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The Factors Affecting the Presentation of Events and the Media Coverage of Topics in the Mass Media

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Abstract

Cultural commercialization and globalization, which we can witness more and more today, are interrelated with the media coverage processes, i.e. with the mass communication processes, the aim of which is to highlight particular topics. This paper deals with presenting the ways of selecting topics within the media environment. We will focus our attention on one of the media coverage segments. Namely, we will discuss the following issues: “*How are topics selected by the mass media?*” and “*What are the factors affecting this process?*” We will deal with news as the simplest journalistic genre as regards its structure. Our views are based on the assumption that media coverage reflects the interrelations among the mass media subjects, events presenting by media, news values and social reality. The main reason for this is seen in the fact that media coverage of topics is also becoming a very efficient tool for creating media reality. By the audience with low levels of media literacy, this type of reality is perceived as social reality.

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1. Presenting Events in Media, Media Coverage of Topics and News Values

The issue of presenting events in the mass media, i.e. the coverage of real or fictitious events by means of any journalistic genres, and the issue of the coverage of topics in the mass media (“media accentuation”), i.e. the processes of an active accentuation of certain topics within mass communication (the extent of the coverage, the

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used means and the intended purposes), include a lot of aspects related to various fields, e.g. epistemology, ontology, marketing, persuasion theory and social constructivism (Pavelka, 2004). Topic selection, the manner in which the topic is dealt with as well as the order of presenting topics in print, electronic and digital media must follow a number of norms and criteria. These norms and criteria keep changing, depending partly on social and cultural time and space, partly on global economic integration (O'Brien, 1992). Within the news, these are considered equivalent to news values. Their existence, cumulation and concentration increase the probability that news will get published. Therefore, news values as a media product also influence their economic value (Alexander, 2003; Bolin, 2011).

The term “news values” was first precisely defined by Lippmann in his book entitled *Public Opinion* (1922). Lippmann specified basic news values that cause “the news value increases” or “is still greater“ (Lippmann, in Chapter XXIII THE NATURE OF NEWS). A number of other authors, both before and after Lippmann, also tried to define news values. E.g. Stieler (1695) in his book entitled *Newspaper Pleasure and Utility (Zeitungs Lust und Nutz)* determined the following basic news values: importance, nearness, dramatic character and negativity (cf. Jiráček & Köpplová, 2003, p. 77).

Galtung and Holmboe-Ruge (1965) are considered the authors who based their concept of news values on extensive research and who gave a complex and well-founded definition of news values (“values of news stories”) as threshold, frequency, negativity, unexpectedness, unambiguity, personalisation, meaningfulness, reference to elite nations, reference to elite persons, consonance (the media’s expectations), continuity, composition (the news value depends not only on its own value, but on values of competing news) (cf. further Spencer-Thomas, 2012).

There is one aspect that unites all the different views of news values or news criteria. It is compiling their complete and accurate list. Nevertheless, some researchers think that completing such a list of news values is impossible (Ryan, 1991, p. 31). However, one thing is important. When an event has been successfully covered on the news, a combination of various news values always occurs. At the same time, there are also a number of internal and external factors and pressures that play their part. Regardless of the type of news value, emphasis is always laid upon attracting attention and interest of the audience. Also, there is a contradiction between the interests of the audiences, media owners, mediators (editors), politicians and advertisers.

The impact of news on the audience’s everyday lives is considered one of significant news values. This applies, for example, to weather forecasts, traffic news, price news, news about upcoming events, job-related news, and news informing the public about new official regulations and legislative changes.

The fact that news can provide information about an upcoming event, in terms of space and culture (as regards the audiences location), is another of significant news values. The audience is interested in those events that happen around. As the rating of the most frequently watched TV channel in the Czech Republic, *Nova*, shows, the majority of the audience requires domestic news, and also prefers local and national news to news from abroad.

News with reference to elite nations, states and persons is considered news of high value. As regards celebrities, interest in this type of news occurs, irrespective of what cultural area the particular celebrities represent.

Another thing that is of significant importance for media coverage is the topicality and urgency of news. What the audience considers important in a given moment (e.g. political, economic, ecological and cultural issues) is generally viewed as topical and urgent. In time of national emergency, or in time of war or political crisis, different news values are considered topical and urgent than in time of economic and cultural conjuncture.

