[CZ] TV "Action Artists" Acquitted

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"Panorama", a morning programme regularly broadcast on Czech public service television, shows images of Czech holiday destinations. However, on 17 June 2007, viewers could hardly believe their eyes when pictures of a nuclear explosion in the Sudeten Mountains were broadcast. Several art college students, members of an informal group of "action artists" known as "Ztohoven", had managed to hack into a remote controlled camera and broadcast an animation live on television, one which looked entirely realistic and had been prepared in advance. The group stated that they had hoped to use this prank to draw attention to the manipulative nature of the media, particularly television. In an interview, three members of the group had recently explained that their work was intended to urge people not to believe everything they saw and heard. The aim had not been simply to shock the viewers, but also to demonstrate the virtual reality that was portrayed by the media, but which did not reflect the truth.

The broadcaster brought charges against the members of the Ztohoven group, accusing them of scaremongering. This is an offence under Art. 199 of the Criminal Code (Law No. 140/1961), carrying a maximum sentence of three years in prison. However, in its ruling of 25 March 2008, the district court in Trutnov acquitted the seven "action artists" who had broadcast the pictures of the supposed nuclear explosion in the Sudeten Mountains on breakfast television. The judge explained that their action had not thrown anyone into a state of panic. The criteria of the offence had therefore not been met. The public prosecutor, who had demanded that the accused be sentenced to 200 hours' community service, may yet appeal the decision.

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