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Theoretical Framework of Alternative Media and Current Slovak Media Environment

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Abstract

The article focuses on the perceptions of alternative media within Slovak media landscape. According to the authors, the recognition of different types of media is an important skill within the set of skills in the field of media literacy. The authors focus on theory of alternative and mainstream media relationship and how it corresponds with the current situation in Slovak media landscape. In theory of alternative media, there are many views on what constitutes an alternative medium. However, a prevailing number of alternative media theorists state that the difference between alternative and mainstream is not clear-cut and that in many cases, the two types of media share some similarities. To reflect this aspect, the term alternative mainstream media was created. In this paper authors focus on three selected Slovak media that are considered alternative. Their features are examined and compared in order to determine whether they reflect the theory of ideal types of alternative media drawn up by Robert Hajek and Nico Carpentier. Based on the examination, two of the selected media are typical examples of alternative media. The third is an unusual example of alternative media as it borrows a lot of features from mainstream media. The authors make the claim that there is a tendency to imitate mainstream's media practices by deliberately striving to gain credibility, popularity, and thus higher readership.

Keywords: alternative media, mainstream media, online, news outlets, Slovakia.

1. Introduction

In the digital age people take in a huge amount of information from variety of sources, far beyond the traditional media. Media literacy is thus an essential set of skills, where the educators put a lot of focus on critical thinking (Fedorov, 2003: 11-14). Critically evaluating media, correctly interpreting media content as well as being able to understand the complex structured world of media are the key goals of media literacy education (Brestovanský, 2010: 16-17). Among important tasks of media literacy education also belongs developing the ability of the audience to analyze media texts of different types and genres (Fedorov, 2019: 244). The orientation in the complex world of media is made difficult by the alternative – mainstream media dichotomy. If one recognizes the features of alternative and mainstream media, it greatly enhances this orientation and thus increases level of their media literacy skills.

However, Slavomír Gálik poses a question whether it is possible to achieve such critical assessment of media and whether the educators themselves are not influenced by the media and culture (Gálik, 2012: 85-88). Recent poll among Slovak teacher stresses importance of such question as well as importance of further media education of teachers as the results show

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questionable choices the teachers would recommend to students as reading materials. Some of the reading sources recommended by teachers belong to alternative media; some are even considered conspiracy media.

Diverse media are central to a healthy democracy as the media represent our politics, our social institutions, our government and ourselves (Kenix, 2011: 1). Today, new technologies are believed to be helpful at decreasing costs and erasing geographic boundaries and thus increasing the availability of media. Yet, there is still skepticism about the degree of representativeness in media (Hamilton, 2000: 358). Moreover, most recent developments in the concentration of media ownership, the strengthening of the mainstream as well as huge hybridization of genres add to the skepticism (Hudíková et al., 2020: 90-124). Of course, the economic background must also be taken into account when defining the mainstream media. This contributes greatly to the standardization and homogenization of media production (Radošinská, 2018: 105). In this context, Zuzana Bučková points to the phenomenon of the mismatch between reality and media reality in the mainstream media (Bučková, 2019: 46).

Alternative media are considered a logical reaction and an answer to these gaps in representation on the media market; contributing to democratic processes. Alternative media have been praised for counter-balancing the hegemony of mainstream media practices, giving voice to the underrepresented and broadening public discussion and debate about a wide range of concerns and issues. However, how really successful and far-reaching their efforts are is sometimes considered debatable. Many alternative projects are short-lived and under-capitalized. Tony Harcup talked about the narrative of alternative ‘failure’ which is based on the fact that alternative media tend to reach significantly smaller audiences than mainstream media (Harcup, 2003: 371).

Moreover, what is even more important is the fact that many alternative media outlets raise questions and concerns for publishing controversial and manipulative content. Media manipulation issues are often linked to fake news, which is not a new phenomenon, but has been strengthened by the advance of Internet (Levitskaya, Fedorov, 2020: 71). Recently in Slovak media, the discourse regarding alternative media has primarily centered on critiquing alternative media. And so the term alternative media has taken on a rather negative connotation and in our paper we try to investigate whether this created notion and the theoretical concepts of alternative media correspond with the current situation of alternative media within Slovak media landscape. The findings are compared to alternative media practices in larger context.

