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ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES AND REFLECTION OF THEIR PERCEPTION IN INTERNET MEDIA

The purpose of this study is to determine the extent to which the media are devoted to global environmental problems and to how they measure them. The initial categorization of the published texts in reputable online media with national coverage (that also has its printed counterpart), specifies how and where the most important environmental issues are reflected in online media, more specifically in SME and Pravda. We believe that only marginal space is dedicated to the important environmental issues. The basis of the content analysis is to document the frequency and the thematic focus of the contributions dedicated to environmental topics. Within this study attempts are made to highlight the media's ability to positively influence and shape public opinion. It also aims to emphasize the importance of the media's educational character in the context of environmental themes, the publishing of which has global importance.

Keywords: Online media, the environment, global warming, environmental issues.

"We need the tonic of wildness...At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be indefinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of nature."

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*

1. Introduction

Mass-media offers a wide range of topics – for example political, social, cultural and amongst them, those that deal with environmental issues. There are specific texts related to climate change in the context of global warming, drinking water and soil contamination, destruction of ecosystems, pollution or waste management problems. We live in an age in which the word 'globalization' becomes extremely frequent in the vocabulary of most world population. "The notion of globalization has become the leitmotif of our age" [1, p. 1]. In the debate on globalization we are constantly reminded of the compression of time and space [2 and 3], and the "intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole" [4, 5, p. 421]. The way media present events influences the perception and the decision making process of the audience [6, 7 and 8]. The importance of the art of conveying information, its transformation and subsequent implication of moral principles is highlighted in the recent study by Valco, Kralik and Barrett [9 and 10]. Similarly, Kralik and Kondrla develop this theme in their study "Authentic being and moral conscience" [11] and Butorova with Roznova point out the acute correlation of

media with ethical principles [12 and 13]. The very issue of living environment is thus always situated in the context of other news, commentaries, or other media genres. The contents spectrum mainly consists of political topics. Also communicated are news about specific fields, such as education, health care, culture, economics. Environmental themes, however, remain on the fringe of media interest.

2. Fundamental global environmental issues and their effects

It is obvious that the issue of environment (its pollution and the need of its protection) has gained global significance, common concerns being identified and discussed in all parts of the planet [14, 15 and 16]. It affects all countries on the planet, including the Central European region. Prominent among the discussed problems are, for example: landscape devastation, human overpopulation, hydrologic crisis, waste accumulation, pollution of soil, water, and air, the loss of biodiversity, nuclear waste and the threat of radioactive contamination. These topics are connected with other problems that demand our careful

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attention, such as climate changes the result of which is human induced global warming. R. Stahel points out that “the most serious threat within the global environmental crisis are climate changes. These constitute a more acute danger than pollution or anything else” [17]. The media are and should be the means able to inform the public about the reality of depletion of natural resources, deforestation, or the rampant diminishment of the corral barrier. “We are defiling our Earth, the fertile topsoil is disappearing, we are paving over nature, destroying the wilderness, decimating the biosphere, and will end up killing ourselves in the process. The world’s ecosystem is breaking down. We are fast approaching the absolute limit of variability, and the limits of growth are becoming apparent” [18].

3. Mass media coverage of environmental topics

This article deals with news coverage of environmental issues. In line with the recent study conducted by Jankova, this article focuses on “modification of content analysis, miscellaneous approach to content analysis with quantitative topical base...” [19, p. 97]. The following nationwide daily newspapers in Slovakia served as the basis for our analysis: SME, PRAVDA. Both of these are published online as well as in print. Based on continuously updated statistical data (AIM monitor), we clearly see that the web pages of these two daily newspapers have a very high number of real-time users in comparison with the number of inhabitants in the Slovak Republic (we are not making comparisons with the tabloids here, however). The average number of monthly web site visitors (real-time users) oscillates around 1.3 million for Pravda and up to 2 million for SME. Hence, the target group is substantial enough for the designated topics to have a measurable impact on the readers. In my paper, I am analyzing the news coverage (brought by news agencies but partly also by journalists) that focuses on climate changes and global warming from September 2013 till May 2016. I am primarily interested in the frequency and content orientation of news outputs that focus on the topics of living environment.

My preliminary observation is that neither of the two examined media has a specialized section (column) dedicated to the issues of living environment. The daily newspaper Pravda gives a bit more space to this theme by including environmental topics into the science and technology column, within the sub-column titled “Earth”. The daily newspaper SME sorts out articles with environmental topics based on the criteria of whether the topic covers domestic or worldwide happening. Again, there is no dedicated column or even a sub-column to the issues of environmental protection.