Apart from other values, the following are also considered news values: news availability (this applies to the opportunity to be noticed by mediators), duration of the event being covered on the news (events with longer duration are considered to be of higher value), and news personalisation (events that can be “portrayed” as individual-centred events are considered to be of better use).

Also, news with a strong emotional intensity, both positive and negative, may be listed among news values. Attention and interest are attracted by any of the following: negative news (such as deaths, car crashes, accidents, natural disasters, crimes, violation of rights and war conflicts), entertainment news (please see infotainment and sport), conflict and controversial news (the audience can be provided with contradictory views of an event), and news that can be anticipated or unambiguous news (this type of news deals with those events that do not raise doubts when they are being reported). The audience is also interested in unexpected and unusual news. This includes the coverage of quaint events.

It is widely known that emotions have an impact on the way in which reality is perceived as well as on the way in which information is processed and remembered. Thus, information must be treated very carefully in the media environment to avoid provoking anxiety, helplessness and panic reactions (Šramová, 2012). This particularly applies

to treating negative emotions (such as fear, worries, threat, etc.). While positive emotions appear to promote the remembering process, negative emotions rather prevent us from remembering things.

News values represent one of the factors influencing the media coverage of events – in other words – the news selection process. It is apparent that it is not possible to provide an exhaustive list of news values, although there is an unusually wide range of literature items dealing with this topic.

2. Ethical Code, Media Legislation, Censorship, Gatekeeping, Framing, and Agenda Setting as Media Coverage Tools

The form of media products, including news products, is not determined, influenced and regulated only by the subjects operating in the media market. Media organizations as well as state authorities use numerous tools and institutions to regulate all mass communication forms as well as the mass communication process. These tools include, for example, ethical guidelines/code for journalists, and national, federal and union legislation regulating the media market. Other tools are represented by various occupational committees. There are also state institutions supervising whether the professional standards of mass communication and media legislation are adhered to.

Under certain cultural and political conditions, the production of media content may be regulated and controlled by means of state supervision. This includes censorship. Censorship is a distinct and extreme type of regulation of and control over the activities pursued by media organizations in the media market. This particularly applies to the regulation of media content, namely activities conducted by church, political parties or state authorities. Usually, it is represented by an authority, the aim of which is to approve activities of media organizations.

A less aggressive, though no less effective type of regulating media content is called gatekeeping. The term “gatekeeping” was first used by Levin (1943, 1947) in relation to the regulation of the eating system. According to him, a “gatekeeper” is the member of the family who takes the decision on what will be eaten within the family. In the field of media studies, gatekeeping represents a conceptual scheme, by means of which news selection is regulated within news agenda setting (White, 1950). Gatekeeping is a way in which a media organization or state authority regulates media content production. This regulation type may take an extreme form. It applies to the situation when the country in which the media organization carries out its business is being endangered by a foreign power or when it has been put on a war footing.

There are different versions of gatekeeping theory (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Gatekeeping is, in fact, a type of filtration – it is a selection of a topic, motivated by protection and propagandist reasons. If a topic has been selected, it means that space for other topics has become smaller or that other topics have been excluded from the mass communication process. A gatekeeper takes the decision on what (i.e. which of the topics and in which form) will be offered to the audience by the media. The role of the gatekeeper is taken by particular editors-in-chief, editors and media text authors. Also, authorized officers of the state or political apparatus may be appointed to the role.

In some cases, if social conditions are favourable, the selection of a topic and the manner in which it will be dealt with may be strongly influenced by a powerful subject. Subjective factors may be extremely apparent if, for example, the role of the publisher, the role of the media editor-in-chief and the author are represented by one person. As an example of personally-motivated gatekeeping, we can present the journal entitled *Šalda's notes* (*Šaldův zápisník*). It may be considered a prehistoric blog, the form of which was quite clearly influenced by one particular person. The journal was not only edited, but also entirely written by Šalda (1928–1937), who only dealt with those issues that he found interesting. The journal provided him with an opportunity to express his distinctive views and attitudes in an original manner.

The news may be presented as the best example of gatekeeping. A piece of news is a piece of goods. It is goods that are produced, distributed, sold and consumed. News reflects an event that has occurred somewhere. News may even be fictitious – it may be a result of a deliberate forgery or an unconscious mistake. A news event is usually captured and recorded by a reporter, who also offers it to media organizations – either to press and information agencies or directly to media organizations. In this way, news enters the market – the information market. Media organizations buy news from press agencies or freelance reporters. Selecting as well as publishing news rank among gatekeeping activities.