2. Materials and methods

The material for this study are Slovak alternative online news outlets Hlavne Spravy (hlavnespravy.sk), Zem a Vek (zemavek.sk) and InfoVojna (infovojna.sk). Methodology is based on theoretical framework on alternative and mainstream media. More specifically, we use the research conducted by Robert Hajek and Nico Carpentier on alternative media (Hájek, Carpentier, 2015). For the purposes of their own research, they created a set of features of ideal types of alternative media. With the use of qualitative content analysis, categorization and comparative analysis they analyzed three alternative papers. We use the features of ideal types of alternative media proposed by them in analyzing the features of the three alternative outlets. The aim is to establish the alternativeness of the selected media, with the premise being that all studied outlets can be classified as alternative. The methods we use are discourse and comparative analysis as well as qualitative content analysis. Methods of logical analysis are also used, as well as synthesis, classification and generalization.

3. Discussion

In order to fully comprehend and utilize the key scientific theories related to our research topic, it is necessary to examine the definitions and understanding of the terms mainstream and alternative media. In academic papers, even those directly focusing on the mainstream – alternative media dichotomy, the term mainstream media is rarely defined. Part of the reason might be that the term mainstream media is understood as being self-explanatory. On the most general level, mainstream media are understood simply as mass media – “A means of public communication reaching a large audience” (American Heritage Dictionary, 2016). More specifically, it can be seen as *traditional* newspapers, television and other *news* sources that most people *know* about and regard as *reliable* (Collins English Dictionary, 2020). However, with the

number of media outlets and their different formats increasing, the lines between types of media are getting blurry. Therefore, a more detailed definition is needed.

Theoreticians comparing mainstream and alternative media in their studies frequently draw from the descriptions of mainstream media by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman (Atton, 2002; Coyer et al., 2007; Kenix, 2011). In their book *Manufacturing Consent*, they outlined five attributes of mainstream media. First, the ownership of media is held by major corporations with interests and goals similar to power elite elements of society. Second, people with different views, "dissenting voices," are not heard much, and the breadth of debate is limited. Moreover, the official stance and institutional memory prevail and become history. And finally, the people's interest and attention are often diverted away from issues about which they could become concerned (Chomsky, 1988: 1-35).

In *Understanding Alternative Media* Olga Bailey, Bart Cammaerts and Nico Carpentier presented their understanding of the mainstream media which with little variations is akin to the understanding of many alternative media scholars. It features similar points to Chomsky's definition while adding organizational aspect of alternative media creation. They consider mainstream media to be large-scale and geared towards large, homogeneous audiences as well as being state-owned organizations or commercial companies. In their opinion, mainstream media are vertically or hierarchically structured organizations staffed by professionals and are carriers of dominant discourses and representations (Bailey et al., 2008: 6).

Alternative media emerged as a recognized label only several decades ago to refer to a vastly diverse range of media and social movements. As an umbrella term, "it replaced more specific designations such as the 'labor press', 'feminist press', or 'underground media'," as noted by Gibbs and Hamilton in their introduction to *Media History* journal issue (Gibbs, Hamilton, 2001: 117). In their opinion, even though placing these distinct efforts under an umbrella term may appear as downplaying their uniqueness, it is important to see them together, as this emphasizes their collective resistance to increasingly monolithic commercialized media systems and products (Gibbs, Hamilton, 2001). However, such broad definition of alternative media has been criticized. For example, Pickard argues that imposing the master category of 'alternative' onto all the subgroups destroys significant nuances (Pickard, 2007: 12).

Looking for a universally accepted definition of alternative media among scholars is challenging also because of the fact that authors use various modifiers that are frequently used interchangeably with alternative media, such as participatory, citizens, critical and independent. Thus when defining alternative media we have to look at the broad as well as the narrow views at defining them. "Broadly speaking, alternative media counter mainstream representations and assumptions. More specifically, alternative media suggests democratized media production that tends towards the non-commercial, the community based, and the marginalized" (Pickard, 2007: 12-13).

