
SLOVAK MEDIA (NOT ONLY) AT THE TIME OF COVID-19: WEAKNESSES, PROBLEMS AND THEIR FACTORS

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Abstract

Media play a crucial role in society, performing several important functions. Therefore, it is relevant to evaluate their quality and condition. This study aims to identify significant issues in the practice of Slovak mainstream media during the COVID-19 pandemic and to determine the factors contributing to this practice. It has been noted that the media faced difficulties in fulfilling their role during times of crisis, highlighting their long-standing weaknesses. As a result, the identified key contributing factors have led to a loss of credibility and authority. In terms of social and cultural contexts and expectations, it has been concluded that there is a need to reconstruct the media and their function as part of a socio-humanitarian mission. In the post-COVID digital society, it is important to consider both the new nature and conditions, as well as the appropriateness of applying a systemic

approach given the complex circumstances and participants. Additionally, it is important to strengthen ethical responsibility among all participants involved in media communication, while also considering their rights, duties, and responsibilities.

Key words: *Slovak Media, Professionalism of Journalists, Mainstream and Alternative Media, COVID-19.*

INTRODUCTION

Media, both globally and in Slovakia, play a crucial role in society by fulfilling several important functions. Public service media, in particular, should prioritize providing the public with access to events of particular interest, unbiased, independent, and pluralistic information, a forum for democratic discussion, and promoting education and culture (Sobotovičová, 2019, p. 137). The programme structure should cater to the interests of the public, regardless of physical distances, and pay attention to the minorities that are part of society. The objective of broadcasting should not be viewed as profit-oriented, but rather as a means of meeting the needs of all members of the audience (public; Višňovský, Mináriková, Kapec, 2022, 50). The social role of these media requires both high quality and accountability, as determined by the very definition of public service. In a democratic society, public service media are typically held to a higher standard than commercial media. Therefore, they should adhere to quality standards regarding professionalism, professional ethics, as well as the moral and social principles and values of contemporary democratic society (Lehoczká, 2012; Sobotovičová, 2019, pp. 136–137, 150; Sámelová, 2016; Sámelová, 2021, pp. 282, 284). In this context, the condition of the media, particularly their ability to exercise and fulfil the public service role, depends primarily on the quality of journalism and its ability to fulfil its duties (Velas, 2011, pp. 7–8; Czarnecki, 2018, pp. 10–11). In Slovakia, journalism is expected to support the public interest, bear a certain degree of social responsibility, and uphold democratic principles (Olejárová, 2019, p. 113).

The quality and condition of media, particularly their public service and evaluation, are relevant to society. This pertains to the long-term experience of media services and specifically includes the public's experience of media during times of social crises. As experts have pointed out, social crises reveal weaknesses in both societal systems and individuals. Difficult times or situations test the media's ability to fulfil their roles in society. They can also be seen as an ethical test of the media's

performance (Pitoňáková, 2020, p. 65; Orlová and Somr, 2021, p. 3). This can expose lies that contribute to false opinions, attitudes, behaviour and social structures (Modrzejewski, 2020).

The aim of this paper is to identify the significant problems and weaknesses of Slovak mainstream media through a critical analysis of their nature. We will also name the factors that contribute to the media losing their credibility and authority in Slovakia. The paper aims to capture some of the more significant elements, given the complexity of the task. The social responsibility of the media during the COVID-19 crisis, particularly the public service, was significant. Therefore, this study examines the practices of Slovak mainstream media, with a focus on Pitoňáková's (2020, pp. 56–65) research findings.

1 ON THE NATURE OF SLOVAK MEDIA: THE PROBLEM OF THEIR FITNESS AND PERFORMANCE (NOT ONLY) IN TIMES OF CRISIS IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

The informative function is traditionally considered to be the core of the social service of media. The quality of their performance or management comes to the forefront in times of social crises. The media has an important role in informing the public about a given situation using relevant sources (Orlová, Somr, 2021, 3). It is necessary for them to supervise the construction and creation of narratives with an emphasis on objective and reliable information. This includes creating appropriate and relevant headlines (pandemic; (Pitoňáková, 2020, 61). In this context, journalists are expected to regulate the news content presented by the media on behalf of society (Lewis, 2012). During the social crisis caused by COVID-19, the media in Slovakia and around the world helped the public orient themselves by providing necessary information. Therefore, their primary function was to inform.

