THE ATTRIBUTES OF THE FOURTH ESTATE.
IN THE AREA OF MEDIAL THEORIES
AND POLITICS

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The term “Fourth Estate” is becoming more and more common and acquires various connotations. It seems that processes of mediatisation of politics and tabloidisation of the media greatly contribute to phenomenon. Numerous examples of that sort are provided by the permanent election campaigns in Poland, mutual relationship between different types of media and political public relations, as well as the relationship between the media and the ruling coalition.

The ‘Fourth Estate’, with regard to the media and journalists, defines their importance for shaping the public opinion, thus indirectly their influence on popularity, support and political choices within society. This term is usually ascribed to the British Parliamentary Edmund Burke, who was talking about the Fourth Estate in the Kingdom, pointing to the journalist sitting in the Press Gallery. According to the written sources another MP, Thomas Macaulay, referred to the British journalists in that way in 1829, emphasizing the opinion-forming role of the contemporary press and phenomenon which corresponds to the today’s concept of exchanging ideas between journalists in e.g. the Parliament’s lobby. It can be hence assumed that at the origin of this phenomenon lay the conviction that the journalists represent society in direct contacts with the politicians;
they strive to obtain the greatest possible amount of information for the sake of society; control, comment and assess, stay outside the traditional Montesquian subdivision of powers into legislative, executive and judicial. The media associated with public opinion exert significant influence on actions undertaken by authorities in numerous ways: press perusals and watching news programmes belong to regular duties of politicians. Similarly, they should participate in TV and radio programmes, give interviews, comment on the political reality via the media, strengthen the image of politicians and their party and have political debates with the opposition. A bond of dependency is created between the authority and the media. The journalists have other sources of income making it possible to verify the claims made by the politicians. They also have the knowledge to interpret the data in a broader context, which is unavailable to politicians fighting for leadership. Everyday news agenda is depended on journalists, which gives them the opportunity to expose or silence those, who for various reasons, do not match the profile of the station or a paper, have negative influence on certain positions or, on the contrary, reinforce the positive overtones of certain situations. Owing to the media, or more specifically to investigative reporters and editors and the provocations set up by them, society learns about irregularities in the public administration, courts, parties, enterprises, organizations and the Church. There are no forbidden topics anymore, just to remind the circumstances of establishing the Investigation Commission (due to journalists’ activity under the pressure of outraged public opinion), changes in the church hierarchy (the so-called Archbishop Paetz scandal, the canceling of Archbishop Wielgus’ ingress, removing the priests accused of collaboration with the secret service during the Communism from their positions), controlling sole shareholder companies of the State Treasury during privatization etc. Witold Bereś with a good reason mentions, among other events that shook Poland and were caused by the media, the following one – the article written by Adam Michnik “Your President, our Prime Minister” (Gazeta Wyborcza, July 3rd 1989); the TV debate between Lech Wałęsa and Aleksander Kwaśniewski just before presidential election (TVP 1, November 12th 1995), the so-called Starachowice scandal (in July 2003, Anna Marszałek revealed in Rzeczpospolita that Zbigniew Sobotka, the minister of Internal Affairs tipped off his party colleagues about a planned Police action against them, the so-
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called Rywin scandal or Wildstein list\(^1\). The selection of the examples clearly illustrates the complexity of the real state of dependency between the media and politics as well as practical usage of the “Fourth Estate” attributes. Tomasz Goban-Klas draws our attention to this fact analyzing different fields on which both entities function in the social system. As long as media can restrict political news, the politicians without the medial interest are bound to be marginalized, which is reflected in the elections’ results. Politicians and parties that are aware of this fact surround themselves with PR specialists, closely follow their advice to maintain a constant level of medial presence. It is probably for that reason that politicians constantly compete with their flights of medial oratory. Governed by the same principle, the media resort to new credibility tools – the so-called media facts, e.g. polls which are designed to be used to manipulate due to the wrong understanding of the way they function. There is more and more information obtained in the way of provocation or investigation or the sources restricted by the journalist secrecy. Attempts at clarifying the facts is immediately dubbed an act against freedom of speech, while restricting general conclusion – not always and not everywhere there is a need to reveal the secrets; sometimes this demand is another element of political games. It should also be emphasized that the Fourth Estate is growing with the sense of impunity, being grounded in the social acceptance for such a course of action. Long lasting and costly trials against journalists which are rarely started are a clear evidence for it. At best when the slandered person proves that information published is false, the papers will place an apology at the back pages of a newspaper. T. Goban-Klas wrote in conclusion: “The Fourth Estate is slowly becoming the first one, whereas freedom and journalist secrecy puts the media outside political control and social responsibility.”\(^2\)

