

# Web TV as a Public Service: The Case of Stream.cz, the East-Central European Answer to YouTube

**Dorota Vašíčková and Petr Szczepanik<sup>1</sup>**

CHARLES UNIVERSITY

Petr.Szczepanik [AT] ff.cuni.cz

## **Abstract**

*In this article, we present the case study of Stream.cz, East-Central Europe's largest web television portal dedicated to original short-form programming. By situating Stream in the local screen industry ecology, we explain the success of its advertisement-supported video on demand (AVOD), short-form, web television business model. This is followed by a description of Stream's hybrid "production culture," which borrows from both broadcasting and the internet, and a dissection of selected categories that make up Stream's "industry lore," consisting of its key agents' conceptions of web television, strategies and business models, day-to-day creative processes, audience behavior and tastes, and the general market trends they use to rationalize decisions and promote the core values of their output. The goal of our production analysis is to show whether and how short-form web programming can complement traditional public-service media in fulfilling a public-service mission.*

**Keywords:** Internet-Distributed Television, Web TV, Web Series, Public-Service Media, Advertisement-Supported Video on Demand (AVOD), YouTube, Platform, Portal, Small Media Market, Central-Eastern Europe, Production Studies

The ins and outs of Czech politics orchestrated from one shady office. Pulling the strings is Tonda Blaník, an unscrupulous, abusive, hard-drinking, chain-smoking, and yet, somehow, adorable lobbyist. Aided by two submissive assistants and sporting an always-new pair of extravagant shoes, Blaník is the man to call if you need help influencing an election campaign, appointing or firing a minister, resolving a political crisis, or approving a new law. This

conspiracy narrative is the premise of the most successful political satire in the Czech Republic's recent history: a five-season short-form web series entitled *The Blaník Bureau* (*Kancelář Blaník*, 2014–2017).<sup>2</sup> A surprising coproduction between leading local web TV portal Stream.cz (fully owned by the Czech Republic's biggest search engine Seznam.cz) and Negativ (the leading arthouse production company in the Czech Republic), the weekly series attracted a huge following and made headlines for its merciless lampooning of the ongoing scandals enveloping the country's prominent politicians. Commentators praised the series for reviving the genre of daring political satire and for presenting an unexpected challenge to the dilution of satirical content on Czech public-service broadcaster (PSB) ČT, a state of affairs allegedly attributed<sup>3</sup> to its fear of sanctions by the broadcaster's supervisory board, whose favoring of more timid forms of humor had quelled the liberal spirit that emerged in the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> The widespread public attention that Stream's *The Blaník Bureau* attracted did much to herald Stream.cz as if it was a new phenomenon. In the years following 2014, Stream launched a dozen other, mostly satirical and parodic fiction series, whereas its emerging competitors developed their own shows.<sup>5</sup> Today, these portals contribute to a lively national scene of short-form web television and, although being unique not only in terms of their production volume and quality but also the prestige they hold within the public sphere, they are compared by many to public-service broadcasting.

Our aim of this article is to use the case of Stream and its web series production to reveal the small local market conditions that have facilitated the boom in advertisement-supported, short-form web television and to examine how Stream's hybrid production culture has mediated a quasi-public-service mission. After reviewing the existing literature on short-form web television, we reconstruct the corporate history of Stream.cz, its evolving business models, the ambivalent position it occupies between broadcasting and the internet, and, finally, its production ideology. The key research question of our critical production analysis is whether and how Stream's organizational structure, insider discourse on web television, and aesthetics mediate public-service values. The analysis is inspired by John Caldwell's concept of "production culture"<sup>6</sup> and Timothy Havens's "industry lore."<sup>7</sup> Based on qualitative analysis of interviews with key participants in the local internet television industry,<sup>8</sup> we offer a contextualized answer to the question of what short-form web television is and look to what future role it might play in a small market populated by strong, albeit increasingly uncertain, public-service media (PSM).

## Theorizing Short-Form Web Television

There is a growing volume of scholarly work on nonlinear, internet-distributed television and online video, the vast majority of which focuses either on "portals" such as Netflix (whose predominantly long-form, industrially produced content is comparable to linear TV programming)<sup>9</sup> or on social media platforms such as YouTube.<sup>10</sup> Catherine Johnson's definition of internet TV as "providing access to video content that has been actively acquired/produced and is viewed within a closed and editorially managed interface" takes into account short-form web content.<sup>11</sup> But although the definition correctly points to certain continuities between linear and nonlinear TV, it disregards the permeability of the boundaries between internet television and open platforms. For example, although German public-service

funk.net's web series are watched predominantly on YouTube, funk still employs an editorially managed interface.<sup>12</sup> For the purposes of this article, we will use "internet television" when referring to industrial formations and audience practices and "web television" when writing about web-native content. Drawing on Aymar Jean Christian, we understand "web TV" as "television programming served exclusively via Internet protocols"<sup>13</sup> and "short form" as its relative measure; for while the webisode is generally shorter than the standard TV episode (usually less than twenty minutes long), the crucial difference lies in its adaptability and flexibility. Freed from standardized programming slots, not only can "short-form" content be as long or as short as the ever-shifting needs of production and narration dictate, it can easily adapt to changing consumer behavior and social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. Because web series have lower budgets, smaller crews, and shorter production schedules, it makes them more "open" to various experiments in new technologies, digital narrative techniques, marginalized topics, and minority talent.<sup>14</sup> The shorter video length also has formal consequences and corresponds to specific consumer habits. It favors "personality over production values"<sup>15</sup> and comedies over drama. Sketch comedies, which represent the bulk of the most popular web TV content, are tailor-made for "bite-sized consumption."<sup>16</sup> Short-form web TV also fits "workplace media habits" such as "media snacking" and what Ethan Tussey labels the "procrastination economy."<sup>17</sup>

One line of theorizing stresses close relationships between short-form web television and social media. In her recent book on "internet-distributed television," Amanda Lotz notes that this "parallel," "emergent" television industry is distinguished by its close ties with user-generated content (UGC), a reliance on social media dynamics, the support of advertisers, and the "integration of viewing into daily life."<sup>18</sup> Stuart Cunningham's recent research focuses on competition and collaboration between Hollywood and IT business models.<sup>19</sup> His and David Craig's description of the emerging "proto-industry" of "social media entertainment" (SME), epitomized by the commercialized uses of YouTube, allows us to dichotomize specific cases of short-form internet programming in relation to various other platforms (NoCal or IT, building on social media dynamics) and portals (SoCal, Hollywood or "legacy media," epitomized by Hulu and Netflix), and also to address their mutual hybridizations.<sup>20</sup> In their most recent book, Cunningham and Craig show the abundance of SME around the world, including Indian web series.<sup>21</sup>

In the most specialized scholarly work on professional short-form web programming written thus far, Aymar Jean Christian provides the first complex reconstruction of the US web series' twenty-year long history, offering a typology of web series producers and development practices while drawing distinctions between various levels of corporate control and "independence." In Christian's typology, Stream.cz falls into the category of "corporate, ad-supported web TV networks."<sup>22</sup> However, Christian's central model of "indie web series" is not easily applicable to the kind of European internet programming in question here. Stream's independent, UGC-inspired aesthetics, mainstream target audience, well-established creative talent, and strong corporate home alert us to fundamental differences between US indie web series such as *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl* (2011–2013) or *High Maintenance* (2012–), on one hand, and the likes of *The Blaník Bureau*, on the other. Again focusing on the United States, Katherine Edgerton claims that most web series are aspirational, relying on free labor and writing "on spec." If they are created by established professionals, it is because

they hope to “jumpstart or diversify their careers in traditional media” and to enjoy the creative freedom of the web.<sup>23</sup> However, this is hardly the case with Stream and its local competitors. For although Czech creative talent is paid less than in television or film, fees are accepted by the professional community as relatively reasonable, and there are even examples of creators who have made a living by producing several parallel programs for Stream.