Journalists have traditionally been regarded as playing a leading role in society, tasked with regulating the flow of information and mitigating chaos and situational panic. As noted by T. S. Hadžialić and V. Phuong, they have fought against fake news that can confuse public opinion (Hadžialić, Phuong, 2020, p.37). However, it is unfortunate that Slovak mainstream media has also been known to publish low-quality information, including unverified and inconsistent statements. It was found that the media content about the coronavirus lacked a clear and logical structure, making it difficult to understand the situation and find rational solutions. The content was chaotic and contained a large number of hoaxes, which were then spread by the media. Additionally, the media focused on negative news, which perpetuated a sense of hopelessness. Rather than reassuring the public and

promoting calm, this source has spread uncertainty, fear, and hopelessness (Orlova & Somr, 2021, p. 4)¹.

During the COVID-19 social crisis, the media's role in providing entertainment was emphasised, particularly for those who relied on it as their primary connection to the world. While some media outlets adapted flexibly to the situation, many overestimated the importance of entertainment journalism. Some journalists opt for tabloid-style presentation of information, which unfortunately often results in an immature approach to media content processing. It should be noted that the tabloidization and infantilization of the media space generally does more harm than good to journalists. From this perspective, it can be stated that the high standard of professional work of journalists in Slovak media was devalued during the COVID-19 pandemic. The media's pursuit of maximum profit has led to a focus on market value in journalistic reporting. This has resulted in a clear prioritisation of increasing revenues and minimising costs, which has had a significant impact on news coverage. As noted by Pitoňáková (2020, pp. 61–62) and Lovaš (2021, pp. 380–381), media outlets have adopted processes to achieve their financial goals. During times of social crisis following the COVID-19 pandemic, political influence has become more prevalent worldwide. This has led to a revival of political control mechanisms over news and journalism, as noted by Casero-Ripollés (2021, p. 65). It is common for political parties to appoint their own people to work in the media (Czarnecki, 2018, pp. 9, 10, 14). However, mainstream media in Slovakia has abandoned the idea of presenting diverse perspectives and instead adopted a singular, 'correct' opinion. The slogan 'Who is not with us goes against us' was revived once again. According to Lovaš, this situation highlights three issues with Slovak journalism: ideologization, activism, and propaganda (Lovaš, 2021, 376–379).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, talk shows were analysed by D. Orlová, M. Somr, and Vorčák. Their findings revealed poor selection and composition of discussants ("experts"), who were not specialised in medicine. Nepotism was also observed in the media coverage, with only people from the inner circle of the show's creators being invited to participate. Media only used one-way communication, which could give the impression that the recipient's opinions were not relevant (Orlová & Somr, 2021, p. 3). During the COVID-19 crisis, there was a failure to manage the format

¹ The huge flood of negative news at the time of COVID-19 had a severe negative impact on the recipients. Research has shown that regardless of the information provider, negative emotions were spreading when receiving the content. People began to experience fear, anxiety, and frustration increasingly. Without a brighter outlook for the future, they were succumbing to depression. They developed a distaste for life (in Orlova, Somr, 2021, 4–6).

of media debates epistemically and ethically. Media professionals, particularly journalists, failed to steer the discourse in Slovak talk shows and struggled to conduct rational and inclusive dialogues.

Based on the few examples of weaknesses of Slovak mainstream media mentioned above, it can be concluded that during the COVID-19 crisis, the media had difficulty fulfilling their role. As presented by K. Lovaš, this role was taken over by tabloids and, in many respects, by 'alternative' media (Lovaš, 2021, p. 379). Therefore, Slovak media were not functioning properly and were promoting the failures of politicians and the system as a whole. The current crisis has exposed the ongoing issues with Slovak mainstream media, particularly in terms of public service (Pitoňáková, 2020; Orlová Somr, 2021; Gáliková Tolnaiová, Gálik, 2022). These weaknesses are not new and have been apparent for some time. Together with other weaknesses or problems, these factors ultimately raise questions about the importance of media and can contribute to a loss of authority and credibility. This can lead to increasing apathy and ignorance towards media among the public. Currently, the situation is becoming critical for the media in proportion to this increase. Therefore, in terms of socio-cultural expectations, we can speak of the quality of media activities. We will continue to examine their long-term operation in practice, identifying their features and weaknesses as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Subsequently, we will concentrate on identifying the key factors that contributed to these outcomes.