Another famous press expert Walery Pisarek has a different view, claiming that “the function of the people in the media as the Fourth Estate is not wielding any sort of power but providing people with crucial information about the contemporary events, commenting on them, and contributing to the shape of public opinion. By going beyond that area and claiming the position of the Fourth Power, media are becoming a tool of other authorities, unfortunately with a loss for democracy. In the light of the discussion in the European Council the slogan: “The press – The fourth power means press owners – The Fourth Power”. The opinion expressed by Pisarek shows ambiguity of the term under discussion, as even without detailed research on the topic we can venture a claim that The Fourth Power in case of a Polish journalist, differs significantly from similar attributes of local and regional media abroad. Taking into consideration the degree of foreign capital concentration in the Polish media, the following oversimplification seems really problematic: “the press owners – The Fourth Power”. It emphasizes the connection between the world of business and politics in the sense of controlling the public opinion. Besides, the media that are economically dependent on advertisers and general public are muzzled when wielding this power, in order not to interfere with the sponsors’ interests. Another crucial factor for theoretical considerations of the issue are the political options of the owners and public, shaping the programme line despite declarations of objectivity and pluralism as the most important values for the editors. Media are a mediator between politically active groups, so they are prone to yield to political PR often called “The Fifth Power”. Katarzyna Kowalska formulated skeptical point of view on the prerogatives on “The Fourth Power” in the democratic system when summarizing her sociological studies conducted between 2001–2002 by the Institute of Political Studies PAN and Collegium Civitas. 4


4 The research which was led by Mocek was titled 'Independence of Polish journalism – chances and threats'. K. Kowalska, „Czwarty stan – dziennikarz wobec
It is generally known that independence of the press is essential for it performing the watchdog role which constitutes the basis for calling it ‘The Fourth Power’. In democracy the media control the authorities, taking care if the public interest, initiating various actions on behalf of the society. They influence the decision making process, the course of events, political careers. It should be pointed out, after Goban-Klas, that the influence is not equivalent to power, especially as society has not granted the press such prerogative. The weapon of “The Fourth Estate” is critical information, in accordance to Press Law, stating that the role of journalists is to serve to the state and society understood as providing information.

Bogusława Dobek-Ostrowska quite rightly pointed out that mass media are perceived as “The Fourth Power i.e. major institution of modern public area” in the liberal approach. There are quite specific features of such context, namely treating the public area as the space between the government and those who are governed, in which the citizens have formal (election) and informal (public opinion) control of the authorities. Media play a significant role, as they broadcast the information which is vital for the political actions, they trigger independent debates, they influence politicians’ actions and behaviour, they protect people from abuse of power, they secure realization of basic freedoms. In the radical concept, the media occupy central position within the political system, they represent important social interest, they facilitate conduction public debate, and even they compensate for various forms of injustice, wrongdoings by criticizing the ruling party. The differences also lie in conceptualizing the role of the media in democracy. In the liberal approach they are perceived as the vertical channel of communication process between the citizens and authorities, i.e. they inform about the choice in voting, they express the citizens’ views. In the radical approach the media are the channel of comprehensive vertical, horizontal

wyzwań współczesnej sfery publicznej”, in S. Mocek (ed.), Dziennikarstwo..., pp. 67–68.
7 B. Dobek-Ostrowska, Media masowe w systemach demokratycznych, Wroclaw 2003, p. 15.
and diagonal process of communications between units, groups, institutions; citizens due to media gain versatile knowledge about the system, structure, decisions of the estate.

According to B. Dobek-Ostrowska, media are “The Fourth Estate” if the citizens are affected by its influence. Media are, from political and economic pressures and forming independent views, fulfilling a control function over tripartite power. It is significant that a thesis of negotiated influence of media is currently gaining popularity. It means that the media affect viewers to the same extend as the viewers are influenced by them.\(^8\)

Moving from media to political perspective, one should recall Krzysztof Pomian’s considerations, who pointed out the increasing meaning of surveys of media in the relations between the state and democracy. He paid attention to medial instruments of shaping public opinion responsible for politicians’ careers. He underlined the power of the television, dominating in image campaigns that are elements of effective political communication.\(^9\) These considerations correspond with John B. Thompson’s and Denis McQuail’s ideas concerning a symbolic and practical dimension of “The Fourth Estate”. The first idea is using information for intervention and affecting events (the opposite of the phenomenon is emphasizing events through the fact that they are the subject of information). The second idea is a factual influence of media through the monopolisation of the market, commercialisation, advertisement, satisfying needs of media concerns before other objectives resulting from ethical-professional criteria.\(^10\)

Political life in Poland, accelerating due to the 2005 elections, and not slowing down as permanent election campaign, is still a good research field of the problem. First of all, campaigns showed a tendency to use mass media to achieve a real influence on electorate’s decisions. Mass media were under bigger and bigger pressure of political public relations. Since the mid 2005 there has been dependence between activities of political marketing of the competing candidates concentrated on selecting information given to

\(^{8}\) Ibidem, p. 32.


