

National report for the Czech Republic

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Contribution to the European report:

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Universities and Disciplines

The term “university” is not used in a legal sense in the Czech Republic, as a label for the legal status of an institution. The law knows only “higher education institutions” (covering the whole sector of tertiary education), which can be best translated as “colleges”. Only a minority of them have the word “university” as a part of its official name, usually signifying that the institution offers a whole range of educational programmes, in the “classical” sense. According to the Czech Ministry of Education, currently there are 26 public colleges (among them 15 universities) and 46 private ones (including 2 using the name “university”).

Media and communication studies do exist, although on a still rather limited scale. There are currently about 5 media studies departments, offering study programmes on the BA and MA level. While media studies departments in private universities (Univerzita J.A.Komenského, Literární akademie J. Škvoreckého) focus on teaching “practical” skills and do not produce any real research/academic output, departments in public universities (Univerzita Karlova, Masarykova univerzita, Univerzita Palackého) function as regular academic bodies, conduct research, etc. The institutionalisation of media studies as a discipline is further underlined by the existence of the Czech and Slovak academic journal of media studies called Mediální studia (<http://www.syndikat-novinaru.cz/medialni-studia/>) which is published quarterly.

Media studies in Czech Republic is a relatively new discipline, which had to be built from scratch after 1989. The departments are beginning to catch up with international discourse in the discipline only recently. The number of scholars in the discipline is very limited. The same applies for published articles and books.

The institutionalisation of these sub-disciplines has only recently begun in the Czech Republic. Study programmes focusing on New Media are blossoming at various universities, however usually they are philosophically or aesthetically oriented or they are focused on the management of information (for librarians, etc.). Therefore they lack the social science focus. However, there are individual researchers who focus on this topic, as well as certain specialisations that are somewhat connected. For example, the Department of Media Studies and Journalism at Masaryk University offers a specialisation in Digital Media in its BA programme, and it also includes theoretical subjects like Cyberculture, Social Theory of New Media, etc.

National Data Collected

There is just one research project conducted on a yearly basis – it is the Czech part of the World Internet Project, which has been conducted since 2005 by the Institute for Research on Children, Youth and Family at the Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University. Children and the internet as a sub-topic has not yet been a focus of any statistical survey collected by the state. Usually the lowest age in samples is 12, and in government samples this is 16. The Czech Statistical Office (which is the state’s research agency) conducts yearly surveys on internet penetration

The Czech part of the World Internet Project repeats certain questions (mainly on penetration and forms of Internet use) yearly.

Institutional processes in applying to conduct research

There are no regulations concerning research on children in the Czech Republic. There are no ethical committees or other such bodies at Czech universities supervising/approving research (apart from medical research or laboratory experiments on animals). Proposals are regarded as the researcher's own responsibility and no uniform checks exist as such.

Pressures to conduct research

This varies from university to university, or even from faculty to faculty. Some (usually smaller, regional ones) are mostly concerned with teaching, so their employees are not required to undertake research projects. Other institutions, including our own – the Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University – are starting to put more pressure on their staff members to apply for research grants, both in order to improve the faculty's academic standing, as well as to bring additional funds to the budget. However, most departments are understaffed and the student-staff ratio is steadily growing, as the university admits more students every year (the ratio at our department is currently about 50 students / 1 staff member), making it very difficult for many academics to find time for research.

Factors influencing the orientation of research

The pressure on researchers is definitely growing – not just to cooperate with industry but to make study programmes more “practically oriented”, to help students get jobs. Our Department of Media Studies and Journalism, for example, cooperates with one of the largest newspaper publishers in the country which provides short-term studentships for our students. However, as regards research, this kind of cooperation is not very usual for humanities/social sciences (most research is state-funded). This mostly applies to the sector of natural/medical sciences and is rare for the humanities and social sciences.

Political or cultural institutions sometimes approach universities with requests to undertake research. One example is the Czech Broadcasting Council (which is the regulation body for the Czech TV and radio market), which asked our Department several times to conduct a content analysis of certain programmes or TV stations as a whole, usually related to portrayal of violence or breaking the rules of objectivity and impartiality in news programmes.

There are no specific bids for certain types of research – every proposal goes to the two main Czech research agencies. These are The Czech Grant Agency and the Grant Agency of the Academy of Science, (both fully state-funded) and proposals fall into the same “basket”.