In Slovak media, entertainment and sensational information that generates profit have often been prioritised. The commercial sector, profitability, and cost-effectiveness have dominated for a long time (Lehoczká, 2012, p. 95; Veľas, 2011, p. 10). This trend is not only related to the current coronavirus crisis. Contemporary culture exhibits a general trend towards the economization or commercialization of the media environment (Lovaš, 2021, 381; Pravdová, 2017; Lehoczká, 2011). The current Slovak media landscape is shaped by processes such as infotainment, tabloidization of information, oligarchizing of ownership structures, and changes in the business model (Pravdová, 2017, 64). Several private media outlets, which have been taken over by oligarchs and financial groups, continue to pursue their own financial gain. This pursuit has a significant impact on politics, and these media outlets may even directly enter the political scene (Čekovský, 2021; Višňovský, Mináriková, Kapec, 2022, p. 33). It is important to note that media processes are primarily guided by profit-orientation, rather than ideals of public service. This leads to work goals and practices that serve the material and economic needs of the organization (Korkonosenko, 2012, p. 1728). By

doing this, the pursuit of public interests is compromised, which undermines the public service of the media. By doing this, the pursuit of public interests is compromised, which undermines the public service of the media. Instead, profit-orientation takes precedence, causing ethical principles to be neglected. With the above model of operation in practice, the communicated media content is primarily a means of obtaining profit from advertisement recipients, which can be exchanged for (monetary) gain. Unfortunately, there is no room for any social mission (Czarnecki, 2018, p. 13). In Slovakia, the importance of public service media for the cultivation of society has long been a matter of concern (Lehoczká, 2012, p. 96).

It is important to note that censorship and self-censorship are already embedded in the decision-making mechanisms of media in Slovakia (Pravdová, 2017, p. 62). While commercial media may appear to allow journalistic independence, public media may use these censorship mechanisms to present ideologically determined views (Dobeš, 2020, pp. 84-85). In the context of Slovak media's ideological and political interests and relations, there is evidence of a strengthening trend towards political-party activism among journalists (Lehoczká, 2012, p. 95; Pravdová, 2017). The ideologization, activism, and propaganda found in contemporary Slovak journalism largely undermine the original mission of journalists, which is to capture and convey information. Today in Slovakia, we often see a certain resignation to the truth in a significant part of the Slovak and mainstream media: Instead of searching for the real truth, we witness the search for those who affirm "their own" truth. It is a common situation to see journalists obsessed, especially in relation to certain topics (Lovash, 2021, 376–379). Sámelová notes (Sámelová, 2016, 321) that in the context of such preferred visions of the world, "inappropriate topics", opinions and people with "inappropriate" views are apparently often pushed out. In this context, the Slovak mainstream media publishes selective reports that correspond to certain (e.g. right-wing) narratives (Dobeš, 2020, 84). This is also the reason why most of the media provide what could be called 'identical content'. It can be concluded that the uniformity of the media has to a large extent become their actual cognitive sign (Lovaš, 2021, 379).

It is often forgotten in Slovakia that if the media have a function or moral obligation to shape society, it is only through participation in the debate and social action that recognises the equal rights of each actor in the public space, and not through the imposition of a vision of the world, even if this vision is considered valuable by the majority of society (Czarnecki, 2018, 13). It is necessary for media practice to manage and conduct a debate in a way that maintains communicative or discursive

conditions, based on the ethical premise that any subject capable of speech and action can participate in the discourse and challenge any claim, using argumentation that maintains basic logics (Chillón, 2016, 105). Unfortunately, however, in our opinion, dealing with debates in this epistemic and ethical way often proves to be a problem in the Slovak media. In Slovakia, J. Košč also points out that there is a particular inability to debate or to argue. As it turns out, a frequent by-product of these debates – due to the presented imbalance – is the ostracisation of other opinions (such as neoliberal positions, etc.) (Košč, 2020, 41, 42). We also see an apparent inability to conduct an inclusive dialogue in media discussions. Instead of facilitating such an open and respectful dialogue aimed at reaching a synthesis beyond the individual participants, the prevailing habit leads to quickly discrediting the opponent and attributing derogatory adjectives to him, as Lovaš points out with Pope Francis (Lovaš, 2021, 384).