Quite often, news that is provided to a media organization is like a prefabricated part, which is processed further. This prefabricated part is adapted by an editor, who forms it into its final shape. There are two main aims of this activity – to give the news such a form that will correspond with the media policy of the organization and to make it fit into the printed periodical as a whole or into the radio and television broadcast as a whole. In the latter case, the

process of selecting and outlining news is also entered by topic framing, i.e. framing that is well-developed particularly within communication, media and political sciences (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996) as well as within health and social psychology (Gallagher & Updegraff, 2012).

“The basis of framing theory is that the media focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning.” (University of Twente, 2013.) According to Fairhurst and Sarr (1996), framing is comprised of three components – language, thought and forethought; in fact, there are a number of options to frame events, statements and topics, and so to determine their meaning. Apart from other things, it can be done by means of stories (myths, legends and anecdotes), rituals, slogans and metaphors, which determine their new meaning on the basis of comparing two different realities.

As Giles (2010) points out, its basic idea lies in the fact that a frame is a combination of various media elements, such as a headline, photograph, text, etc. Every single statement can be put into a particular frame. Such a frame can then be used to influence the audience’s attitudes and opinions. According to Giles and Shaw (2009), who offered a complex concept of the media framing analysis, several areas should be carefully observed within the framing process – the story, its characters, its narrative form, the language used and the way in which the story is interconnected with other stories/topics (i.e. its generalization). This generalization forms a media template (Giles & Shaw, 2009). According to Kitzinger (2000), this helps the audience make sense of new information.

A gatekeeper selects a tiny fraction of a great amount of the existing news being offered. The person selects only some of the news available, i.e. s/he decides which of the topics will become a subject of mass communication and so a matter of public interest. Topic selection represents an integral part of the processes shaping the media image of the world. Therefore, it is used as a tool for shaping public opinion. The bigger the scope of the communication medium and the larger its audience, the greater its influence will be. The audience does not have to accept the content (the interpretation of events) offered by means of a text by a particular medium. Nonetheless, the mere fact that a certain topic has been suppressed, while another (quite often an escape topic) has been selected, presented and preferred to other topics (which are often of greater social significance and relevant to the current situation), i.e. the topic is going to become a matter of public interest – represents one of the most effective manipulation tools within mass communication.

The Persian Gulf War in 1991 (Summers, 1995) is an example of gatekeeping activities and censorship (MacArthur, 2004). When the war broke out, there were probably about 96 more war conflicts going on in other parts of the world. Despite this, it was the Iraq war that became the major international news. CNN even broadcast it live – for the first time in the history of news (Smith, 1991).

A different view of the issues related to topic distribution in the mass media is offered by the agenda-setting theory. This theoretical concept does not aim to clarify the manner in which topics are selected in the mass media. Contrarily, it aims to advocate the idea that selecting and hierarchy of topics within media communication affects public agenda setting.

Some of the agenda-setting postulates were formulated by Lippmann (1922). He claims that topics are offered to the public by the media. Empirical research that led to the development of the agenda-setting theory was conducted as late as in the early 1970s by McCombs and Shaw (1972). These authors dealt with the 1968 American presidential election. They investigated what had been published by nine media companies in Chapel Hill, North Carolina during the aforesaid three-week presidential campaign. They identified five main election topics presented by the media. At the same time, they conducted a survey among undecided voters. In this way, they gathered data about the main campaign topics for the media as well as for the public. The authors found out that there was a strong correlation between the two areas. Top five most popular topics presented by the media corresponded with top five topics of the undecided voters participating in the survey. On the basis of their research outcomes, they created a hypothesis suggesting that the media offer the public topics, i.e. agenda, and that these topics are accepted by the public. According to the agenda-setting theory, the media thus have the power to influence their audience’s thinking and to offer the audience the most important topics.

Research conducted later shows that the process of public agenda setting is a complicated process, which cannot be explained by media agenda only, e.g. by the frequency of presenting particular topics in the media. Contrarily, the research showed that there were more important factors in public agenda setting. It is the manner in which topics are dealt with, framed and timed (timing means the spacing of topics and events in the entire structure of the communication processes). And there is also the political, social and cultural context that plays a significant part.