Dowmunt and Coyer in their *Alternative Media Handbook*, also define alternative media as "media forms that are on a smaller scale, more accessible and participatory, and less constrained by bureaucracy or commercial interests than the mainstream media and often in some way in explicit opposition to them" (Coyer et al., 2007: 1). These media are produced by the socially, culturally and politically excluded (Coyer et al., 2007: 5).

In an effort to bring more understanding of the notion of alternative media Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier presented a typology of theories of alternative media. In *Understanding Alternative Media*, they distinguish between four approaches that define alternative media in different ways. The first approach focuses on participation of members of a community in content production and media organization as central for alternative media. The second approach focuses on the notion of the alternative. "This concept introduces a distinction between mainstream and alternative media, in which alternative media are seen as a supplement to mainstream media, or as a counter-hegemonic critique of the mainstream" (Bailey et al., 2008: 15). The fourth approach uses metaphor of the rhizome to highlight the role of alternative media as the crossroads of organizations and movements linked with civil society. Like rhizomes, alternative media tend to cross borders and build linkages between pre-existing gaps (Bailey et al., 2008: 16-28). However, this oft-cited typology was described as interesting but arbitrary by another alternative media theoretician Christian Fuchs, who argued that these four approaches are not based on a theoretical distinction, but arbitrarily (Fuchs, 2010: 181-182).

To define alternative media more specifically, many theoreticians also suggest using additional terminology alongside or instead of alternative. John Downing is one of the scholars who proposed using extra designation to help firm up the definition of alternative media. The extra designation is radical. By radical media he referred to medial, generally small-scale and in many different forms which express an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities and perspectives (Downing, 2001: ix-xi). Chris Atton, another leading scholar in the study of alternative media, also presented a typology of alternative as radical media. He too defines these media with a stress on ideological opposition or challenge to mainstream media (Atton, 2002: 27).

Fuchs considers alternative media to be mass media that challenge the dominant capitalist forms of media production, media structures, content, distribution, and reception. The extra designation he uses when discussing alternative media is critical. Similarly to Downing, he does not see alternative and mainstream as binary. Only in the area of content are alternative media necessarily on the opposite side, as they can also make use of mainstream strategies and structures (Fuchs, 2010: 178).

Clemencia Rodriguez developed the term ‘citizens’ media’ to reject what she perceives is a false dichotomy between mainstream and alternative media. The meaning of the term ‘alternative’ means opposition, in this case opposition to the mainstream. However, not all alternative media work in resistance against mainstream practice. Rodríguez uses the term ‘citizens’ media’ to refer to that alternative, community, or radical media that facilitate, trigger, and maintain processes of citizenship building (Rodríguez, 2008: 1-3).

Mitzi Waltz, the author of ‘Alternative and Activist Media’ stresses that the ‘alternative’ and ‘activist’ do not necessarily mean the same thing. ‘Activist media’ encourage readers to get actively involved in social change. Many but not all ‘activist media’ can also be ‘alternative’. According to Waltz, a broad definition of ‘activist’ can include media that advocate actions which might be described as mainstream. As an example, she uses voting for the politician of your choice or volunteering for charity (Waltz, 2005: 4).

Table 1. Features of ideal types of alternative media

<i>relation to social context</i>	<i>content</i>	<i>organization and funding</i>
Fulfil specific needs of communities Established from bottom up Oppose power structures Question dominant discourses Allow full participation Higher degree of users’ control Public forum for community debates Situated between state and private media, as part of civil society Change social relations	Different criteria for news selection Different attitude towards objectivity and impartiality Express an alternative vision to hegemonic policies and perspectives Politically, socially, culturally radical Present divergent points of view and cultural choices Use wide range of genres Use of humor, language figures for political messages Innovative layout/graphics	Horizontal organization, rhizomatic structure Ad hoc decision making Reject of state and municipal grants Reject of advertising revenues Diverse models of funding (plurality of sources)

Source: Adapted from Hájek, Carpentier, 2015: 377

As this literature review illustrates, the definition of alternative media is not yet unified. Whereas some authors put stress on alternative ways of creating media production, others stress the content which should be in opposition to that of mainstream media. From the aforementioned, it is also clear most authors are reluctant to draw a strict line between mainstream and alternative media. In the empirical part, we will look into three selected alternative media and based on methods of logical analysis, comparative method and hermeneutic interpretation, we will analyze their features in relation to the ideal types of alternative media drawn up by Roman Hájek and Nico Carpentier. Based on the works of Atton and Carpentier, they created a table for their own case study analysis featuring the distinct features of ideal types of alternative and mainstream media related to social context, content, and organization and funding. These are designed to help when deciding about alternativeness of a media outlet.

