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**SIGNIFICANCE OF REGIONAL MEDIA IN POLITICAL
COMMUNICATION OF MUNICIPALITY´
REPRESENTATIVES WITH THE PUBLIC.
CASE STUDY**

Abstract:

Regional and local print and electronic media in Slovakia achieved the significant development since the 90s of the 20th century. Paradoxically, relevant attention is not yet devoted to the question of media operating in the territory of a village or a region in context of regional political communication in Slovakia. Regional and local media are important communication factors in a relation local politics – media – the public although they fulfill other functions as well. The aim of this research was to prove the application of regional and local media as effective tool for creation of desired image of municipality´s representatives in the essential part of the public through the exhibition of the display of the selected media effects in relation local media – local audience. This research maps political communication of the representatives of Slovak town Žiar nad Hronom by means of contents analysis published in *Mestské noviny Žiar nad Hronom*. It concentrates on frequency of display of the public representatives and the recipient´s understanding of their importance as well as establishing the themes that city management considers to be priority. It is assumed that systematically and strategically directed communication through the local newspapers can maintain popularity of actual political representation and form desirable media image of its political representatives.

Key words:

agenda setting, local and regional media, media image, political communication, framing, *Mestské noviny Žiar nad Hronom*

Introduction

Normative idea about the media behavior is based on conviction that the media in its original and drawn form refers to events that they witness. This idea says they only transport political events in objective form, they analyze, evaluate and comment in favor of its audience's awareness (Laluhová 2012: 152). This is preordained by the freedom of speech that is basic systematic element in liberal-democratic foundations. However, reality is different. It is not that work of the media and its reporting teams does not originate in the freedom of speech, quite opposite. In case of indication of political powers entering this freedom, the media power is able to defend the freedom of speech considerably but normative ideas about the functioning of the media interfere with its economic determination. Even D. Šmihula considers as a relative the function of the media to report on actual political events without distortion. He states: Mass media bring very simplified message about politics or just a certain media interpretation of politics and political events. The public debate is therefore often only discussion about media interpretation of any social and political issue (Šmihula 2009: 64).

Mass media, except the public one, are commercial subjects in the absolute majority in liberal-democratic systems. They are dependent on the sufficient volume of an acquired advertising and on the preference of the target audience, indeed. Thus given determinants enter the process of portraying reality that media seize and often present in accordance with their own manufacturing rules, practices so that resulting product responds to the vision and the focus of the media (McNair 2004: 148). Artistically created event, staging and creating the impression of authentic events with use of situational, temporal, expression or visual elements is designated as pseudo-event. It is designed mainly for press corps and its story as well as progress is mostly prepared and managed by professional PR workers or press departments. As examples can serve press conferences, briefings, opening ceremonies, ribbon cutting, knocking the foundation stone, book launch etc. Jozef Ftorek describes it as an event which has originated so that journalists could inform the public about it. It is a traditional tool for creating desired publicity directed by specialists in public relations (Ftorek 2010: 17). Growing interest in media processing of pseudo-events involves especially journalist time pressure, reduction of expenses on news production and complete informative service of organizers of these events (Trampota 2006).

It is these factors that create bigger space for political representatives and their professional teams in order to influence news contents. When offering well prepared pseudo-events corresponding with the media logic, media increase its chance to push itself or respective themes and interpretations into media agenda.

Media “raise” audience for the certain news style by its production of news when applying standardized rules. Therefore recipients expect that and if politicians want to be a part of such produced content and visible for the voters, they adapt to the rules that media provide.

Jan Jirák and Barbara Köpplová defined following characters in political media image:

- a) Dramatization or staging– is expressed in focus on people, action. There are conflicts, collisions, shocking revelations depicted in dramatization.
- b) Personalization – it is shown here personal life of a politician, their family, hobbies, love affairs etc. Politicians are styled in different positions (in photos with grimace, gestures). There is a focus on mutual conflicts of politicians, rancor, the joy of victory in the elections or in the duel with opponents. Dramatization accents emotional side of the communication.
- c) De-politicization – is manifested by debate extrusion on serious topics that are substituted by show for the audience, “politics as an entertainment”.
- d) Trivialization – its result is simplification, downplaying of politics as such or themes that would deserve social debate in other circumstances (Jirák & Köpplová 2009: 346-349).

