes from year to year. There were, on the other hand, dynamic quantity changes, within the whole decade but also from year to year, in the magazine group. The greatest decrease was noted in 1981 and 1982 (12.3% and 9.7%), while since 1983 there has been a gradual increase.

In the 1980s, existing rules of cooperation between the Collective and its main transport corporations (PKP, PKS) ceased to exist. The carriers decided that they were being financially discriminated by the Party corporation and demanded higher freight charges, refusing to cooperate until their demands were met. Additionally, press distribution was further crippled by numerous other ongoing stoppages and strikes.

Meanwhile, new agreements between RSW and PPTiT in the late 1980s were increasingly unfair and financially damaging to the post office. Despite growing press prices, decreasing was the distribution profit margin for delivery to subscribers. It is no wonder that as a result of the agreements, the post office as a corporation was noting increasing financial losses. Also, an increasing number of subscribers was another reason for numerous protests from post office delivery men, refusing to do their services without additional pay¹⁹.

RSW's dominant position in the media system as well as its protection by the party resulted in the fact that PPTiT could not refuse or even successfully negotiate better conditions (also financial) for its services to subscribers. There was a regulation prohibiting PPTiT refusal of rendering services under exclusive state rights. Obligation to render services was stated in art. 33 of the Act on communication which read that, "PPTiT may not refuse services delineated in art. 31 pt 1 ("telecommunication and post office services under exclusive state rights") nor those outlined in art. 31 pt 2 (services other than those mentioned in pt 1, in connection with the use of post office and telecommunications service") which the Minister of Posts and Telecommunications considered universal, if the subject met the conditions delineated by the above Minister"²⁰.

This kind of 'cooperation' between RSW and PPTiT was becoming increasingly conflictual. In 1980s, local and regional post office authorities often announced strike alerts or even went on strike, demanding an immediate and real improvement in the situation (including financial) of delivery men and post office staff. These were, however, more

¹⁹ Cf. A. Wieraszko-Liberska, *Torba pełna desperacji*, "Łączność" 1989, No. 9.

²⁰ Cf. Act from January 31, 1961 on communication, Dz.U. 1961, No. 8 (14.02), pos. 48.

symbolic rather than organized protests which could result in bettering the ‘cooperation’ between the party controlled corporation and the post office.

On January 1, 1989 took effect two imperative acts, changing the present regulations on doing business activity (both approved on December 23, 1989) – the Act on business activity and the Act on business activity with foreign subjects²¹. Art. 11 of the first outlined several types of business activity which could be carried out with proper concession (ie. ore extraction, looking for new ore deposits, manufacturing and sale of explosives, firearms and ammunition, manufacturing of tobacco products, sea transport, air transport and other air services, various security services and detective services, etc).

The Act on business activity radically changed the current situation regarding press distribution since art. 45 stated that art. 1 res. 1 pt 2 of the Act on communication from 1984 is no longer in effect. It meant that the state no longer had exclusive right to distribute foreign and domestic press. Moreover, res. 2 art. 2 on Prime Minister right to exclude from exclusive state right the distribution of select dailies and magazines was also done away with. Finally, art. 5, on RSW “Prasa–Książka–Ruch” right to press distribution monopoly was invalidated as well.

It is obvious that at that time it was a historic decision, making way for the establishment of an entirely new situation on the distribution market. The legislation decided that press distribution is a type of business activity which, from now on, could be carried out by anyone who meets the conditions for having his own business activity. It could also be performed by foreign companies meeting the conditions delineated in the Act on business activity including foreign subjects.

It was the beginning of establishment of private distribution firms. In the beginning, most of them were of local scope, at best – regional. It should also be noted that all press publishers greatly encouraged setting up of new firms, having an interest in bettering the situation on the distribution market. Particularly active in this area were those publishers which were outside RSW structures (such as Agora, publisher of “Gazeta Wyborcza”). Another favourable factor as far as the diversification of the press market was the Act from November 15, 1984 on the liquidation of RSW “Prasa–Książka–Ruch”. It can be said that since 1990 until today we are witnessing another, new stage in post-war history of press distribution.

²¹ Texts of both Acts were printed in Dz.U. 1988, No. 41 (28.12), pos. 324–325.