Hajek and Carpentier focused on three areas, namely the medium's relations to social context, the content of its production and the way the medium is organized and funded (Hájek, Carpentier, 2015: 378).

4. Results

As the examples of alternative media, we selected three digital news outlets: Hlavne Spravy, Zem a Vek and InfoVojna. Hlavne Spravy, whose name means 'the main news', was launched in 2012 by its editor-in-chief Robert Sopko (Iliašovce..., 2012). It has one of the largest audiences of all Slovak alternative digital news outlets. On their website they state to have one million visitors a month (Manifest..., 2020). In 2018, Hlavne Spravy appeared in the Reuters Institute Digital News Report as the fifth most trusted brand by those who have heard of it. This put them above mainstream media outlets such as print daily Pravda, online news website actuality.sk and the leading commercial TV station Markiza (Reuters..., 2018). Hlavne Spravy used the title 'the most trusted online news in Slovakia' on its home page for a year; however, this was criticized as misinterpretation by many, including the author of the particular part of the report (Smith, 2018). Based on the header of the websites home page, Hlavne Spravy is a conservative daily. According to Sopko, their aim is to bring information not reported by what they perceive predominantly liberal mainstream media (Manifest..., 2020).

Another high profile example of Slovak alternative media is Zem a Vek (Earth and Time), digital news outlet which is a newer addition to monthly magazine first published in 2013 (Zoznam..., 2013). They describe themselves as geopolitical and culture magazine without censorship and ads (Zem..., 2020). Even though they currently use advertising on their website. There are a lot of controversies related to the media and its editor-in-chief Tibor Rostas. The most recent one saw Rostas charged with dissemination of extremism in 2019, in connection with an anti-Semitic article published in the magazine (Šéfredaktora..., 2019). Moreover, the largest supermarket chains in Slovakia, Tesco, Billa and Kaufland stopped selling the magazine after a lot of media criticism (Časopis..., 2019). Apart from dissemination of extremist ideas, the outlet is criticized for publishing misinformation, hoaxes and propaganda.

InfoVojna (InfoWar) is a creation of Norbert Lichtner, one of the founders of Slovak alternative radio Slobodny vysielac. He is also a former candidate to European Parliament for ultra-right political party People's Party Our Slovakia. The website was launched in 2015 and the most likely inspiration was American far-right outlet InfoWars founded by well-known conspiracy theorist and far-right radio host Alex Jones. These leanings are reflected in the content of articles provided on the website.

When we look at the first area of Hajek and Carpentier's table, relation to social context, all three selected media profess their mission to be fulfilling particular needs of the community which are not provided by mainstream sources. This is mostly coverage and support of conservative and nationalist views which they consider underrepresented in mainstream media. However, questions of changing social relations, e.g. capitalist system, are not predominant or absent. The issue of opposing dominant, hegemonic perspective is interesting as the current newly-elected Slovak government is made up of representatives from mainly conservative parties and all three alternative outlets identify as conservative. As for participation, none of the selected media present a higher degree of users' control or allow full participation. They all provide a forum for debates; however, it is through the means of regular comment sections also employed nowadays by mainstream media.

The second area within the features of ideal alternative media is content. All three alternative media produce content that could be described as conservative, Christian, nationalist, pro-Russian, euro-sceptic or anti-immigration. Where they differ is form and the level of aggressiveness of their expression. In their style and form, Zem a Vek and InfoVojna are typical examples of alternative media using language figures, humor for political messages as well as less traditional graphic and visual language and hybridized genres. The style and form of Hlavne Spravy mimic that of mainstream media. Starting from the navigation bar, it has typical items of mainstream media such as home, world, economy, breaking news and sports among others. Hlavne Spravy also included an identical count bar related to the coronavirus pandemic.