National Research Traditions

The tradition of quantitative research is better established in the Czech Republic, than the qualitative tradition. This partly stems from the specific history of the Czech social sciences which were, during the communist regime, subjected to heavy government and party control and ideological influences. Within the narrow research possibilities, quantitative research was the preferred method. Therefore, after 1990, there were very few scholars who were trained in qualitative approaches, and so the quantitative “bias” was passed onto new generations of academics. Only recently has the situation begun to change, with more scholars getting opportunities to study/work abroad, and generally with more contacts with the Western academic world.

There have been occasional studies on radio in the 1930s (conducted by the research unit of Czechoslovak Radio) and then again in the 1960s and 1980s (mostly within sociology departments). There was, to our knowledge, no study conducted on interpersonal communication until only very recently – we are aware of just one study on mobile phone usage which was conducted by a researcher from a department of Psychology in 2006. Apart from marketing or statistical research, examining internet penetration (from the late 1990s), first studies attempting to go beyond these simple statistics have been conducted only after 2000 when internet really became a mass phenomenon in the Czech Republic.

Sources of Funding for Research

Most research is either directly state-funded (via particular grant programmes of specific Ministries) or indirectly state-funded. However, with the EU accession, there have been several grant programmes opened for the Czech researchers, usually administered via Czech Ministries.

In the Czech Republic, empirical research in the field of children's use of internet and new media is rather scarce. Until the end of 2006, only a handful of studies (6) which met the criteria for a standard piece of scientific research were conducted, which resulted in considerable shortage of information on the way children and teenagers in the Czech Republic access and use on-line media and technologies. This shortage of research can be partially explained by the novelty of this topic in the country, where the coming of internet technology was, in comparison with most of the western European countries, rather delayed. Its diffusion among populations was significantly slowed by the relatively high costs of personal computers as well as of internet accession and operation, which begun to drop only after 1999 when the state's monopoly on telecommunications was broken, opening doors for competition in this area and leading to exponential growth of internet penetration into households (up to the current level of around 30%).

The other reason is the underdeveloped nature of media and communication research in the Czech Republic, represented by only three academic workplaces engaged with it (two of them younger than 10 years). The academic marginalisation of this type of research is further deepened by the lack of funding from the national foundation bodies, which usually give priority to more established academic fields. There is also no research institute outside of university structures that shows a long-standing interest in this field (most of the surveys conducted by private research agencies were focused on adults) and there does not seem to be any funding prospects from the telecommunication industry either.

Political initiatives influencing research

The first half of this decade saw a government-funded project "Internet into Schools", aiming to provide all Czech schools with internet access. Within this project, most public schools were equipped with PCs and an internet connection. However, the project stirred up a lot of controversy, especially since the bid for the general supplier was not transparent and there were allegations of corruption. Since the change of the regime in 1989, the flow of information is supposed to be free and there are only token limitations of the media content regarding children (a ban on sexually explicit content and violence before 22:00 in the TV, a ban on children pornography, hate speech or Nazi symbols, etc.). There was no substantial change regarding these regulations over the past decade.

The laws concerning media ownership are some of the most liberal ones in Europe. There is no restriction on foreign ownership, resulting in a situation where most of the print and electronic media are owned by foreign, mostly German or transnational companies. There is an anti-monopoly law as well as a law regulating cross-media ownership but neither has yet been truly enforced, despite the fact that in some sectors there is an effective monopoly (like the sector of regional daily press) or oligopoly (national daily press) and there are media conglomerates with ownership interests in various media sectors.

There is no specific law "regulating" the internet in the Czech Republic. The content is regulated by general laws (i.e. regarding children pornography, hate speech, promotion of certain ideologies etc.). There are many courses for teachers to improve their PC and internet skills. Younger teachers already know everything and the older ones are not very interested and see the courses as a necessary evil, necessary only for formal reasons, since their teaching can be managed without PC skills. But generally speaking, the computer and internet literacy of Czech teachers has been improving. In June 2008, one of the three main Czech mobile phone operators, Vodafone, announced that it is starting a new user tool that can block illegal internet content, and therefore enhance child safety. This has been the first

initiative of this kind in the Czech Republic; it is expected that other operators and providers might follow suit.

Particular debates and concerns about children

While there really is not too much concern about public spaces being dangerous for kids or around commercialisation of childhood, a recent event sparked some debate.

Last spring the police discovered a case of brutal molesting of two children by an allegedly religious group. There was – and still is – a heavy debate concerning the fact that TV and tabloids repeatedly carried pictures/videos of these children, subjecting them thereby to a secondary victimisation.

Case Studies

“Communication of adolescents in the internet environment”, conducted by our colleague David Smahel from the Department of Psychology of our faculty is an interesting example. His choice of the topic was stimulated by his long-term interest in developmental psychology and the influence of new communication technologies on adolescents' behaviour.