These media practices which aim is to achieve the greatest attention of the audience are called *infotainment*. Its result is that in the newscast (mainly of commercial televisions) dominate elements of entertainment in politics over informative value of its topics (Višňovský 2014). On the other side, newscast is thanks to the infotainment more available for the wider specter of the audience but its informative value has significantly declined. Widera related to new information and communication technologies stated: One of the most important problems of the modern world is to find a balance between pro-development possibilities of communication technologies and the damage it brings, limiting the citizen’s right to freedom. Globalized communication system in the context of using its instruments becomes a homogeneous market, however, the cultural diversity of users puts the skillful task of reconciling customs and cultural characteristics of interfering societies (Widera 2015: 554).

Media in process of political communication

Mass media are an important part of the world of politics. Politicians are dependent on their use, especially since the media is the only way the public knows about political affairs (Gajdka 2014).

Political events represent a collection of communication activities which participants are political organizations (including state), inhabitants, media and economic subjects. Subject of interest of political communication has gradually focused on the media role when creating the public opinion as well as on the influence of the opinion poll on the political life. Today the significance of political communication is considerably broad. Brian McNair defines political communication in three essential categories:

- all communication forms of people involved in politics with the intention to achieve their target goals
- communication addressed to political actors from unpolitical subjects (e.g. voters, journalists, pressure groups)
- communication about political actors in news, comments, debates or other media contents (McNair 2003).

According to Jay G. Blumler and Dennis Kavanagh, various trends influence political communication since the 90s of the 20th century. The expansion of communication means is a typical sign of this era. The development of cable and satellite broadcast technology has resulted in the origin of huge amount of television and radio stations (Višňovský & Baláž 2012). Mass expansion of home recording devices (video and audio as well), expansion and general internet and social network availability causes that the way of communication is increasingly fragmented and changing dynamically like a social system. Agnieszka Turska-Kawa and Waldemar Wojtasik stated in this regard: „as consumerism in contemporary economics has been to some extent replaced by prosumerism, so does democracy in the 20th century change the social (and to some extent the systemic) significance of the elections, at the same time affecting the functional redefinition of the role of the electorate. The modern voter has far more opportunities to influence the real of politics than was possible before (Turska-Kawa & Wojtasik 2013: 45).

Media theories in turn of the 20th and 21st centuries mention the process of so called media promotion of the society when media substitute various social activities and interpersonal situations; blur the boundaries between private and public for example; and mostly by accommodation they force political and economic sphere to adapt their rules, values (media logic). Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini declare the considerable influence of media promotion on the change of political communication in postmodern

era. According to them there is a departure from party-centralist model to cantered model that includes marketing of the parties and its leaders aiming at individual consumers mass. Media has gradually differentiated from political systems which does not mean that they lost their ties to politics. In fact it is supposed that media play increasingly important role in political process because they are getting more independent of parties and other political actors and these actors lose the ability to regulate shaping the culture and the views (Hallin & Mancini 2004: 277).

According to Dennis McQuail political communication is manifested through the media in three ways: election campaigns, newscast, political propaganda (McQuail 2007). Right election campaigns are most often examined as manifestations of political communication through media. First research was made in 1940 by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet. They examined campaign of presidential election in USA and they found out that media exhibited low influence and they are not effective as a tool for voters persuasion. Interpersonal communication played a much larger role when election results. Substantial influence was shown by opinion leaders that are individuals with natural authority in their social groups. Their interpretation of media messages and its following spread should have a much greater impact on the voters (Rankov 2002).