We consider it appropriate and necessary to examine the moral and ethical side of the media and their influence. Indeed, in the context of multiplying global social problems, such as terrorism, mass migration or the COVID-19 crisis, the issue of morality, moral judgement and moral action, or the moral function of the media, is more than ever at the forefront of society (Keklak, 2016, 158, 159). Thus, if we talk about the function of forming moral judgement in Slovak society through its influence, as M. Lincényi points out, in recent years several experts and educators have pointed out that the activities of the media or journalistic activities should (among other aspects) be compatible with ethics and morality, because each individual journalist, as well as journalists as a group of professionals, contribute significantly to the state of morality in the country. In terms of their morality and ethics, Lincényi notes that the situation is often serious (Lincényi, 2017, 37). It can be said that this problem of the Slovak media or Slovak journalistic practice has been underestimated for a long time (Remišová, 2010; Hochelová, 2006, 164). Unfortunately, as a result of such an attitude it is possible to observe immoral and contradictory professional behaviour and actions of the media or media professionals, which has a negative influence on the public².

In this context, a question arises regarding the social mission of the media in Slovakia: to what extent are the ideals of a democratic society being fulfilled? The

² The professionalism of journalists' work depends primarily on their expertise and ethics, as demonstrated by an anonymous survey of journalists' opinions in early 2008. Questionable or unethical behaviour can take many forms, including distorting facts, failing to verify information, having close relationships with news subjects, invading privacy, accepting gifts, and committing plagiarism (Višňovský, Mináriková, & Kapec, 2002, p. 23). Unfortunately, this continues to be a problem in Slovakia.

core of a democratic society is well-informed citizens who can make informed decisions. This is especially important during times of social crises (Pravdová, 2017, p. 63). According to H. Pravdová (2017, 63), the main informational function of media has become a mere shadow of its original ideals in recent years. Bachletová (2014, 162) argues that media socialization can no longer be relied upon to create a sense of responsibility, whether political or civic. Additionally, P. Czarnecki notes that media no longer educate or guide their recipients. It has been found that instead of attempting to educate or guide individuals or civil society, the aim is to construct an ideal recipient for the content (Czarnecki, 2018, p.13).

According to K. Lovaš, and in agreement with the current Pope, media and journalists in today's world, particularly in Slovakia, have lost the ability to engage in dialogue and listen to others. Instead, their communication with the public has become a one-sided monologue. However, due to its subject matter, form, and content, this monologue appears to be of interest to fewer and fewer people. According to the author mentioned above, the prevalent broadcasting of facts and challenges often hinders dialogue. It allows individuals to use the faults of others as an excuse to maintain their own ideas, interests, and decisions without considering alternative perspectives. It can be argued that they have lost the ability to connect with people, navigate their environment and problems, and experience situations rather than solely solving them from the newsroom. To effectively influence the opinions of their audience, they may attempt to assert their authority (Lovaš, 2021, 380–384). This results in them becoming the authority that avoids any criticism or self-criticism. Contemporary experts agree with this perspective. However, these authorities do not accept any criticism. There is an almost complete lack of self-criticism in the media, and their inability to accept criticism aimed at themselves from the outside is evident. Unfortunately, journalists often dismiss constructive criticism as 'hecklings' and label any attempts to hold them accountable as 'attacks on the media'. This can prevent them from addressing unprofessionalism in specific journalists, stories, or programmes. It is important to maintain a critical eye on the media to ensure they remain accountable to society (Czarnecki, 2018, 12, 17; Lovaš, 2021, 380).

Ultimately, the Slovak mainstream "thought-shaping" media's weaknesses, including their inability to accept criticism and expose themselves to self-criticism, contribute to the loss of their authority and credibility. The loss of credibility and authority among mainstream media has allowed "new players" to emerge (Orlová, Somr, 2021, 4). Tabloids have taken over their role, and alternative media (Lovaš, 2021, 379) that challenge the monopoly of mainstream media over information

dissemination are gaining popularity (Olejárová, 2019, 126; Radošinská, 2017, 157; Kosho, 2021). This highlights the critical situation of Slovak mainstream and public service-oriented media.

2. ON FACTORS INFLUENCING THE QUALITY OR PERFORMANCE OF THE SLOVAK MEDIA, THEIR AUTHORITY AND CREDIBILITY

In general, no media can be a perfect instrument for meeting the needs of both society and its individual members. However, it is important to consider the quality, authority, and credibility of media not only for the public but also for the media themselves. This is often crucial for their existence and how they are perceived and evaluated by the public.

Therefore, it is important to reveal the factors contributing to the problems or weaknesses of the mainstream media in Slovakia. This can cause a loss of credibility and authority in society. Different perspectives can show a number of determining factors that contribute to this loss. We will try to identify, in particular, the key and structural ones in the system of numerous determinants that influence the Slovak media.