Very little has been published on European web series to date.<sup>24</sup> In the nationally defined screen industry ecologies of Europe, short-form web television necessarily has to negotiate its place in the context of small media markets, language barriers, fragmented production systems, strong PSM, and protectionist cultural policies. No surprise then that the most researched issue relating to short-form web television is the transformation of PSBs into PSM—more specifically, how they adopt multiplatform or online-only production and social media strategies.<sup>25</sup> “Spreadable”<sup>26</sup> content informed by “social media logic”<sup>27</sup> helps PSBs adapt to the media habits of young audiences, secure the next generation of license payers, and, ultimately, relegitimize their status in the new screen ecology. Instead of simply supplying their broadcasting content to corporate platforms, such as Facebook or YouTube, or imitating the increasingly commercial functions of social media, PSBs experiment with “hybrid” forms and arrangements, combining television with the internet, the “public” with the “social.” Their key goal, according to van Dijck and Poell,<sup>28</sup> is to do so without compromising the core values of their public-service remits through the promotion of universality (reconnecting with teenage and young adult audiences that most PSBs would otherwise continue to lose), diversity (representing marginalized topics and identities, providing opportunities for new talent), and innovation (experimenting with new technologies, cultural forms, and innovative techniques of digital storytelling). Most public-service web series aim at mixing popular content types with enlightening material to deliver different versions of “double storytelling.”<sup>29</sup> They also address more narrowly defined target groups, as illustrated by the Norwegian hit teen drama *Skam* (2015–2017), a series that speaks to the specific needs of 16-year-old Norwegian girls.<sup>30</sup>

Unlike West-European PSBs, many of which have launched dedicated services for online-only content in the past six years (e.g., France Télévisions’s *Nouvelles Écritures* in 2012, BBC’s *iPlayer Exclusives* in 2014, RTBF’s *Webcréation* in 2014, and ARD’s and ZDF’s *funk.net* in 2016), East-Central European PSBs have yet to introduce special production programs or portals of a similar kind, limiting their online strategies to catch-up services.<sup>31</sup> As a result, they face competition from private enterprises, some of which have been able to develop a quasi-public-service mission independently of PSB institutions, such as Stream in the Czech Republic and ShowMax in Poland (see below). van Dijck and Poell claim that in the multiplatform ecosystem, clear-cut divisions between public and corporate media are no longer possible. Their recommendation is to “strip down the institutional concept of public broadcasting to its core ‘naked’ public value” and to ask, “How can public value be produced outside a designated PSB space?”<sup>32</sup> Taking their initiative as a cue, this article inquires how and why the private portal Stream.cz has complemented the local linear PSB in fulfilling its specific public-service mission: not by producing teen series with “double storytelling” like *Skam* but by addressing more mature audiences and cultivating a daring satirical discourse otherwise absent from the Czech PSB. It would be naive to claim that private online services can replace PSBs in the long run simply because corporate commercial interests would eventually

prevail, with no control mechanism in place to prevent such a diversion. However, similar “islands” of public-service value can potentially provoke PSBs to be more innovative, to move beyond their “designated space” by experimenting with social media logic and spreadable content on their own terms.

## Situating Stream.cz in the Regional and Local Television/Internet Ecology

Although the first web series emerged in the United States in the mid-1990s, only recently have we been able to observe signs of their global boom. For example, web series have become a major mainstream trend in South Korea, collectively attracting dozens of millions of views.<sup>33</sup> There, the local market for “web dramas” flourished after the leading Korean search engine Naver launched the advertisement-supported video on demand (AVOD) portal TV Cast, intended—unlike Stream—primarily for mobile audiences.<sup>34</sup> West-European web series production has been growing since the early 2010s, after the first German portal devoted to web series was launched in 2009<sup>35</sup> and after NRK, BBC, France Télévisions, RTBF, and ARTE have launched web series production initiatives that have been followed by public broadcasters in other countries (e.g., ARD and ZDF in Germany). At the same time, independent European web series have mushroomed on YouTube and Dailymotion, with some eventually moving to linear television. Public funds and broadcasters around the world have opened calls for web series projects, whereas original web content creators now have their own festivals and awards (such as the Marseille Web Festival and the Streamy Awards, which honor the best online videos) and their own trade group, The International Academy of Web Television. Web TV has clearly been assimilated as part of the legitimate media industries, as illustrated by the introduction of special categories for web series at traditional TV festivals and awards and the recognition of online production by professional guilds.<sup>36</sup>

With the exception of the Czech Republic, the boom has yet to reach the postsocialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, a hugely successful web series that bears striking textual similarities to *The Blaník Bureau* has broken through in Poland. *The Chairman’s Ear* (*Ucho prezesa*, 2017–)<sup>37</sup> is a political satire about an authoritarian leader—based on Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of the governing party in Poland, the Law and Justice party (PiS)—who runs the affairs of an entire nation from a small secluded office which he (almost) never leaves. Made by the well-established comedy troupe, Cabaret of Moral Anxiety, it has proved extremely successful, attracting up to ten million views per episode and outperforming the most popular shows on Polish linear networks. However, *The Chairman’s Ear*, now in its second season, differs from *The Blaník Bureau* if we consider its business model and corporate home. Shortly after its pilot launch on YouTube, its first season was backed and distributed by SVOD platform ShowMax,<sup>38</sup> with individual episodes opening on YouTube with a 4-day delay. After the second season, the series was bought by WP, a private free-to-air broadcaster. But although ShowMax Poland has since produced other original programs and there are further examples of Polish web series, no strong web TV portal has emerged in Poland with a volume and diversity of short-form web programming comparable to Stream.



What, then, is so exceptional about Stream and how did it succeed? The portal earned wide national popularity around 2014, but it was founded in late 2006, the year Google bought YouTube and opened its Prague office. Stream's founder Miloš Petana, an ex-CEO of the second largest private TV network in the country, envisioned Stream as a local equivalent to YouTube or Metacafe, but one that would offer Czech internet users an "alternative to television broadcasting."<sup>39</sup>

Stream's first fiction series, ironically titled *Gynecology 2* (there was no *Gynecology 1*), was released as a promotional tool to coincide with the launch of the platform. However, although the series—a parody of a notorious Czech soap opera—used a similar formula of aesthetics, humor, and creative talent to the one employed by *The Blaník Bureau* and post-*Blaník* comedy series, it failed to generate sufficient revenue to cover the production costs. What this "false start" illustrates is that while the technology and aesthetic foundations may have been in place, the advertisement market (allowing for a viable business model based on advertiser support), "industrial formation" (backing of a strong parent company), and "practice of looking"<sup>40</sup> specific to short-form internet television were not. To survive, Stream had to wait and repeatedly renegotiate its relationship with consumers and clients, experimenting with a number of alternative business models in the following years.