If we compare environmental topics coverage in Slovakia with those in the UK and Japan (based on published studies), the Japanese model of news coverage is the one closer to our model. Boykoff “found a steady increase in coverage in both

countries, in contrast to the up-and-down cycle of mass-media coverage in Japan around the same period” [20, p. 205]. Slovak daily newspapers function on a similar model. Global warming and climate changes are the most frequent themes, however, their number has grown significantly in the recent period due to the approaching date of the Summit on Climate Change in Paris (November – December 2015) [21, p. 129]. There were visible resemblances to the situation in Japan in 1997 during the “The Third Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1997, at which the Kyoto Protocol was adopted (...). The Japanese mass media gave this event quite a large amount of attention” [20, p. 205].

In terms of the news coverage frequency of environmental topics, the daily newspaper SME ranks first [Figs. 1 and 2]. It covers a wide diapason of topics with a rich variety of issues. Besides the notoriously discussed topics of climate change and global warming, it often enriches its contents by providing information about and partial analyses of the current state of affairs in other areas of interest: maintaining biodiversity, deforestation, air, soil, and water pollution, etc. Many authors chose to apply the attribute of proximity, focusing on local and regional events. In spite of a certain measure global skepticism with regard to finding and implementing solutions to the problems of living environment, we find a high percentage of texts that inform about positive steps being taken. Authors in both periodicals aspire to provide information with the highest possible complexity and accuracy, with the backing of hard evidence. Also clearly discernable is an active approach of news reporters and journalists in general, seeking to acquire solid material from scientific sources pertaining to topics of interest. In their quest for information, they do not shy away from contacting relevant, renowned academic and/or scientific institutions. In addition, academicians themselves are often the authors of the published texts. The readership may thus enjoy original articles as well as translations of texts from world famous experts. This type of contributions, however, demands a much larger space due to the need to present flawless scientific evidence using meticulous scientific argumentation. Such academic texts, therefore, differ from a typical news coverage by a more academic style and lexicon, a higher factual saturation [22]. Due to the limited scope of audience able to appreciate this type of texts, the general effort of both editorial offices is to make the contents of their newspapers accessible to as wide and as diverse readership as possible. Naturally, a substantial number of contributions are published directly from the news agencies without major editorial adjustments. The journalist work is, in such cases, deprived of the processes of the logical-terminological shaping that are typical for opinion shaping as well as analytical journalism or, to put it simply, for journalism of the rational type.

Blogs constitute another form of enrichment of the content dimension of individual online media. As a welcomed supplement to traditional journalism, blogs widen the editorial focus and

are able to bring different or supplementary opinions. Editors themselves may become bloggers, in addition to other individuals, experts or scientists interested in the given issue. Gavin Schmidt, a scientist from NASA who focused his blog entries on the topic of climate change, is a good example of a member from the scientific community who considers blogs a legitimate publishing platform. Global warming and climate changes are only sporadically communicated with an optimistic outlook. Most of the contributions constitute sobering, well-documented reminders that the global situation is quickly deteriorating: loss of biodiversity, rise of the surface level of the oceans, extreme temperatures and abrupt changes in weather patterns – all of these are statistically well documented. News messages are in both periodicals (Pravda and SME) mostly published on the basis of a certain event that has either a positive or (discernably) negative impact. Texts that are usually within a provincial frame of reference belong here. The topics of these texts refer to events such as the planting of new trees, founding new community gardens, etc., or they may provide information about a mass extinction of birds that had died due to food shortage, which is, in turn, a direct consequence of a warmer ocean, which precludes

the occurrence of certain kinds of fish. The examined opinion shaping daily newspapers do not define a unified conception or outlook on the examined issues. They rather approach each scientific output or summit/conference outcome individually. Another influencing factor that determines the art and quality of how each issue is presented is personal approach (preference/style) of the editor and also that of the author. The text is shaped by virtue of their perception of the topic, of the story and how the story is woven into a larger context. Readers are most interested in stories, relevant and exciting stories. After reading a text, they situate it into the context of their own experience and interpret it. Antosova offers an inciting study on the quality of the readers' interpretation of such texts [23]. Furthermore, she presents possibilities of interpretation not only by means of printed text but also through film as an audiovisual medium [24]. Pavlikova and Debnar propose a similar approach [25 and 26]. More research needs to be done on how journalists can influence the quality of media content reception.