Newscast is more effective form of political communication than the election campaigns. It works more reliable than communique of election campaign or political propaganda because it is largely characterized by independence of a resource, reliability and without propaganda tendencies. Hence political subjects develop large activities to influence choice of topics in the news. They adjust communication to media framework to increase a chance that their topics appear in media agenda, alternatively they try to influence a way of framework. For this purpose they employ professional employees as speakers, spokesmen or spin-doctors.

Third McQuail category of political communication – political propaganda is the least effective because propaganda practices which contains are easy readable and it effects as advertising on the recipients (McQuail 2009: 290).

Regional and local media in process of political communication

Media are classified into nationwide, regional and local in terms of territorial scope of activity in the Slovak republic. According to Samuel Brečka, regional and local media are defined regarding territory in which they operate i.e. where the newspapers are distributed, radio or television broadcast's signal is spread. Size of that area is various – district in Great Britain, Sweden or French country in Germany, region, city and so on (Brečka 1998: 134). Andrej Tušer distinguishes

three basic categories when typology periodicals in terms of territorial activity and that are central, regional and local periodicals. According to the definitions, in the locality (village, city) there exist local media, in the region (district, region, county) there exist regional media (district, regional, county) (Tušer 2006).

Regional and local press fulfills these basic functions – informative, indicative and integrating. Exactly the integrating function is the essential difference that differentiates regional and local media from the central one. Local newspapers can afford to give space to the topics that are attractive for inhabitants of the city in which they live whereas nationwide newspapers can do it only rarely. Local periodical can deal with many communal problems that need to be solved in the village or the city and that are attractive for the inhabitants of the given locality only. Integrating function is above all created out of the appeal based on proximity of problems about which media inform citizens. It is also based on the ability to nurture their regional or local identity.

According to Andrej Tušer, functions of local and regional press further include:

- social orientation for events in respective localities and regions,
- commenting on local occasions and creation of „communal“ audience that occurs as an effect of local newscast ,
- capturing of „regular events“ in regional, local and sub-local space – i. e. information of local politics or community politics, culture, sport etc.,
- reading service – assistance in solving citizens' problems,
- newspaper status as readers attorney – regular giving information about problems of ordinary people, advice and help to inhabitants etc. (Tušer 2006).

Political communication and selected media effects

One of the effects submitted for discussion and plenty of research at the same time is the agenda determining phenomenon - so called agenda setting. Its theory relies on hypothesis that mass media' selected and presented topics affect what people talk about, think and what they consider to be public problems. They influence everything their recipients consider to be current events by selection of the topics, their including in the content as well as their ignoring. First empirical research of these assumptions was concluded by McCombs and Shaw (Kunczik 1995). Their work has focused on monitoring attitudes of undecided voters during presidential campaign in 1968. They compared it with the topics that were depicted by five media acting in a city where they conducted research. The result was the match between the topics that media presented the most and the topics that the public emphasized.

From these results, they postulate hypothesis that claims: „topics emphasized in news will be seen as important for the public over time as well. In other words, media agenda sets the public agenda (McCombs 2009: 30). Regarding effects of topics setting, three types of agenda mutually influencing each other can be observed and that are: media, public and political agenda. McCombs study has inspired other theorists and the concept of media topics setting has spread to other views. In the research tradition represented by the author of this theory, others are inclined to believe as well that media set agenda which the public „talks“ about then. Political representation tries to adapt to this phenomenon and its agenda topics tries to infiltrate into media agenda in order to affect the public agenda.

Theoretical concept of agenda setting has developed into another level over time. While initially this phenomenon attributed the power to the media to influence public discourse by topics choice, second development phase of this theory speaks about the power of influencing people's thinking.

This corresponds to the contemporary context development tendencies of mass communication theory when media and their social impact posses again greater power. Advanced theory of agenda setting proposes setting of topic attributes (or objects). Therefore it presents the transmission of meaning of object attribute. Attributes can be cognitive (aspects, subtopics) or affective (positive, neutral, negative).