If Stream started as an internet alternative to traditional broadcasting, it soon mutated into a hybrid of original programming and UGC. Between 2007 and 2013, Stream operated primarily as a local answer to YouTube, nurturing and cultivating a reservoir of YouTubers and potential professional creators. Thus, from the very beginning, it combined elements of an interactive, Web 2.0 social media platform and a professional, curated AVOD portal. At the same time, Stream made use of traditional broadcasting—acting as an "online archive" for several television broadcasters (before they started their own online platforms), a music video catalog, and even a streaming resource for feature films—before gradually eliminating all of these forms in 2013 to fully concentrate on original professional programming. More recently, Stream took steps to combine nonlinear AVOD with linear broadcasting via the launch of its own smart TV app in 2014 and, at the end of 2017, via the incorporation of its original content into the linear television programming of "Seznam.cz TV" (a new HbbTV channel of its mother company).

The groundwork for the post-2013 original content strategy began with a major change in 2011, when Seznam.cz, which had bought a 50 percent share in Stream in 2007, finally decided to acquire the entire company after it became profitable for the first time. Seznam's backing and its decision to invest in original internet programming were crucial. Heralded as "the only company in Europe that is beating Google,"<sup>41</sup> Seznam is the biggest local search engine and online platform. Although Google surpassed it in 2011 with regard to full-text search, Seznam remains Google's most successful European competitor on a national scale, retaining an approximate 30 percent share in the Czech market. With roughly 90 percent of Czechs using its services at least once a month, it has a 60 percent share of all Czech pageviews.<sup>42</sup> Google has dominated all remaining EU markets since at least 2008, exceeding a 90 percent market share in most of them.<sup>43</sup> The usual explanation for Seznam's long-term success is its cultivation of a close relationship with older and more conservative local users. Launched a year before Google, it grew popular for its user-friendly e-mail service, which many middle-aged people still use. It also started producing content very early on—including one of the most popular news websites in the Czech Republic and a successful map application.<sup>44</sup>

Under Seznam, Stream developed into a full-fledged internet television studio. In 2013, it stopped supporting user videos and shifted to creating purely professional content, characterized by higher production values and a public-service mission (investigative journalism, current affairs programs, science, history, etc.). In 2016, Seznam increased its investment in original content production by 50 percent. The strong position of Stream (and its owner Seznam) in the local market is unusual, with perhaps only Korean portal TV Cast, which is owned by the search engine Naver, its closest counterpart.

## **From an East-Central European “Answer to YouTube” to an Integrated Internet TV Studio: Stream’s Evolving Business and Organizational Model**

As an AVOD, Stream has to first and foremost produce content that is marketable to its clients, whether they be advertisers, sponsors, or advertising agencies. As such, all of its programming must function as a carrier of commercial messages or brand images. Stream’s business model, its technological and financial constraints, and the habits of online audiences define its standard product: free, short (approximately five to fifteen minutes per episode), relatively low-cost video. As original videos are more expensive than other forms of web content, it is imperative for platforms like Stream to compete with linear broadcasters, which traditionally attract higher investment than print or internet, for more lucrative clients. However, Stream cannot compete with television networks in terms of production budgets, perceived value, or infrastructure. Instead, it must try to achieve a television “look” within an internet production system, a contradiction that has shaped and limited Stream’s business model from the very beginning. Founder Miloš Petana’s initial goal was to create “an alternative to television broadcasting”:

We come from a different world. Initially, our natural business partners, clients, agencies and other media couldn’t categorize us properly, so our vision was based on creating TV “sui generis.” [. . .] Because I come from the television and film industry, I know that content is king, and that’s why my interest was in creating an alternative to television from the very beginning. In those days (which is no longer entirely the case today), advertising agencies had audiovisual divisions and separate digital divisions. So, when my colleagues and I would come to negotiate with them about a new campaign, they’d send us to the digital division people. I used to tell them: “I don’t want to be with you.” And they’d say: “But you’re internet.” And I’d say: “Yeah, but we create content that’s basically identical to television programming.”<sup>45</sup>

Petana explains how, in the early years of Stream, he felt compelled to respond to the established rules of a system based on the rigid categorization of media types. Faced with resistance from advertising agencies to redefine these categories, he had to fight for Stream to be accepted as a necessary component in the lucrative audiovisual sector.

Although Stream suffered from competing with traditional broadcasters in its early years, the Czech online advertisement market continued to flourish. In 2015, it surpassed TV ad spending and achieved the highest spending ratio per capita of all the EU13 countries.<sup>46</sup>

Online video remains one of the main drivers of internet advertisement growth, and the Czech Republic has the highest video ad spend among the EU13.<sup>47</sup> Although Stream lags far behind YouTube in terms of views,<sup>48</sup> the recent successes of its original series, with top episodes reaching over half a million views, have made it a serious competitor to both private and PSB networks. After years of losses, Stream finally started making profits in 2010. Following the launch of Stream's premium fiction series production, its revenues more than doubled (between 2013 and 2017). Also, advertising agencies gradually overcame their reluctance to embrace online video, finally realizing that online viewers were not overlapping with linear television audiences. To that end, they started offering their clients solutions for reaching online audience groups via Stream and other platforms, persuading them to spend additional money on online video. After Stream redesigned its website and reduced banner ads in 2013, video commercials and product placement became the key instruments for monetizing its original content. Standard video commercials—typically restricted to one pre-roll and one mid-roll, which is less than what competing sites offer—now generate some 85 percent of Stream's revenues, with the remainder coming from content marketing (product placement and sponsored programs).<sup>49</sup>

Stream's post-2013 growth is inseparable from Seznam's corporate strategy, especially in terms of consumer traffic and sales. Eighty percent of Stream's traffic comes through Seznam's homepage (the rest comprises 15 percent of traffic from direct access and 5 percent from social networks), from where several windows link to carefully selected examples of Stream programming.<sup>50</sup> Stream also takes advantage of Seznam's in-house sales department, although it sometimes deals directly with clients and collaborates with external media agencies.

According to content marketing executive Dušan Gajdošík, Seznam's grounds for getting rid of all Stream's UGC and shifting to purely professional short-form programming after its definitive buyout by Seznam were twofold: first, to avoid competing with YouTube and its unrivaled technological solutions, and, second, to strengthen control over content with a view to reassuring clients over brand safety concerns.<sup>51</sup> After Stream eliminated UGC, it changed track to create dozens of original web programs, combining the roles of main financier, producer, distributor, and exclusive copyright holder all in one. It currently produces about forty ongoing programs, 40 percent of which are in-house, with the rest comprising commissions (fixed-price contracts with external producers) or, very rarely, coproductions with independent producers. Programming is divided into three basic content categories: infotainment (cooking shows, lifestyle, science, history and culture, reality shows, investigative journalism, vlogs, how-to guides, driving accident compilations, etc.), original fiction series (political and social satire, sitcoms, parodies, thrillers), and children's programs (mostly animation). Apart from this third category, Stream's current content almost entirely consists of short-form original production (although it has previously experimented with acquisitions of long-form television series and even feature films).