Above all, as for example also P. Czarnecki suggests, most of the time the reasons or factors that set the basis for doubting the fundamental and meaningful mission, tasks, or significance of the media, especially in terms of public service, are the very media themselves, their own nature. When considering the primary informational function of media, it is important to examine journalism. The quality of media, particularly public service media, is dependent on the quality of journalism and vice versa. As noted by Czarnecki (2018), scrutinising journalism is crucial (pp. 10–13). García Avilés highlights that media credibility issues often stem from a disconnect between journalistic practices and public expectations, when people know that are not receiving the public service that they deserve (in Chillón, 2016, 97).

In this context, we can observe the interests and relationships of the media, as well as other active factors that affect the professional and working conditions of Slovak media professionals. It is evident that there is a persistent weakness in the media industry that affects the overall performance, particularly among journalists. For instance, job insecurity is a prevalent issue within the profession. However, the issue of long-term employment for journalists and creative workers is not the only problem. Low salaries also contribute to the problem (Višňovský, Mináriková, Kapec, 2022, 26; Gálik, Vrabec, Gáliková Tolnaiová et al., 2022). Additionally, the media's interests and relationships appear to be a particularly problematic aspect of Slovak mainstream media and their practices. Media professionals may be

influenced by long-standing ethically problematic, improper, or questionable interests and relationships, such as ideological, political, or economic factors. Considering the ability of media to withstand pressure from both economic interest groups and political parties (Remišová, 2010), it can be argued that in Slovakia, journalistic practice has deviated from norms due to pressure from media institutions and influential political or economic groups (Lehoczká, 2012, 95; Pravdová, 2017; Lovaš, 2021; Kaisy, 2021, 20; Urbaniková, 2022). The pursuit of profit often leads to a disregard for ethics. Concentration of economic and media power, as well as non-transparent media ownership, poses a threat to freedom of speech and the press. (Remišová, 2010, 38, 39; Hochelová, 2006, 164) (Radošinská, 2017, 157; Višňovský, Mináriková, Kapec, 2022). These factors have been undermining the authority and credibility of mainstream media in Slovak society for some time. Regarding the nature and practice of Slovak mainstream media, we are referring to the freedom and independence of the media companies that journalists work with (Suárez Villegas, 2016, 5, 91). This is an essential ethical professional condition (Szarka, 2015). Emphasising the unconditional rule (Keyanpour, 2012, 608; Urbanikova, 2021) is crucial for the media and journalists to prioritise the public interest over commercial, political, and personal interests (Hadžialić, Phuong, 2020, 36). Since professionalism and quality are expected from public service media (Sámelová, 2012, 282), it is crucial for them to maintain independence from economic or state power to meet the conditions of professionalism (Lehoczká, 2012, 99; Czarnecki, 2018, 11). We can ask the inherently familiar and therefore "old but new" question of whether these Slovak media are really independent. As it turns out, it is common that less freedom of operation is allowed for the media in the period of transformation, which is a time typical for the lack of preserving their independence from politicians and attempts to interfere with the media content (Czarnecki, 2018, 9, 10, 14). Unfortunately, (also) in the Slovak environment, one of the persistent problems of traditional journalism is indeed the frequent lack of autonomy (Szarka, 2015, 403, 406). Currently, Slovakia has strict legislative, ethical, and educational conditions in place for media and journalism. These regulations guarantee freedom of the press and journalistic conduct is governed by codes of ethics. However, the practical implementation of these regulations raises concerns about the theoretical autonomy of Slovak journalists. In Slovakia, the most significant current ethical risk for journalists and media operating in the field of journalism is the influence of politicians and the pressure of media owners (Gálik, Vrabec, Gáliková Tolnaiová et al., 2022; Višňovský, Mináriková, Kapec,

2022, 33). This all is perceived by the public³, and affects the way the public assesses the authority and reliability of given media.

Another problematic factor for the quality of the Slovak media is, in our opinion, the media professionals themselves, or the personalities of media professionals themselves, as their performance is directly linked to the performance of the media. With regard to the aforementioned specific link between the quality of the media and the quality of journalism, this is particularly the case with journalists. As Š. Velas notes, it is important for journalism itself, its quality, and at the same time for the performance of the media, how journalism is represented by personalities, how they fulfil the basic journalistic function - a good journalist is a creative personality whose professional as well as personal qualities are important (Veľas, 2011, 10). Based on these attributes, good journalists can ensure high-quality performance, which is desirable to the public (Szarka, 2015, p. 407). However, not all journalists in Slovakia can be considered professionals today, and journalism is no longer a creative expression of journalistic personalities (Lehoczká, 2011, p. 60; Lovaš, 2021, p. 375). However, in this context, the absence of creative and professional personalities in the media can be problematic as it may lead to a decline in the quality of media content. E. Bachletová argues that the absence of experienced journalists in Slovakia is a significant issue. This suggests that the younger generation of journalists may struggle to maintain the necessary standard of media content (Bachletová, 2014, p. 164). This has implications for the perceived authority and credibility of the media among their audience.