Precisely attribute agenda can help to establish promoted opinion or preferred solution in the public opinion in some cases. In that sense it creates considerable scope for people involved in politics so they can influence the public through media. Attribute agenda setting of some topic is a representation of political power. Control over perspective of political debate on any topic significantly influences the public opinion (McCombs 2009).

Influence of topic interpretation resp. interpretation framework offer is a phenomenon resulting from topic attributes setting (objects) that is called framing. The aim is that even recipients would accept served framework into their discourse. It is normally used by media when referring to topics not only about political agenda. The other aspect of agenda setting is *priming*. McQuail describes this phenomenon as an accentuation and repeated accentuation of specific topics in order to create the connection between given topic and particular politician within the audience. He also shows an example when the top political representative tries to cover failures at domestic scene with achievements in foreign politics (McCombs 2009). In such case newscast regularly emphasizes international political achievements of this specific politician (home failures are avoided). Hana Pravdová has stated in this regard: Journalists have knowledge of media grammar and they know how to influence criteria according

to which the recipients judge representatives of political parties. They have knowledge of the procedures of topic processing – coding of messages by means of choice and interpretation of an event in such a way so that it would have a desired response from the audience. They draw recipients' attention to a certain phenomenon or event by providing sufficient space to it and in such a way they confirm its social relevance and veracity (Pravdová 2013: 170).

Survey methodology

The aim of this survey is to point out the usage of regional and local media as a tool for creation of desired image of municipality representative in the essential part of the public, and that on example of local periodical Mestské noviny Žiar nad Hronom designed for inhabitants of the city Žiar nad Hronom and surrounding villages.

Partial aim is to prove that local and regional media are able to:

- set order of importance of the public representatives in recipients of the media,
- set topics and their order of importance in recipients of the media,
- set attributes of the public representatives into the image that recipients create about the representatives,
- influence understanding of the topic and its aspects in recipients on the basis of offering interpretation framework and its accentuation.

The purpose of this survey is not to analyze nor evaluate level of ethics of journalistic practices or ethics of political communication that appear in regional and local media. It does not evaluate objectivity rules and the balance of newscast contents of these media as well. The purpose of this survey is to point out that local media can fulfill the function of a (controlled) political communication tool of the public administration' representatives, it can be their "prolonged hand" in regular contact with the public. Local media can serve as a long-term effective communication tool between the mayor (his representation) and citizens when maintaining sophisticated level of communication by political elites, without use of propaganda practices and strong manipulation.

The main research method that was used is a quantitative content analysis. As the research subject served the local newspaper Mestské noviny Žiar nad Hronom. It is the local print medium published by the city Žiar nad Hronom. Its circulation is 7500 pieces. Since 2015 it annexes advertising circular letter Žiarske Echo that is published and distributed by the publishing house Petitpress a.s. The pattern of the newspaper is the same as in its "carrier" Žiarske Echo i.e. central-European pattern (approximately

315x423 mm). Print is full colored but design is different than the one in Žiarske Echo. The newspaper is free distributed into every household that guarantees its general accessibility and it increases readability probability.

In terms of typological characteristics, *Mestské noviny Žiar nad Hronom* is a traditional local medium that has a nature of local newspapers. It is published on the eight pages. The structure consists of newscast, journalism and sport news.

The content of *Mestské noviny Žiar nad Hronom* is based on reporting about actual events in the city first of all. Writing style can be characterized as non-conflicting, with minimum controversy or tabloids approaches. Newscast of *Mestské noviny* mostly focuses on observing events in the city or its immediate surroundings. It also informs about achievements of the city, intentions of the municipality and the city hall, about the progress of project realization etc. The content is not devoted to raising issues and controversial topics. Journalism consists of stories of successful Žiar inhabitants, interesting facts and history. Investigative journalism and civil journalism with focus on problems solving does not occur at all. *Mestské noviny Žiar nad Hronom* is the typical hall newspaper that above all concentrates on positive news directed toward good reputation of the municipality that is publishing this newspaper.