Its business model is not based on the profitability of individual programs per se, but, similar to linear channels and film studios, on the total profitability of a diversified "portfolio" of titles, featuring different generic features, styles, and production budgets. The fundamental idea behind the portfolio is "symbiosis": a group of cheaper programs financially compensates for a premium webisode, whereas premium fiction series such as *The Blaník Bureau* function as branding "flagships" to produce higher symbolic capital and reach new target groups.<sup>52</sup>



In terms of an organizational model, Stream has effectively evolved into an integrated “internet TV studio” and accordingly seeks to standardize content portfolio, production processes, and divisions of labor. Stream has gradually assembled a small team of about ten in-house management, production, and editorial personnel; a panel of fifty regularly contracted external producers and creative talent; and a larger pool of occasional collaborators. Stream’s management is organized into a simple hierarchy: Under Seznam’s Content CEO, Stream’s Chief Producer Lukáš Záhoř oversees the production of all original content and is responsible for coordinating with Seznam’s central management, including its sales division. Chief Commissioning Editor Martin Krušina supervises the Infotainment section and a team of editors. Based on the creative team involved in *The Blaník Bureau*, Stream also standardizes its internal collaborative practices such as talent scouting, screenplay development, and green-lighting. The independent production company Negativ, *The Blaník Bureau*’s coproducer, has cultivated a long-term relationship with Stream, whereas Negativ’s in-house producer Milan Kuchynka serves as the external chief editor of Stream’s Fiction Series section, forming a group of commissioning and screenplay editors around himself. Each of its five members, including Záhoř, collaborates with a small concentric network of further external collaborators to systematize scouting and development processes. They hold weekly meetings to push forward individual projects, and while most of these are commissioned from external authors, some are written by members of the fiction editorial unit themselves. After they approve a screenplay, Kuchynka assigns one of the editors to closely oversee the rest of the development and production process.<sup>53</sup> But, ultimately, he and his editorial unit hold the reins:

First, we decide whether we like the story and ask the authors to develop characters and to write synopses of individual episodes and one final script. If it works, we green-light the project, sign a contract, and the second stage involves all of the scripts for each episode. If they’re approved, we start shooting. So, basically, a normal production process.<sup>54</sup>

At the same time, Stream’s current organizational and business model should not be considered definitive. It remains stuck in a state of “prolonged transition,”<sup>55</sup> or “permanent beta,”<sup>56</sup> open to possibilities of radical transformation and hybridization, while also dependent on developments in technology, advertisement markets, and consumer behavior. And given this context, it is not outlandish to predict that Stream’s expansion into linear broadcasting might even lead to a redefinition of its standard product and the reintroduction of longer formats to adapt to existing television advertising regulations.<sup>57</sup>

## Between Clickbaits and Public Service: Stream’s Production Ideology

Negotiating between traditional broadcasting, online advertising, and social media, short-form web television remains in flux, internally insecure and open to unpredictable external influences. To critically answer the main research question about the possibilities of fulfilling a public-service mission beyond the traditional space designated to it, we will explore how Stream’s production ideology reflects significant inner contradictions between its creative ambitions and the more pragmatic business logic of day-to-day decision making. In what

follows, we will reconstruct selected principles of Stream's "production culture"<sup>58</sup> and categories of its "industry lore."<sup>59</sup> While the first concept refers to the more general cultural characteristics of the professional community and accounts for the lived realities of moving between internet and television, the latter consists of Stream's key insiders' micro-level strategic thinking and day-to-day production processes: the conceptions of audience behavior, tastes, and current market trends used to rationalize their decisions and promote the core values of their output.

*"Opening People's Eyes": The Place for Public-Service Value in the AVOD Business Model*

To understand why public-service value has emerged from Stream's programming, we need to look at Stream's position within the complex portfolio of Seznam's content types, which include video news, a popular news website, and lifestyle magazines. According to the marketing executive Dušan Gajdošík, Stream plays a special role within Seznam and is considered an "island of positive deviation" for its ability to produce higher quality, premium content.<sup>60</sup> This enables them to collaborate with clients in different ways. Seznam's sales executives coordinate with agencies, producers, and authors, who together strive to integrate commercial messages into the programming in a "sensitive" way so as not to disturb tone and narrative flow and to preserve the creative autonomy of the content creators.<sup>61</sup> This protective approach to premium content has enabled a public value-focused production culture to gradually take shape. However, this has not always been the case.

Stream has to cultivate a relationship with its viewers by offering them enough content to make sure they return on a daily basis. Today, it produces dozens of original programs every week, which need to be diversified into different genres, styles, and modes of address to attract different target groups. In the early years, Stream lacked the financial resources for premium content production and had to combine original programs with both UGC and acquisitions from traditional TV networks. At that time, Stream's original content was often labeled "tabloid" and there was a consensus among commentators that it targeted relatively young audiences compared with linear broadcasters.<sup>62</sup> At the time of its launch, Petana openly agreed with the label of "tabloid for young adults," proudly claiming that Stream was the first to bring "tabloid online video" to Czech audiences. Indeed, a number of Stream's older programs from the period 2007–2010, including UGC, easily tick the tabloid box: from its first fiction series *Gynecology 2*, taking ironic advantage of its thematic overlaps with pornography (its "Pussy" episode attracted disproportionately more views than previous ones, exposing the search habits of Czech internet users), to celebrity gossip videos. Indeed, tabloid themes have not entirely disappeared from Stream's output, as it continues to produce programs dedicated to wild driving accidents, bizarre bodies, pranks, records of all kinds, and "Guess What" pictures.

However, Petana's younger successors, responsible for restructuring content production under Seznam in 2012–2013, chose to distance themselves from openly tabloid videos by identifying with values typically associated with public-service programming. Chief Editor of Infotainment Martin Krušina cites his and his colleagues' personal tastes as the key criteria for selecting and green-lighting new projects and hiring new creators:

The only boundary the production team agreed to observe from the beginning was that we didn't want to produce a tabloid magazine dealing with celebrity gossip. We knew it would function best of all, but we didn't want it because (A) we don't like it and (B) we wouldn't be happy doing it.<sup>63</sup>

In explaining their key decision-making criteria and shared values, Krušina and Záhoř in fact employ a lot of quasi-PSB buzzwords: “clever,” “informative,” “eye-opening,” “topical,” “socially relevant,” “socially responsible,” and “authentic.” Upon closer inspection, however, the similarity with traditional PSB is not as straightforward as it may seem. When asked whether Stream has a mission of generating public discussion, both Krušina and Záhoř energetically agreed, but explained that the main strategy focuses on “raising issues and proposing solutions,”<sup>64</sup> supported by infotainment programs about everyday problems such as municipal political affairs, low-quality products, fraudulent business practices, widespread misconceptions of historical events or bad architecture, and town planning policies.

When asked by the host of an internet magazine for young entrepreneurs what his quality criteria were, Záhoř explained that he looks, both in fiction and in infotainment, to combine entertainment with an “eye-opening,” activating effect:

We want to be a free medium in terms of having courage to provide space for various strong, sometimes even radical opinions that nevertheless make sense to us. We want to open people's eyes, to show them how things really are. [. . .] It's not about controversy for its own sake, but about giving people information in an accessible way, and to change the world around us.<sup>65</sup>

He also defined his criteria for a successful show across all genres and content types:

A program is a hit when it's not only watched by a lot of people but the right kind of people, when it creates a certain type of feedback and action. [. . .] The worst case is when we get an average number of views, zero feedback and no action. Those kinds of programs don't “turn wheels”: they don't generate profit or have any effect on the world.<sup>66</sup>

Záhoř implies that the difference with traditional PSB programming is that while television networks focus on high politics, Stream sidesteps standard daily news coverage in favor of everyday issues. Whereas TV networks hire professional anchors, Stream prefers to use non-professional presenters who are specialists in their respective areas: “Our presenters are strong personalities [. . .], who are well renowned in their fields, which means they have the authority to criticize, and it's this aspect that's the most interesting for us,” says Záhoř.<sup>67</sup> Krušina elaborates on the same issue, explaining what Stream understands by “authenticity”:

We don't like presenters in the sense of them being television anchors, who are just as capable of presenting a program about horses as they are about architecture or cooking. With a few exceptions, you don't see that kind of universal presenter in our programming. We strive to pick attractive fields that will interest a lot of people and the widest possible target group, to find an expert professional in that field who is deeply interested in the topic, even though they might not have the perfect diction or media training of a professional anchor. We seek out strong personalities in specific fields, because they're more believable and, I think, more attractive for our viewers.<sup>68</sup>

The idea of social relevance and topicality is perhaps best illustrated in the satirical humor of *The Blaník Bureau*. Stream's weekly web series pokes fun at the latest affairs and scandals

to hit Czech political life, revealing ironic conspiracy “disclosures” through the backstage deals and machinations of the titular lobbyist. Its visual style resembles rough amateur camerawork, replete with quick pans and jump cuts. And unlike more mainstream PSB satires, it does not shy away from radical black humor, obscene dialogue, drug use, or using the real names and faces of the country’s leading political figures. More importantly, it differs from linear fiction programming in that it, with almost real-time speed, holds a mirror up to public life, turning political scandals into satirical fiction on a weekly basis—a format that would be impossible under the rigid system of PSB approval mechanisms. As Záhoř explains, the approach is borrowed from Stream’s infotainment working methods:

In the framework of fiction programming, *The Blaník Bureau* is most similar to the ways we do infotainment: on a weekly basis, with no approvals of screenplays. It’s very specific and totally free. We discuss topics in a general way, but the episodes are made so quickly that there’s no time for approval procedures. A new episode simply goes into production and is released right away.<sup>69</sup>

As a result, Stream’s production ideology combines elements of internet-specific tabloid and user content with concepts more typical of public-service broadcasting while reworking both into a new hybrid.

### *Extracting Public Value from the UGC Legacy*

Chief producer Lukáš Záhoř explains that abandoning UGC in favor of fully professional original content—together with launching premium fiction series production, standardizing the weekly schedule, and shifting to a new corporate structure—was part of Stream’s complex transformation into a new kind of internet television studio. However, for Záhoř, the heritage of UGC is still felt in Stream’s professional creative pool, content themes, audiovisual form, and mode of address, as they continue to churn out “vlogs,” “life hacks,” commentary-based accident compilations, and “pranks” (YouTube-style practical jokes that have endured as a key element in a number of Stream’s professional programs).

In addition, a significant part of Stream’s current in-house talent consists of former amateurs, including the reality show presenter Kasma (see more below) and the reporter Janek Rubeš. The latter started his creative career at Stream as a local pioneer of viral videos (as a member of the “Noisebrothers” duo, 2007–2010). In the post-2013 era, he used his quasi-YouTuber skills to develop a unique, personal style of investigative journalism. For his award-winning web series *Prague vs. Money*,<sup>70</sup> he worked undercover to document the fraudulent practices of Prague taxi drivers and exchange offices (notorious problems long neglected by politicians), often finding himself at the center of heated exchanges with his “interviewees” and even the subject of threats.

The dialectical relationships between UGC and professional production and social media and television have formed Stream’s DNA and remain deeply rooted in its current user interface and programming. The latter tendency is epitomized in *Semester* (2016), a series about a millennial couple communicating exclusively via social media in a setting reduced to two desktops and overlapping windows.<sup>71</sup> With *Semester*, Stream moved in the direction of NRK’s *Skam* for the first time. Aiming at young adult, social media-savvy audiences, it managed to combine an entertaining romantic storyline, deep knowledge of the target group’s lifestyles



and needs, an innovative technique of digital storytelling, and an enlightening message about coping with loneliness and serious disease. At the same time, it provided a breakthrough opportunity to an unproven filmmaker with a strong, independent authorial vision, Adam Sedlák. However, the series' 28-year-old director found the collaboration far from smooth. Stream's producers were concerned with the effect the disorienting spatial effects of the multifocal two-dimensional narrative would have on its older audiences and made him simplify the visual style in postproduction. He also criticized Stream's marketing, which supposedly missed the opportunity to communicate with pop culture-savvy millennials, and instead fell back on its standard marketing channels and methods.<sup>72</sup> The disagreement points to the fact that Stream, after ten years on the market, is now facing a similar problem of aging audiences that local TV networks have been struggling with since the 2000s. It seems that this productive tension between social media logic, on one hand, and the TV portal model, on the other, will continue to inform Stream's programming and communication strategies.

Although Stream's primary target audience has expanded from the original teenage YouTube generation to an overlap of more mature mainstream audiences with Seznam platform users, according to Gajdošík, its audience is still not broad enough to replace traditional broadcasting.<sup>73</sup> As linear television remains more popular, especially with older audiences, Stream functions rather as a complement to it, making use of the cross-media marketing trend. And because broadcasting surpasses it in terms of viewing time and YouTube is overwhelmingly more successful in terms of views, Stream is left to cement a position between broadcasting and social media. So far, then, the solution seems to lie in staking out a middle ground between broadcast television and YouTube by offering lower production costs than broadcasters and more professional local content than YouTube.

#### *A Home for Independent Voices: Translating between Internet and Film/TV Production Cultures*

From its early years, Stream introduced itself to creators as a home for independent, alternative voices neglected by traditional mainstream media. Stream's founder Miloš Petana went as far as claiming that Stream was based on "weirdness, standing out from the mainstream, on the edge of socially acceptable."<sup>74</sup> This might sound slightly paradoxical in today's context, considering that Stream's most famous series is now written and directed by well-established creators of arthouse films and coproduced by the Czech Republic's most successful arthouse company. Indeed, there is much more "weirdness" to be seen on YouTube and other social media, just as there is a lot more "alternative" material on conspiracy websites. But although Stream has clearly changed its position in the field of cultural production, moving toward mainstream, traditional forms of content and toward older audience groups, there are still differences and barriers that mark out the boundary between it and the traditional film and television production cultures.

The key person tasked with overcoming these barriers has been arthouse film producer Milan Kuchynka. As soon as he found a common ground with Záhoř, Kuchynka started operating as a "conduit" between Stream and other filmmakers (including the award-winning writer-directors Marek Najbrt and Jan Prušinovský), many of whom he knows from mutual collaborations on feature film projects.<sup>75</sup> As chief editor of fiction, Kuchynka understands his

mission, among other things, as making sure a new project fits Stream's portfolio and target group. He briefs filmmakers on the specifics of developing a web series, telling a story in short form and releasing it online for online audiences.<sup>76</sup> Together with Záhorský and his editors, they read unsolicited screenplays, watch pilots, and listen to a large number of pitches on a weekly basis. Adding to the workload, a vast majority of these are unsuitable for Stream, so new authors and subjects have to be constantly sought out.

Kuchynka and Záhorský stress that they pick and green-light a project according to their personal tastes ("doing what we personally like") with the intention of giving authors creative freedom. However, they also acknowledge that they set fixed budgets and fees, perform continuous hands-on supervision, especially in the development and postproduction stages, retain total control over the final cut, and acquire all copyrights. To attract new creators, Záhorský and his colleagues have developed and spread a promotional discourse of creative freedom, autonomy, and nurturing original talents, not very different from HBO-style industrial reflexivity.<sup>77</sup> But Stream headhunts for amateurs, too. According to Záhorský, YouTubers should be attracted to Stream's vision of more professional, sophisticated work, as exemplified by Stream stars such as the entertainer Křemánek.<sup>78</sup> Kuchynka and Záhorský effectively act as mediators between two distinct production cultures: traditional film/television and online video. The discourse serves to prepare filmmakers for the faster production and shorter forms of the internet, and YouTubers for more professional and elaborate work with the Stream team.