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journalists and as well as efforts of these journalists to gain a wide spectrum of information, to prepare attractive reports, and the race of the media for the content of political show – election programmes.

Editorial staff of one of weekly magazines anticipating the course of the events, asked a question to journalists, press people and politicians in autumn, 2004: ‘Who dictates conditions to whom – media to the estate or the estate to the media?’ In various answers they underlined that media using lobbing tools ‘are going to get the state to make expected decisions (…) not bearing responsibilities for the results,’ ‘they mark out possibilities of manoeuvre for the state’, the world of media and politics are ‘dependent on each other’, and leading journalists play certain political roles (e.g. Adam Michnik, Tomasz Lis).\textsuperscript{11}

These remarks should be completed with Teresa Torańska’s later consideration formulated after broadcasting Renata Beger’s “tapes of the truth”: “The fundamental thing in journalism is to keep distance to politicians. Not suspecting them of all evil in the world – but looking at what they do from a perspective. As well as reporting words they flood us with. And then we journalists, not agitators, will be ‘The Fourth Estate’”.\textsuperscript{12}

It seems that journalists’ opinions contribute a lot to the problem by documenting mainly the conviction about the need to balance a balance resulting from “The Fourth Estate”. In January 2005, editors-in-chief of opinion-giving press such as Helena Łuczywo, Grzegorz Gauden, Jerzy Baczyński, Rev. Adam Boniecki, Marek Król, Jerzy Urban made an attempt of environmental defining of the case, on the initiative of Piotr Najsztub.\textsuperscript{13}

Taking into consideration all diversity of opinions, it should be taken for granted that mass media as “The Fourth Estate” play a positive role by revising its mechanisms. Editors’ statements included elements of legal and ethical regulations defining the range of power of “The Fourth Estate” or selected environmental controversies around methods used by journalists in order to make it function, e.g. provocations, journalist investigations, manipulations (evaluated negatively), personal political ambitions, etc.

\textsuperscript{13} Compare: “Świat według naczelnych”, supplement to Przekrój 2005, No. 6/3111, p. 5.
Electoral autumn in Poland without doubt stressed many problems such as: the dependence of electoral preferences on order, length and frequency of medial presentations of candidates, modification of electors’ attitudes through the selectiveness of the subjects of public debates (not politicians but journalists choose elements of programme declarations, next discussed in media in form of feedback – politicians, after a preliminary recognition of subject frequency, match their speeches to the subject), pointing out an analysis of the context of politicians’ statements, e.g. political effects of announced decisions, referring to stereotypes, making conflicts between candidates or making an impression that there is a noticeable plan of differentiating their opinions in an efficient way, non-verbal ways of expressing fondness for candidates, the way of the presentation of opinion polls (the role of journalist commentary, ability to read and compare results, partiality of experts, pubhising the results of opinion polls according to viewers’ expectations, neglecting other candidates). Making these phenomena public goes with attempts of critical characteristic of the commitment of media into politics. The Council of Media Ethics, under their pressure, gave a ‘Press release’ on October 16th, 2005 referring to media’s behaviour in election campaign stressing superficiality, sensation and aggressiveness of relations from election campaigns and appealed for making a serious debate about the state of Polish journalism.

As a result, a few meetings and scientific conferences took place with the participation of media representatives, e.g. ‘Media and Public Relations, i.e. 4th estate vs. 5th estate in election campaign 2005’ organised by the SDP – Freedom of Press Monitoring Centre and the Institute of Political Marketing. Tadeusz Fredro-Boniecki, Vice President of the REM, publicists – Krzysztof Burnetko and Michał Karnowski, specialists of Public Relations, and all participating in the discussion, took up the following problems: did specialists of political PR manipulate media, what was media and political Public Relations’ role in the election campaign? What techniques were used by electoral staff to affect media?