The research sample for quantitative content analysis of topics and frequency of the public representatives occurrence was established from the collection of news and journalistic texts of *Mestské noviny Žiar nad Hronom* from 16 issues in the period of time from 8. 10. 2015 to 5. 5. 2016. The sample consisted of 142 articles. Text presented the basic unit for the topic establishment in the quantitative content analysis.

Using quantitative content analysis of *Mestské noviny* issues in mentioned time interval, we obtained these results:

- a) frequency order of the public representatives appearance in the newspapers content
- b) frequency order of the topics appearance presented by local medium.

The method of quantitative content analysis was used for detection of priority topics of the city leaders (political agenda). The content of all issues from 2015 to 2016 was studied.

When defining topics that are priority for the city leaders, we started from the electoral program of the current mayor in Žiar nad Hronom. He performed in the campaign in communal elections in 2014 under the name 23 bodov pre skutočne DOBRÉ mesto – 23 points for truly GOOD town (*Môj volebný program 2014*). This list of procedures that contemporary political representation of the city deems to enforce during actual electoral season was consulted with its leader - the mayor of Žiar nad Hronom, Peter Antal.

It was confirmed that mentioned document can be considered as the current list of the city priorities for electoral season 2014-2018. Based on interview, 13 topics were selected. In 2015-2016 municipality Žiar considered these topics to be priority and they pursued them or dealt with the given topic. For research needs, selected topics presented political agenda of actual representation of the city Žiar nad Hronom. Content analysis of news and journalism was accomplished within sample of all issues from the year 2015 and ten issues from the year 2016. The number of repetition of every priority topic was recorded in the research sample. The portion of priority topics i. e. political agenda of the city leaders in the content of newscast of bi-weekly Mestské noviny was determined by comparative analysis.

Findings

Media agenda of figures i. e. appearance frequency of the public representatives in the media content was identified through the content analysis of the provided sample of Mestské noviny issues. According to the results, Peter Antal, the mayor of the city was most often portrayed in the given period. His appearance reached 43% of all identified subjects in the content of the research sample of local media. The second most presented representative was a head of cabinet of the mayor and spokesman at the same time, Martin Baláž with the share of 13%. The third one was Ladislav Kukulík, recent deputy mayor with 11%. The other values are shown in the table.

Table 1: Appearance frequency of the public representative in Mestské noviny

The public representative	Appearance in %
Peter Antal, mayor	43 %
Martin Baláž, spokeman	13 %
Ladislav Kukulík, deputy mayor	11 %
Róbert Šiška, chief of the municipal police	8 %
Igor Rozemberg, Technical services manager	7 %
Michaela Pribilnicová, chief of the MsKC	4 %
Emil Vozár, city council member	2 %
Martin Majerník, chief economist	1 %
Others	11 %

Source: authors processing

Political agenda was determined by topics selection out of mayor's, Peter Antal, electoral program actual in the period of 2015-2016. Subsequently, the number of repetitions of these topics during given period was gained using quantitative content analysis. Comparative analysis provided the resulting ratio of political agenda topics between all journalistic topics of bi-weekly Mestské noviny.

Table 2: Agenda topics of the city management

	Electoral program topics	Topics frequency in Mestské noviny
1	Stable economy of the city	9
2	Roads and pavements	20
3	Cleanness and greenery of the city	11
4	Roma settlement Pod Kortínou	5
5	Relax zone with in-line track	7
6	Reconstruction of sport hall	6
7	Completion of winter stadium	6
8	Reconstruction of football stadium	5
10	Our schools	14
11	Park of Štefan Moyses	14
12	Safety in the city	8
13	Social taxi and other services	5
14	Svätokrážiský house	3
	Together	113
	Content share in %	39 %

Source: authors processing

On the basis of quantitative analysis, it was discovered that five attributes in both examined texts were repeated several times. Their review and frequency are pictured in the following table.