Created by a well-established filmmaking team, who have in turn attracted further filmmakers to work for Stream, *The Blaník Bureau* has played a crucial role in overcoming the barriers between film and internet cultures. In 2016, *The Blaník Bureau* won a "Czech Lion" (a Czech Oscar) award and multiplied its already high symbolic capital within the filmmaking community. And on February 1, 2018, amid high expectations, Negativ's feature film *President Blaník*, made by the same team and coproduced by Stream, premiered in Czech cinemas.

### *Critical Meta-television: Stream's Self-Referential Aesthetics*

One of the key lessons to be learned from Caldwell's "production culture" theory is the deep suspicion with which he approaches any public self-representation of an industry, especially in the form of "on-screen reflexivity."<sup>79</sup> While keeping in mind that Stream's on-screen self-referencing primarily serves publicity and marketing functions, the aim of this article is to highlight ways it manifests criticism of traditional broadcasting and its own sense of distinction. One of Stream's first videos, dating to December 21, 2006, shows its founder Miloš Petana smashing a traditional TV screen with a hammer before leaving his colleagues to deliver the final blows to the analogue beast. (This "first" video also features the first Stream logo: a pirate-style skull.)<sup>80</sup> Stream's anti-TV gesture of "alternative television" is present in its programming and off-screen corporate reflexivity to this day. For example, a talk-show program by Stream's comedy star Luděk Staněk is devoted to identifying and mocking clichés found in traditional television programs such as soap operas and TV news.

The post-2013 Stream developed another kind of reflexivity that refers to its own heritage. Apart from various humorous self-promotional or backstage videos, Stream often uses

transpositions of their stars or even fictitious characters between programs (as guests, experts, and interviewees) or morphs the aesthetic features of well-established programs into new formats. The most striking example of this strategy is a trio of playful cooking show parodies: the first, featuring a conceited chef preparing awfully expensive recipes and intentionally throwing away half of the quality ingredients, sends up snobbish cooking shows; the second, featuring a Joe Soap cooking from low-cost pantry staples, makes fun of the budget cooking trend; the third, a fiction series called *Gluttons* (2016),<sup>81</sup> is a satirical comedy/horror involving the two chefs, unforgiving opponents battling it out not just for their reputations but their lives. Záhorský explains this self-referential strategy as “building sympathy” based on the ability to “make fun of yourself.” He attributes it to the internal evolution of Stream, a self-awareness all the more keenly felt given Stream’s recent tenth anniversary. However, he also acknowledges the potential pitfalls, particularly that audiences might not be sufficiently acquainted with the prototypes being parodied:

It’s probably connected with our acquired self-confidence, which we lacked in the beginning. To be able to consciously parody yourself, I think you have to reach a moment when people know who you are. Making fun of ourselves while assuming it may be of interest to somebody else implies that we believe this “somebody” knows what we’re actually doing. Because otherwise he or she won’t get it. I’m afraid a lot of the things we’ve done in this way haven’t been understood by people, because [...] we’ve gone too far, as with the *Gluttons*.<sup>82</sup>

A third self-reflexive strategy involves the playful crossing of the boundaries between fiction and reality. The most striking case is *One Man Show* (2008–), a brainchild of entertainer Kázma, who specializes in staging complicated interventions in real-life situations to mystify the participants and expose their reactions. In the most notorious episode (which has more than four million views as of January 2018),<sup>83</sup> he hires a young actor to pose as a participant in a private TV network’s reality/cooking show called *The Table Is Set* (2010–), in which people taste and criticize each other’s meals. Pretending to be the sufferer of an unfortunate condition involving priapism and Tourette’s, the fake participant inevitably becomes the subject of much bullying and the butt of a number of highly inappropriate jokes. Kázma’s crew secretly films the real TV crew from a hidden room adjoining the set to expose how their manipulative behavior induces conflicts among the contestants. The episode was praised for raising awareness of Tourette’s and for revealing the unethical practices of commercial reality shows. Another example is *The Blaník Bureau*, whose lead character, played by the renowned theater and film actor Marek Daniel, “interacts” with real politicians, drawing them into fictitious micro-narratives. The protagonist is repeatedly placed in real-life situations: from “organizing” a demonstration to addressing a pre-election meeting of presidential candidates (as played out in the feature film *President Blaník*). Having seeped into the consciousness of Czech public life, Blaník (who even has his own twitter account) has become something of a phenomenon, a living meme now synonymous with widespread political corruption.

Although there are significant differences between these meta-discursive, self-referential, and self-reflexive textual practices, what Stream communicates through all of them is a certain sense of distinction—different from traditional media, closer to real-life problems, more truthful, more daring. In this way, it manifests its willingness to fulfill a public mission of its own kind.

## Conclusion: Stay Local! Stream's Competitive Advantage

Talking to Stream's and Seznam's executives as well as to their associate creators was surprising for how little they follow foreign models. Although Infotainment Chief Editor Martin Krušina mentions BuzzFeed's YouTube channel as his model and Lukáš Záhoř speculates about the possibilities of producing English-language versions of selected programs<sup>84</sup> and expanding to social media platforms, their strategic thinking and value horizons remain generally very local. The fact is that both Seznam and Stream consider their long-term ties with the local market their main competitive advantage. As Stream's founder Petana acknowledges,

Seeing global platforms develop, I came to the realisation that the only added value we could offer our potential users was the Czech language and Czech cultural context. That's why our ambition was never to reach an international audience.<sup>85</sup>

It seems that "stay local!" is, and will be, the main imperative of Seznam's and Stream's strategists for the foreseeable future. Indeed, it is a strategy followed by most of their local competitors, too.<sup>86</sup> Unlike long-form content distributed via Netflix or HBO GO, short-form web programming seems to build on deep local knowledge of target audiences' tastes and needs—and one of the key reasons it inclines to public-service values.

The case of Stream is clearly symptomatic of the small media market's structural and cultural limits. The company understood as far back as the early 2010s that it stood no chance of competing with Google's YouTube and the aggressive commercialization of its gigantic UGC assets. And after local broadcasters began to launch their own catch-up portals, Stream's online services fell out of demand. When the Czech internet giant Seznam bought the remaining share in Stream, it developed it into a vertically integrated internet TV studio, incorporating it into its corporate structure and content portfolio. Despite this, Stream remains in a state of "permanent beta." Even at the time of finishing this article, the radical transformation so characteristic of its historic development seems to be continuing apace. All of the key figures interviewed and quoted here have recently left Stream. The consequences of these changes, involving an almost complete replacement of Stream's executive ranks and the departure of a significant swathe of its associate creative talent, are not clear as of spring 2018, even to the insiders. This uncertainty is indicative of the ubiquitous problem internet TV studios face: the ever-changing character of its subject.

It remains to be seen whether Stream's quasi-public-service mission will continue under its new management. It is also uncertain whether the example of *The Blaník Bureau* will provoke Česká televize, the local PSB, to enter the sphere of original web series or to experiment with a more daring satirical discourse. But the release of the feature film *President Blaník* signals that it can happen given that ČT in fact became one of the film's coproducers, atoning perhaps for its failure to recognize public value in the original concept for the web series pitched to it five years earlier.