In April 2006, in the face of increasing antagonisms and numerous, mutually imitated speeches, the Batory Foundation organised a debate called ‘Power of Media, power over media.’ It was discussed ‘whether the fourth Republic of Poland can exist along with the fourth estate?’ Kamil Durczok (TVN) gave an opinion that media, in fact, do not have a strong position
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and journalists’ critical commentaries are no longer a mirror for the government. Media are dependent upon the KRRiTV (the State Council of Radio and Television) and courts. Today, Jarosław Kaczyński’s party also wants to regain media. Robert Krasowski (“Dziennik”) stated that the conflict had appeared on the ground of a different understanding of the role of media. Journalists consider themselves to be judges of political life, politicians see a party of disagreement in them. According to Jacek Żakowski (“Polityka”), a fight of ‘the power of the old order’ (executive, legislative and judiciary power) with new centres (media, business, civil society) takes place in the situation of the concentration of power. For these reasons, most leading personal positions in the KRRiT are selected with the party key. Jarosław Sellin, the only politician participating in the debate, Vice Minister of Culture, convinced that media have real power because the majority of Poles form their opinions and make decisions on the basis of their (the media’s) information.14 Robert Kozak, the former director of ‘Wiadomości’ (‘News’) TVP1, complained that politicians could not resist the temptation of subordinating public media and treated them as a scene of political struggle and as the object of arguments, which endanger independence, lower credibility, favour mechanisms of auto-censorship. The authors of the report titled ‘Public Media According to the Government Coalition,’ MPs of the Platforma Obywatelska (PO) (the Civil Platform), Iwona Śledzińska-Katarasińska and Rafał Grupiński, developed a synthetic image of the situation. Due to gross substantial mistakes and personalisation of the controversy, the document was accepted sceptically even by journalists of media favored in the evaluation. First of all, circumstances of how the report came into being were taken into consideration – November 2006, the cul-

14 R. Kalukin, “Kto rządzi: media czy politycy. I jak długo”, Gazeta Wyborcza 2006, No. 89. 5097, p. 8. The latest scene of the conflict being discussed is a boycott of some political commentary programmes by politicians rejecting invitations, e.g. the President from Monika Olejnik & Tomasz Lis, the President and the Prime Minister from Andrzej Morozowski and Tomasz Sekielski; the longest list of absentees was presented by Jacek Żakowski and Piotr Najsztub on a billboard advertising “Tok2Szkok” programme (“Nie pękajcie się. Gorąco zapraszamy Jarosława Kaczyńskiego, Radosława Sikorskiego, Zbigniewa Ziobrę, Ludwika Dorna, Zytę Gilowską, Annę Fotygę”), compare: A. Nalewajk, B. Sowa, ”Politycy, nie bójcie się nas”, Dziennik 2007, No. 33 (246), p. 4.
minating moment of the fight between the PO and the PiS (the Law and Justice) and the coalition, which had a negative impact on the quality of statements. Bogdan Biniszewski, President of ‘ComPress’ – Public Relations Agency, assessed that politicians should not prepare a report concerning this subject because the control in a democratic system runs in the opposite direction, ‘media should breath down politicians’ necks’. The authors defended their position that the medial circle is only a background for the presentation of political activities such as canvassing governing bodies and boards of directors of the public media for the party, medial statute.15 The question of treating media as a propaganda speaking tube was marginal. Bronisław Łagowski’s reflection in this context seems to be significant. He is a philosopher and commentator for ‘Tygodnik Powszechny’ and ‘Przegląd’. He said that Polish media include a mechanism of unanimity, to which only a small group of journalists resist. Rest of them aim at imposing a new vision of the world, politics of history.16 A symptomatic manifestation of the asymmetric division of media are the groups of the Salon and Antisalon, that is fighting against ‘Michnik symptom’, about which Rafał Ziemkiewicz wrote.

Self-government elections in autumn 2006 triggered an interesting practical aspect of the problem. Journalists of local media, including Poznań, Katowice, Kraków, Warsaw and Zamość, ran for councilors with a different result. Some of them suspended professional duties during the campaign in order to avoid partiality charges. Superiors of others claimed that ‘self-governments have little in common with politics’ and accepted concurrent activeness in both fields. Opinions on inadmissibility of combining roles of a journalist and a member of a self-government unit council due to a clear conflict of interests, and furthermore, imposition of the position of an observer and participant of political life, dominated in various commentaries.17

What are, therefore, attributes of “The Fourth Estate” when it is assumed that media have it or create it? Media, or rather their workers, called into

being to inform and control public life, have a capital of social trust. To maintain an exceptional position, media should be objective, credible, independent, free from political pressure and journalists should be reliable, balanced in their opinions, preserving highest ethical standards and professionalism. Wiktor Osiatyński, designing building stages of “the Republic of citizens” writes about it in a demanding form. He marks out a few tasks for the media in this plan. These are for example: restoring meaning to out-of-politics and out-of-market authorities, creation of a catalogue of values (norms of decent behaviour and conduct), participation in self-clearing of public profession confidence, incorporating cultural and civilisation areas into the public debate, controlling authorities together with independent civil organisations, commitment to civil movements against ignorance of authorities. These aims may come true after realising that “The Fourth Estate” is fully independent from politics and market mechanisms, which seems to be, also for the author, a utopian state.¹⁸