Table 3: Topic's attributes: Mayor' candidacy in the parliamentary elections

Attributes	The number of repetition
It is convenient for city	5
Decency – decent party – Bugár decent leader	3
To solve Roma settlement, Roma question	3
Not party member – just candidate	2
Functions compatibility – no problem, I am the mayor	2

Source: authors processing

We assume that results of our research sufficiently indicate skills of local and regional media to influence formation of the public opinions by framing of the offered topics. It is not important if this is done on purpose or unintentionally. We emphasize that application and verification of the agenda setting theory of the second degree (attributes) does not mean that media have a power to influence everything. We presume that media have ability to influence not only what people are supposed to evaluate or consider as current reality but at the same time they influence the way people evaluate. However it does not mean that impact on evaluation (interpretation) and the acceptance of given attribute into recipient's discourse leads to the change of approach, change of behavior or it acts as a call to action.

Results of our research is possible to apply e. g. when managing communication of municipalities or their top representatives in creating communicative system of the city or the village, alternatively in creating communication strategy of political communication or electoral campaign. We are convicted that local and regional media play an important role within communication of the public representatives and municipality institutions. Proper and sensitive communication management can play a significant role between inhabitants and their elected representatives. It may carry an important message for mayors and other officials about communication. Adequate communication is as much important as results of the work for the political success of the public representative in the contemporary society.

Conclusions

There is a various amount of power and influence prescribed to mass media during the hundred year of existence of mass media communication theory. Initial reviews and concepts claimed that mass media are omnipotent and people believe in everything they portray. The other theories explained that media do not have any substantial impact and the real power to influence reality is possessed by people that interpret media message further. Contemporary theories allow a certain degree of media impact on perception of reality. These are so called theories about agreed rate impact. We completely agree with the fact that media are able to influence our perception of reality. Topics selection into news contents, their presentation in certain order and repetition of the given time period causes recipients to think that "this is happening", this is true reality.

Moreover media are able to influence what we think and how we interpret reproduced topics and values provided that recipient possesses the ability to transmit offered interpretative framework. The results of our research confirmed that media, exactly local and regional media in our case, are able to influence

public discourse. Struggle to get into the news content does not have to be harsh in our case. Mayors or other local politicians can capture the place in the local newspapers or local broadcasting easier than their colleagues nationwide. Rather it is a way how they take advantage of that.

Because even though we claim that local and regional media are ideal tool for strategically directed communication of municipality representatives with the public, it is important to know how to handle this tool. Interest in watching media and media credibility in the eyes of the recipient is one of the dispositions that are necessary to fulfill in order to influence the recipients. Media credibility decreases when the local medium becomes a promotional tool of the current political representation and also when reported topics and their interpretation fundamentally differ from recipients experience and from interpretation of other media. In such case the ability to reach people decreases as well as the power of being real and effective tool of political communication.

The space for development of diploma thesis can be seen in systematic and long-term research of the influence of the local and regional media on the public opinion in the cities and regions of the Slovak republic. There is almost no attention paid to this issue in the Slovak republic according to the author of this report.

Since 21st century and its second decade above all, there is a noticeable increase of politics professionalization in the regions or small cities in Slovakia. Professionalization of political communication and space for use of local and regional media as directed communication tool increases as well at the same time.

It is noteworthy to examine closer the influence of new social media platforms – mainly personal profiles and fan pages on social network such as Facebook that municipalities and their top representatives use to much greater extent.

We recommend paying attention to long-term and serious research of regional and local media ability to set topics attributes and to frame the topics i. e. to influence interpretative frameworks of its audience. We assume that this media ability increases with the reduction of their acting territory. Local newspapers or local TV can have a great influence on the public opinion formation and on the maintenance of mayor's preferences or other political representatives when certain criteria are met. Exactly defining of the mentioned criteria and examination of their aspects could be helpful when reaching deeper understanding of the power of media in influencing public opinion. These criteria include credibility, range of viewership resp. readability, degree of objectivity, actuality, type of applied media logic etc.

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