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- <sup>1</sup> Dorota Vašíčková is a Graduate Student of Film Studies at Charles University, Prague. She is the author of a thesis on Stream.cz, for which she conducted a set of detailed interviews with the portal’s executives and associate filmmakers. Petr Szczepanik is an Associate Professor at Charles University, Prague. His current research focuses on (post)socialist film production practices. Some of these findings are published in *Behind the Screen: Inside European Production Culture* (Palgrave, co-edited with Patrick Vonderau, 2013).
- <sup>2</sup> See [www.stream.cz/porady/blanik](http://www.stream.cz/porady/blanik).
- <sup>3</sup> The prominence of satire in the local perception of public-service media can be explained by the crucial role subversive political humor has long played under state-socialist regimes across the whole region, labeled by one comedy scholar an “alternative public sphere, where the controversies and absurdities in the dominant social structures could emerge in a critical light.” Lilla Töke, “Communism with Its Clothes Off: Eastern European Film Comedy and the Grotesque” (PhD thesis, Stony Brook University, 2010), iii.
- <sup>4</sup> The failure of the Czech public-service broadcaster (PSB) *Česká televize* in the field of political satire was epitomized by its rejection of the initial proposal to collaborate on the project. See Petr Holec, “Zasměj se pravdě,” *Euro.cz*, August 24, 2015, <https://www.euro.cz/archiv/zasmej-se-pravde-1220922>.
- <sup>5</sup> The main web portals that have released original series in the country, apart from Stream, are Playtvak ([www.playtvak.cz](http://www.playtvak.cz)), OBBOD ([www.obbod.com](http://www.obbod.com)), and OneTV.cz ([www.onetv.cz](http://www.onetv.cz)).
- <sup>6</sup> John T. Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).
- <sup>7</sup> Timothy Havens, “Towards a Structuration Theory of Media Intermediaries,” in *Making Media Work: Cultures of Management in the Entertainment Industries*, ed. Derek Johnson, Derek Kompare, and Avi Santo (NY: New York University Press, 2014), 39–63.
- <sup>8</sup> In 2017 and early 2018, we conducted thirteen semi-structured in-depth interviews with Stream’s founder, production executives, editorial staff, associated filmmakers, a prominent actor-writer, and a marketing executive.
- <sup>9</sup> See Amanda Lotz, *Portals: A Treatise on Internet-distributed Television* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, 2017).
- <sup>10</sup> See Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).

- <sup>11</sup> Catherine Johnson. "Defining Television in an Online Video Ecosystem" (Trans TV Conference, London, September 13–15, 2017), <https://nottingham.academia.edu/CatherineJohnson>.
- <sup>12</sup> See [www.funk.net](http://www.funk.net).
- <sup>13</sup> Aymar Jean Christian, *Web TV Networks Challenge Linear Business Models* (Carsey-Wolf Center's Media Industries Project, 2015), [www-old.carseywolf.ucsb.edu/mip/article/web-tv-networks-challenge-linear-business-models](http://www-old.carseywolf.ucsb.edu/mip/article/web-tv-networks-challenge-linear-business-models).
- <sup>14</sup> Aymar Jean Christian, *Open TV: Innovation beyond Hollywood and the Rise of Web Television* (NY: New York University, 2018).
- <sup>15</sup> Amanda Lotz, "The Paradigmatic Evolution of U.S. Television and the Emergence of Internet-Distributed Television," *Icono 14* (2, 2016): 122–139.
- <sup>16</sup> Katherine Edgerton, "Byte-sized TV: Writing the Web Series" (Master's diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2013), 48.
- <sup>17</sup> Ethan Tussey, *The Procrastination Economy: The Big Business of Downtime* (NY: New York University Press, 2018), 65.
- <sup>18</sup> Lotz, *Portals*.
- <sup>19</sup> Stuart Cunningham, David Craig, and Jon Silver, "YouTube, Multichannel Networks and the Accelerated Evolution of the New Screen Ecology," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 4 (2016): 376–91.
- <sup>20</sup> Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, "Online Entertainment: A New Wave of Media Globalization?" *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 5409–25.
- <sup>21</sup> Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, *Social Media Entertainment: The New Industry at the Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley* (NY: New York University Press, 2018).
- <sup>22</sup> Christian, "Web TV Networks Challenge Linear Business Models"; see also Aymar Jean Christian, "The Web as Television Reimagined? Online Networks and the Pursuit of Legacy Media," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 36 (2012): 340–56; Aymar Jean Christian, "Indie TV: Innovation in Series Development," in *Media Independence: Working with Freedom or Working for Free?*, ed. James Bennett and Niki Strange (NY: Routledge, 2014), 159–81; Christian, *Open TV*.
- <sup>23</sup> Edgerton, *Byte-sized TV*, 108.
- <sup>24</sup> See Jan Henne and Markus Kuhn, "Die deutsche Webserien-Landschaft" (Medienwissenschaft: Berichte und Papiere 127, 2013), [http://berichte.derwulff.de/0127\\_13.pdf](http://berichte.derwulff.de/0127_13.pdf); Vilde Schanke Sundet, "From 'Secret' Online Teen Drama to International Cult Phenomenon: The Global Expansion of SKAM and Its Public Service Mission," to be published in *The Scandinavian Invasion: The Nordic Noir Phenomenon and Beyond*, ed. Richard McCulloch and William Proctor (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2017); Paul Grainge and Catherine Johnson, "From Catch-up TV to Online TV: Digital Broadcasting and the Case of BBC iPlayer," *Screen* 59 (1, 2018): 21–40.
- <sup>25</sup> James Bennett and Andrea Medrado, "The Business of Multi-Platform Public Service: Online and at a Profit," *Media International Australia* 146 (1, 2013): 103–13; José van Dijck and Thomas Poell, "Making Public Television Social? Public Service Broadcasting and the Challenges of Social Media," *Television & New Media* 16 (2, 2015): 148–64; Faye Woods, "Streaming British Youth Television: Online BBC Three as a Transitional Moment," *Cinema Journal* 57 (1, 2017): 140–146; Jenni Hokka, "Making

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- <sup>26</sup> Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (NY: New York University Press, 2013).
- <sup>27</sup> José van Dijck and Thomas Poell, “Understanding Social Media Logic,” *Media and Communication* 1 (2013): 2–14.
- <sup>28</sup> van Dijck and Poell, “Making Public Television Social?”
- <sup>29</sup> Eva Novrup Redvall, *Writing and Producing Television Drama in Denmark: From the Kingdom to the Killing* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 55–80.
- <sup>30</sup> See Sundet, “From ‘Secret’ Online Teen Drama to International Cult Phenomenon.”
- <sup>31</sup> For a rare overview of an East-European PSB’s online strategy, see Bianca Mitu, “Romanian Public Service Television: The Pursuit of Audience in a Multi-Platform Context,” *Ecoforum* 4 (1, 2015): 268–75.
- <sup>32</sup> van Dijck and Poell, “Making Public Television Social?,” 159.
- <sup>33</sup> Myung-Seok Lee, “Emerging Web Series? The Beginning of a New Trend?” *Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange*, February 16, 2017, [http://eng.kofice.or.kr/c00\\_hallyuInsights/c00\\_hallyuInsights\\_01\\_view.asp?seq=7906](http://eng.kofice.or.kr/c00_hallyuInsights/c00_hallyuInsights_01_view.asp?seq=7906).
- <sup>34</sup> Jennifer M. Kang, “Just Another Platform for Television? The Emerging Web Dramas as Digital Culture in South Korea,” *Media, Culture & Society* 39 (5, 2017): 762–72.
- <sup>35</sup> The name of the portal was “3min.de,” and was backed by Deutsche Telekom. See Thomas Klein, “Web Series—Between Commercial and Non-Profit Seriality,” in *Media Economies. Perspectives on American Cultural Practices*, ed. Marcel Hartwig, Evelyne Keitel, and Gunter Sü (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2014), 7.
- <sup>36</sup> Christian, *Open TV*, 12; Sébastien Lachaussee and Dominique Bougerol, “Producing and Financing Web Series in France,” *L Avocat*, April 15, 2016, [www.avocatl-en.com/single-post/2016/04/15/Producing-and-financing-web-series-in-France](http://www.avocatl-en.com/single-post/2016/04/15/Producing-and-financing-web-series-in-France).
- <sup>37</sup> See <https://youtu.be/LYiAathvVYI>.
- <sup>38</sup> The South-African service ShowMax, which launched in 2015, is owned by multinational media giant Naspers, based in Cape Town. Although it is primarily a cheaper alternative to Netflix in Africa, it is expanding to other markets globally; its development and engineering team is based in the Czech Republic, with the management team in Amsterdam.
- <sup>39</sup> Miloš Petana (founder, CEO and co-owner of Stream between 2006 and 2011), interview with Dorota Vašíčková, April 28, 2017.
- <sup>40</sup> To borrow terminology from Lynn Spigel, “Introduction,” in *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2004), 2.
- <sup>41</sup> Lloyd Waldo, “Meet the Only Company in Europe that Is Beating Google: Seznam.cz,” *Startupyard*, January 3, 2014, <http://startupyard.com/meet-the-only-company-in-europe-that-is-beating-google-seznam-cz/>.
- <sup>42</sup> According to Seznam’s own calculations from 2015; see <https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/content/digital-single-market-perspective-only-european-competitor-google>.