The quality of Slovak media performance may not solely be attributed to the level of experience of young media professionals. The quality of education and professional training of media experts also plays a significant role in determining the quality of media service. It is evident that journalists often make mistakes due to a lack of knowledge and understanding of the art of journalism (Czarnecki, 2018, p. 15). The media in Slovakia is controlled by individuals with varying competencies and knowledge (Remišová, 2010, p. 159). It is evident that in recent times, particularly in the context of the social crisis related to COVID-19, deficiencies in the epistemic and ethical dimensions of Slovak journalism have become more apparent (Gáliková and Gálik, 2022a; Gálik and Gáliková, 2022b). It is possible to confirm a problem of cognitive and ethical competencies among media professionals in Slovakia. This

³ Median's February 2022 survey monitored views on media freedom and journalists' independence in the V4 countries. It showed that up to 43 % of Slovaks think that owners or other players who have economic interests influence media content (in Višňovský, Mináriková, Kapec, 2022, 33).

includes critical thinking, moral thinking, and acting. These issues have been identified previously.

According to A. Remišová, education plays a significant role in determining the moral and epistemic level within the media profession. The ethical practice of journalism as a public service is dependent on both professional ethical values and the personal moral values of journalists, including their own morality and moral integrity. Education in ethics has a positive interaction with journalists' morality (Remišová, 2010, 159). It is important for journalists to have a strong foundation in both ethics and logic to enhance their performance. We also believe that education in logic and philosophy positively correlates with the intellectual dispositions of individual journalists. In this context, it can be stated objectively that possessing sufficient knowledge and education has a positive impact on the moral and epistemic performance of media professionals. This was especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it remains crucial for journalists to possess adequate knowledge, competencies, and skills related to the use of digital technologies. Although, as N. Nahida Begun notes, merely completing journalism studies and acquiring technology-related skills does not guarantee a "good journalist" because "it has more to do with the inherent nature of being human" (Nahida Begun, 2014, 8, 9).

In this context, it is evident that knowledge, expertise, and education play a crucial role in the media industry. These factors contribute significantly to the high quality of media performance by shaping the personalities of media professionals. However, despite continuous efforts in Slovakia to improve the situation, there are still flaws in the education and professional training of journalists and media professionals that affect the quality of Slovak media performance. It is important to address these issues to improve the overall quality of media in Slovakia. Unfortunately, As previously noted by experts, the absurd reality of Slovak media is that they often seek young workers without proper journalistic education. It has become common practice to employ individuals without academic qualifications. This preference for lower education or inadequate qualifications is a recurring issue in newsroom (Bachletová, 2014, 164; Lehoczská, 2011, 60; Remišová, 2010, 159; Lovaš, 2021, 375). In the pursuit of economic interests in the media, cheaper labour is often prioritised. Additionally, when Slovak media outlets do employ university students, they are often 'educated' to meet the specific needs of the media (Bachletová, 2014, p. 164). For instance, media professionals may experience a decline in critical thinking, leading them to become what A. Sámelová refers to as the 'Spirits of the Newsroom' – editors, redactors, photographers, documentary makers, archivists,

dramaturgs, directors, and so on – who are trained and routinized, and therefore freed from logic and rationality. According to A. Sámelová, the systematic rationalisation of mass media production (of news, journalistic and documentary nature) is a significant contributor to this issue (Sámelová, 2016b, 322). This blurs not only the necessary critical dimension but also the moral dimension of thinking and complex performance in media professionals.

In order to monitor the quality of the performance of the Slovak media, it is important to assess the dynamic development of media technologies. As noted by A. Olejárová (2019), the Internet has transformed the media environment and its structure⁴. In this context, it can be argued that the ethical application of journalism in media as a service to the public depends on the personal and professional values of journalists, as well as external factors such as commercial, economic, or political conditions, and technological advancements (Remišová, 2010; Sarka, 2015; Suárez Villegas, 2016, 5, 91). However, the media in Slovakia often struggle to adapt to the evolving conditions of the journalistic industry, particularly in regards to multiplatform publishing (Gálik, Vrabec, Gáliková Tolnaiová et al., 2022; Višňovský, Mináriková, Kapec, 2022).