4. Conclusions

It is of utmost importance to devote more academic attention to the study of media. Above all, our attention should focus on analyzing and examining the ways media can contribute to raising awareness of important environmental issues in society, educating and shaping the moral outlook of media content recipients. Besides using the traditional media, it is necessary to assess the impact of the new media and bring them into interaction with the more traditional ones. Their level of influence rises by means of the latest technological equipment and corresponding applications. Our current societies cannot imagine functioning without the electronic media, the Internet, or social (virtual) networks. These now become key platform in communicating the latest scientific findings, recommendations and guidelines. The media have the ability to influence public opinion and play a key role with respect to a truthful, objective, competent, and understandable communication. Both, content and terminological accessibility are important factors for adequate mediation of information. We agree on this point with Veverkova who maintains "that the language of journalism is considered to be serious language used in mass media, performing primarily its informative function which provides nonentertaining information about a specific topic" [27, p. 149].

Several experts argue that the information about climate changes or about the state and consequences of global warming are perceived by the public as more or less common, standard. Some media, therefore, implement the rule that offered scenarios and stories should be deliberately catastrophic in order to attract more readership attention. It does not always work this way, however. The topics of important summits and conferences are intertwined with the news of recent scientific discoveries. The

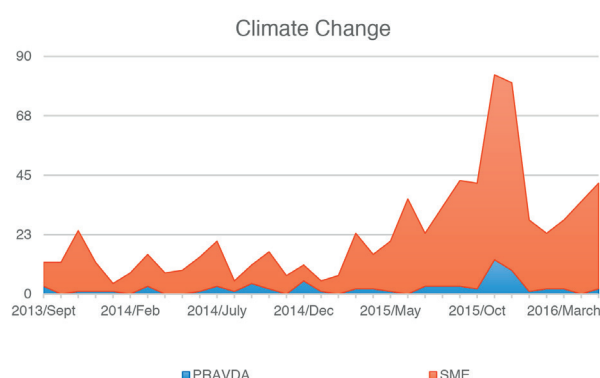


Fig. 1 Coverage and frequency of texts containing the terminological phrase "Climate Changes" in the online issue of the daily newspapers SME and Pravda

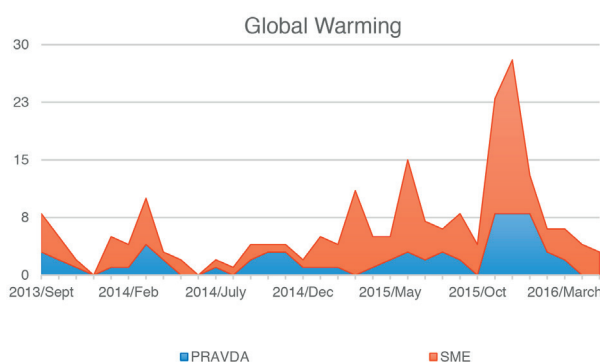


Fig. 2 Coverage and frequency of texts pertaining to global warming published online in both periodicals

issue of living environment is a global problem and such challenge needs to be understood on a global level [28 and 29]. Based on the results of research it is clear that coverage of environmental issues in investigated Slovak media is on minimal space. The number of journalistic texts, which deals with the above topics (climate change, global warming), grows in proportion to the importance of data or news.

The media, furthermore, have the ability to synthesize and systematize information. However, they must not leave out the educational principle (or imperative) from the framework of communication [30]. This has been confirmed by the recent study of G. Jankova, titled: The socializing and educational function of media and marketing communication [19] and M. Pavlikova, titled: The Concept of Anxiety and its Reflection in Auden's work 'The Age of Anxiety' [31]. The recipients of media content build up their reading experience and shape their opinions. It

is, therefore, important to pay attention to the cross-correlation function (CCF) between media coverage of a concrete topic and its reception by the audience (readership). Former research as well as present scientific studies from around the world prove that the living environment deserves our attention in all its aspects and that, if our attention is insufficient or inconsistent, it may have global consequences. The media play a crucial role in this process. The mass media, especially the new, online media and social networks of the present age, are able to modify, create and disseminate public opinion, constantly exerting a decisive influence on it and, in the better case, nurture a sense of responsibility in the mind of the public [32 and 33]. Thus, we should not underestimate how we reflect and respond to the challenges of living environment. To find a new "blue planet" will be an extremely difficult task...

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Translated by Michal Valco.