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- <sup>43</sup> The European Commission has been following Google's market dominance in the European Economic Area since 2008; see [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-17-1785\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-17-1785_en.htm).
- <sup>44</sup> Seznam's 30+ services include a homepage, search engine, browser, e-mail, news and lifestyle webs, a map app, e-commerce, and television. Seznam's revenues are mostly generated by its own search advertising system "Sklik," which displays advertising (including Stream videos) and the web feed on its homepage.
- <sup>45</sup> Petana, April 28, 2017.
- <sup>46</sup> Christian Grece, *The Online Advertising Market in the EU* (Strasbourg: European Audiovisual Observatory, 2016), 18.
- <sup>47</sup> Christian Grece, *The EU Online Advertising Market: Update 2017* (Strasbourg: European Audiovisual Observatory, 2017), 11, 25–26.
- <sup>48</sup> Google's data on Czech YouTube show that between March 2016 and March 2017 an overall total of 5.2 million Czech viewers were responsible for 1.9 billion views per month (half of them on mobile devices). In the 15–24 age group, YouTube's reach surpassed all FTA broadcasters. In terms of monthly reach in the 15–69 age group, Stream was the third strongest video portal in a Czech internet context in early 2017 (YT: 68 percent, Stream: 30 percent); see the presentation "The State of YouTube in the Czech Republic," <https://youtu.be/X2IoNryXYk>.
- <sup>49</sup> Dušan Gajdošík (a former content marketing executive), interview with Petr Szczepanik and Dorota Vašíčková, December 14, 2017.
- <sup>50</sup> A video interview with Lukáš Záhoř, *MladýPodnikatel.cz*, May 11, 2017, <https://mladypodnikatel.cz/lukas-zahor-jak-funguje-stream-cz-t33260>.
- <sup>51</sup> Gajdošík, December 14, 2017.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>53</sup> Lukáš Záhoř (chief producer), interview with Dorota Vašíčková, March 23, 2017; Milan Kuchynka (chief editor of fiction), interview with Petr Szczepanik and Dorota Vašíčková, May 4, 2017.
- <sup>54</sup> Kuchynka, May 4, 2017.
- <sup>55</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (NY: New York University Press, 2005), 24.
- <sup>56</sup> Cunningham, Craig, and Silvr, "YouTube, Multichannel Networks and the Accelerated Evolution of the New Screen Ecology."
- <sup>57</sup> Linear scheduling creates a specific problem. Due to EU television advertising regulations (the AVMSD [Audiovisual Media Services Directive] limits the amount of advertising to twelve minutes per hour), Stream is compelled to create longer programs divided by video commercials, which flouts its internet-based "industry lore" ("online viewers will not watch it").
- <sup>58</sup> Caldwell, *Production Culture*.
- <sup>59</sup> Havens, "Towards a Structuration Theory of Media Intermediaries."
- <sup>60</sup> Gajdošík, December 14, 2017.
- <sup>61</sup> This approach, however, necessarily leads to a lower success rate in terms of closed deals with clients. See also a video interview with Lukáš Záhoř at student film festival FAMUFEST, where he comments on the low success rate in negotiations with clients interested in customized content, November 15, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/famufest/videos/10156060033475312>.



- <sup>62</sup> See, for example, Jan Ambrož, “Stream TV a nové vize internetové televize,” *Lupa*, January 12, 2007, [www.lupa.cz/clanky/stream-tv-a-nove-vize-internetove-televize](http://www.lupa.cz/clanky/stream-tv-a-nove-vize-internetove-televize).
- <sup>63</sup> Martin Krušina (infotainment chief editor), interview with Dorota Vašíčková, March 23, 2017.
- <sup>64</sup> Záhoř, March 23, 2017.
- <sup>65</sup> Záhoř, May 11, 2017.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>67</sup> Záhoř, March 23, 2017.
- <sup>68</sup> Krušina, March 23, 2017.
- <sup>69</sup> Záhoř, March 23, 2017.
- <sup>70</sup> See [www.stream.cz/porady/praha-vs-prachy](http://www.stream.cz/porady/praha-vs-prachy).
- <sup>71</sup> See [www.stream.cz/porady/semestr](http://www.stream.cz/porady/semestr).
- <sup>72</sup> Adam Sedlák, interview with Dorota Vašíčková, March 24, 2017.
- <sup>73</sup> Gajdošík, December 14, 2017.
- <sup>74</sup> Petana, April 28, 2017.
- <sup>75</sup> Lukáš Záhoř, interview with Petr Szczepanik and Dorota Vašíčková, January 24, 2018.
- <sup>76</sup> Milan Kuchynka, May 4, 2017.
- <sup>77</sup> This masterclass with HBO Europe executives, held at the Sarajevo Film Festival in 2015, illustrates how they recruit European talent to work on their Central European original productions: <https://youtu.be/uJOAtgv0i5Y>.
- <sup>78</sup> Záhoř, May 11, 2017.
- <sup>79</sup> Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 309.
- <sup>80</sup> See [www.stream.cz/stream-fun/1-tv-destrukce](http://www.stream.cz/stream-fun/1-tv-destrukce).
- <sup>81</sup> See [www.stream.cz/porady/zrouti](http://www.stream.cz/porady/zrouti).
- <sup>82</sup> Záhoř, January 24, 2018.
- <sup>83</sup> See [www.stream.cz/onemanshow/10017526-odhaleni-nejvetsiho-televizniho-skan-dalu-v-cesku](http://www.stream.cz/onemanshow/10017526-odhaleni-nejvetsiho-televizniho-skan-dalu-v-cesku).
- <sup>84</sup> So far, the only English-language program to be released on YouTube has been Janek Rubeš’s *Honest Guide*, famous for warning foreign visitors about tourist traps in Prague.
- <sup>85</sup> Petana, April 28, 2017.
- <sup>86</sup> See Petr Szczepanik, “Localize or Die: Intermediaries in a Small East-Central European On-demand Market,” *Cinéma&Cie. International Film Studies Journal* 17 (29, 2017): 33–49.

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