Alternative media are often considered to be in opposition to traditional media due to their open approach to media production, which represents an alternative to the traditionally applied practices (Olejárová, 2019, pp. 119, 122–124). However, it is important to note that they are not solely a result of the increasing prevalence of digital technologies. The reasons for their establishment and operation are also closely linked to the pursuit of independence in the realms of economy, politics, and culture (Lovaš, 2021, p. 379). Currently, alternative media in Slovakia are often viewed as a complement to mainstream media. The main motivation behind the creation of alternative media is to present marginalized topics (Olejárová, 2019, 124; Višňovský, Mináriková, Kapec, 2022, 104–109). New media platforms, including the internet, have provided media professionals with new opportunities and enriched the media landscape. However, they have also introduced certain risks. The use of these platforms has led to a crisis in traditional media production standards⁵. The

⁴ We can spot the impact on the organisational structure of the media. It is an interconnected ecosystem in which traditional and new media operate in parallel and complementary ways. Through the new media or Internet platforms, alternative communication channels have been or are being created, representing thus an extremely wide range of communication structures that, in terms of the organizational principle, is an open system modified by its users (Olejárová, 2019; Višňovský, Mináriková, Kapec, 2022).

⁵ The Print and Digital Council of the Slovak Republic managed to approve a new version of the Journalist's Code of Ethics and updated it to include digital environment cognition, but also

use of these platforms has led to a crisis in traditional media production standards. The influence of these factors on the normativity and deontology of journalism has been significant, leading to concerns about the quality of media products among both the public and professionals.

New media technology has caused a shift in the way Slovak society views traditional media. This has led to questioning the necessity of public service broadcasting or the validity of its concept (Lehoczká, 2012, p. 96). The expanding usage of this new technology, along with the growing influence of alternative media, appears to be contributing to the questioning or loss of authority of traditional Slovak mainstream media. The growing popularity of alternative media is, among other reasons, a reaction to the displacement of 'inappropriate topics' (Sámelová, 2016b, p. 321), opinions, and people with 'improper' views by the Slovak mainstream media. To a great extent, the loss of authority or the current lack of credibility appears to be a natural reaction to their unwillingness to be there for everyone and their readiness to accept only those who agree with their narrative (Lovaš, 2021, 379).

From another perspective, the media audience can be seen as a significant but often overlooked factor that influences the quality and authority of Slovak media. Let us examine the puzzle, as described by A. Sámelová, that burdens liberal society: 'Why do the media increasingly dumb down society with banalities and lie shamelessly?' However, it is also worth considering the opposite question: "How come that readers, listeners and viewers let themselves be dumbed down by more and more of media banalities and lies, how come they do not punish the media for this arbitrariness and shamelessness?" The audience is surely not at the mercy of some mass media sovereign. A. Sámelová identifies the problem not only in the media but also in their audience, who lack a critical perspective towards the media and its performance (Sámelová, 2016b, 322).

Related to the above is the high tolerance for immoral and unethical behaviour among (not only) journalists, which is visible among Slovaks regardless of social hierarchy and manifests itself in indifference to their exposed immoral or unethical acts (Sámelová, Krištof, Belianová, 2021, 48, 49). The lack of critical thinking is evident in Slovakia's overall moral situation. Additionally, the media audience lacks knowledge of their own roles, duties, and responsibilities, including those that arise from media ethics⁶. Regrettably, there is little awareness of audience ethics within Slovak society or the general public. Additionally, a lack of understanding regarding

potential risks resulting from changes in the media environment caused by social networks (Višňovský, Mináriková, Kapec, 2022, 18).