The theory of news values, but also censorship, gatekeeping, framing, and agenda setting, interfered with the idea that reality might be presented objectively by the media. A significant shift in viewing the interrelation between the

media and reality was brought by Schulz (1976). According to this author, the mass media audience does not have access to the events that are reported by the media (mediated messages). Therefore, the recipients perceive media reality as a true reality. Media create such an image of the world/reality for the recipients on the basis of the selection journalistic news. The criteria of this construction determine news values. If we use Kunczik's words that summarized Schulz's knowledge news value indicators of Schulz are as follows: time, nearness, "status (regional or national centralism, personal influence and prominence)", "dynamics (surprise and intensity)", "valence (conflict, crime, damage and success)" and „identification (personalisation and ethnocentrism)" (Kunczik, 1995, pp. 125–126). This social-constructivist approach has brought an important finding (Schulz, 1989). There are not only rules for the construction of media reality, but also rules for its interpretation.

3. Social Institutions and Media Coverage – Presentation of Events and Media Coverage of Topics Related to Higher Education Institutions

As has been suggested above, agendas of the majority of state-owned, public as well as private institutions, e.g. higher education institutions and research centres, connected with their everyday lives do not have a big chance to get covered on the news. Nevertheless, covering events taking place in these institutions becomes interesting if these events can be labelled as scandalous. In the past decade, Czech media agenda was primarily comprised of criminal scandals (financial frauds), accreditation scandals (closing schools and degree courses), and scandals associated with habilitation procedures and procedures for the appointment of professors as well as sexual harassment scandals. This represents the type of agenda setting that is definitely not in the best interest of the given institutions. In the event that such news is reported by the media, it is essential to be active and respond to the news in accordance with the rules of crisis communication.

One of the few events that are covered by the mass media without any negative aspects is a celebrity's enrolment at a higher education institution and the preceding admissions procedure. When such a topic gets covered by the media, interests and attitudes of media agenda and higher education agenda become very close. The media coverage of an institution by means of celebrity media coverage depends, to a great extent, on the activities pursued by the institution and on the capability of its management to ensure communication with the media and the public. The institution representatives can arrange regular visits by those celebrities that are attractive to the media. It depends on the activities conducted by the institution as well as on the scientific and cultural events that the higher education institution organizes (international conferences, exhibitions, concerts, honorary degree ceremonies, etc.). All of these are, more or less, a reflection of its economic potential.

The biggest problem lies in how to ensure the media coverage of annual events, including an admissions procedure at a particular higher education institution. There are so many institutions and degree courses that it is almost impossible for the PR management of any higher education institution to arrange the mass media coverage of admissions procedures at their institution. In this case, print and standard electronic media as well as the standard news format are not the most appropriate tools for media coverage. However, network communication appears to be essential and efficient here. This particularly applies to using social networks and, within mass communication, to print media advertising.

4. Conclusion

The mass media create products that are offered to the audience in a standardised, i.e. predictable manner. To support remembering media statements, the media use various tools, e.g. word selection, wording, connecting statements and images, dynamics, repetition, the personality of a presenter, and working with emotions. The mass audience expects that media products will be created as products of the same format, i.e. they will be standardised and schematised. This, for example, applies to TV news, reality TV shows as well as TV series. There is little chance that innovations will be positively accepted, unless they have been developed well in advance and step by step. The same applies to digital networks and digital media, which are becoming the dominant communication systems and tools in today's world, the upholders of change, and the space for extreme commercialization.

Each person incorporates new facts into his/her cognitive schemes developed earlier. These schemes help the person make sense of the world (perceive, organize and process information) (Šramová, 2012). When developing media statements, the following should be taken into consideration. Each individual assesses information within the context of his/her self-scheme developed earlier (cognitive self-representation). This scheme affects the way in

which information is selected, processed and interpreted. If an individual is offered schemes that s/he is familiar with, his/her confidence is supported and so understanding a media statement is facilitated (Šramová, 2012; Jurášková & Šramová, 2011).

Media coverage of social issues also enters into these contexts. Media coverage is becoming a power that considerably influences the development of human culture. The identification and classification of components and factors affecting the processes of the emergence and selection of events, topics and news are a precondition and starting point for a successful practical application of these findings within a new area of communication.

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