⁶ K etike publika ako súčasti etiky médií napríklad (Donev, 2017).

the role(s) of the media and the concept and value of public service, which appears to persist in Slovak society, can also be considered a contributing factor⁷ (Lehoczká, 2012, 95, 103). As also noted by A. Kaysi, based on more recent research, there is confusion among the media audience in Slovakia about the role media can play in promoting democratic principles and socially cohesive societies (Kaysi, 2021, 20). We agree here with M. Urbaníková and her idea that this is caused by a deficiency in media literacy in the Slovak public (Urbaníková, 2022, 18), despite the fact that there are currently efforts to improve media literacy in Slovakia with the help of media education (Kačínová, 2016; Vrabec, 2017; Gálik, Vrabec, Gáliková Tolnaiová, et al., 2022). This deficiency contributes to the crisis of Slovak mainstream media, particularly the public service media, and undermines their authority in society. Finally, the impact of the public's lifestyle and demands on this crisis cannot be overlooked. According to V. Lehoczká, public service broadcasting has found itself at a dead end in the era of globalisation and hypermodern trends. The original journalistic and informative principles of mass media communication, or the primary position of the producer and distributor of objective, socially significant and relevant topical information, has been shifted in the eyes of the average audience to the category of less significant stimuli, influenced by the very demands of the audience and their consumerist lifestyle, due to the selling of programme content and the environment being regulated or dictated by market interests (Lehoczká, 2011; Lehoczká, 2012, 95, 96). In this context, we can observe the interconnection between the dominant media and cultural logics in Slovakia. These logics prioritize the entertainment function of the media over other functions and do not seem to have a significant issue with banalities presented in media content.

CONCLUSION

During the COVID-19 social crisis, Slovak mainstream media faced challenges in fulfilling their role objectively. This highlighted their persisting weaknesses, which can be identified from various perspectives. The quality of their performance is influenced by several key factors, including their own nature and practices, which have long been shaped by prevailing cultural logics in Slovakia. One of the primary factors that affects media quality is the independence of media institutions. Additionally, the quality of media performance is influenced by media professionals, particularly journalists, who face a persistent crisis in terms of their personalities

⁷ Jej interpretácia sa v minulosti nesprávne posudzovala a ako taká stála za spochybňovaním opodstatnenosti či nutnosti existencie verejnoprávneho vysielania na Slovensku (Lehoczká, 2012, 95, 103).

and education. New media technologies, as well as alternative media, are also significant factors. Development in this field affects the media environment at all levels and directly impacts the quality of media communication. It is important to consider the recipients of the media, the public, as a key factor. In addition to the three factors mentioned above, our lifestyle and lack of media literacy also have a negative impact on the performance of Slovak mainstream media, particularly those that provide public service. All factors contribute to the loss of credibility and authority of the Slovak mainstream media. It is necessary to say the COVID-19 crisis has exposed problems and wrongdoing in the media, particularly in public service media. It has also highlighted the need to find ways to revive or reconstruct their ability to fulfil their roles in society. This crisis provided an opportunity for reflection on the world of media and journalism, including the media themselves (Pitoňáková, 2020; Lovaš, 2021; Perreault, Perreault, 2021; Orlová, Somr, 2021; Gálik, Gáliková Tolnaiová, 2022a). In this context, it is worth considering what form the media should take to be respected, credible, and engaging (Lovaš, 2021, p. 374). We suggest that a more comprehensive and in-depth discussion on this issue should be initiated in Slovakia. However, considering the socio-cultural contexts, the challenge today is to reconstruct the media for the future while taking into account their socio-humanitarian mission within deliberative social processes. It is important to aim for media to regain its authority (Czarnecki, 2018, 12) while considering the new nature and conditions of this mission in Slovak society, and adapting to the new circumstances of the socio-humanitarian mission in the post-Covid digital age. The media should focus on regaining respectability as a bearer or representative of values and dialogue (Lovaš, 2021). As such, their purpose is to support the deliberative potential of society by providing accurate information and promoting rational debate among diverse groups⁸. Media professionals must possess ethical integrity and solid education to be considered competent personalities. Additionally, Slovak media requires a media-literate public with sufficiently developed media competencies.

The desired renaissance or reconstruction of Slovak media and their function depends on several interlinked conditions, paths, and actors due to the complexity of various contexts and influences in society. An appropriate systemic approach includes the media themselves, together with journalists and other media workers, media professionals, government, politicians, educators and also the public. As A. Kaysy pointed out, media development interventions should be performed in

⁸ <https://www.mediadelcom.eu/deliberative-communication-concept/>.

cooperation with civil society, local organizations, and other partners to ensure that each participant can build on the evident successes that are currently emerging (Kaysy, 2021, 20). The renaissance and development of Slovak media and their operations require all partners involved in media communication to have rights, duties, and responsibilities. Ethical responsibility, in particular, needs to be strengthened. It is crucial that media ethos is based on a genuine humanisation of society, rather than just a formal declaration, as noted by H. Pravdová (2017, p. 96).

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