Unlike the other two outlets, Hlavne Spravy also shows the name of the author of the article. Their sources are visible right below the headline and are mostly the same as those of mainstream media, i.e. Slovak news agencies TASR and SITA. However, they also use Russian sources such as

Sputnik and RT news outlets, which are mainstream media in Russia, but were labelled as media spreading misinformation by western media (Russia's RT..., 2019). Zem a Vek and InfoVojna state their sources at the end of the article, using variety of sources; from mainstream news outlets both domestic and foreign, including tabloids, as well as other like-minded alternative media. While all of the three selected media produce articles every day, Hlavne Spravy produces by far the biggest number in a variety of topics and they also reflect the most recent news stories. As for the traditional journalistic principles, all three outlets were criticized for a lack of objectivity and impartiality which is a typical trait of alternative media. The criticism was directed also at the lack of proof-reading and fact-checking (Goda, 2018).

The third area of the difference between mainstream and alternative media is their organization and funding. Ideally, alternative media are supposed to reject grants and revenues from advertising; however, many alternative outlets are forced to seek funding this way due to existential reasons (Rauch, 2016: 762). Such is the case with our selected media. All three selected outlets ask for donations from their readers and they also use advertising on their websites. Zem a Vek's revenues come from sales of the print magazine. In addition, they also have an e-shop on their website which, apart from the magazine, sells books, audio and accessories with Zem a vek motifs (E-shop, 2020). InfoVojna also has an e-shop selling books, ball caps and t-shirts with nationalist and anti-LGBT motifs among others (InfoVojna..., 2020). Ideally, alternative media organizations are rather small-scale and supposed to have a horizontal organizational structure. The organizations of all three selected media are small-scale. However, in each case, there is an editor-in-chief responsible for running the outlet with the help of a small number of regular writers, which presumes a rather vertical structure. Very little is known about the specifics of their relationship as there are no lists of contributing journalists on the websites and the owners rarely give any information about it in interviews.

From the previous analysis, we can conclude that regarding zemaavek.sk and InfoVojna, their alternativeness is undeniable as they tick almost all the boxes in the table of ideal alternative media features. However, in the case of Hlavne Spravy, it seems that the outlet borrows a lot of their features from mainstream media. In Hajek and Carpentier's research alternative media outlets that claim to be alternative were the object of the research. Analysis of their characteristics revealed that they too have qualities of both mainstream as well as alternative media. This led them to propose the term alternative mainstream media, describing media organizations that are alternative within the mainstream media. However, the authors admitted that proposing the notion of hybrid media and other terms might cause new problems when defining alternative media (Hájek, Carpentier, 2015: 378).

In our opinion, Hlavne Spravy do not qualify despite many similarities with mainstream media. These similarities lie mainly in form and style, while the observance of journalistic principles is lagging behind. Despite the fact that they rely on advertising revenue, many theoreticians of alternative media do not consider this as a decisive determinant excluding them from being alternative. It is rather their provision of critical content that is seen as decisive (Sandoval, 2009: 12). According to this, Hlavne Spravy is an alternative medium as they provide a lot of critical content. They continue providing critical content towards current political leaders who similarly to Hlavne Spravy profess conservative leanings.

5. Conclusion

While the theoreticians of alternative media are keen to stress that the alternative and mainstream media are not binary, the Slovak media scene is currently experiencing an intense dispute between mainstream and alternative media. While the mainstream press is labelling it as a fight against conspiracy theories, hoax news and propaganda, the alternative media speak about their effort to defend the freedom of speech which is threatened by the mainstream media not allowing all the voices to be heard. Public trust in news overall is comparatively low in Slovakia. "This may reflect the unceasing flurry of accusations about fake news and disinformation between 'mainstream' and 'alternative' platforms, fueled by politicians" (Reuters..., 2018).

In 2016, a website named Konšpirátori (konspiratori.sk), meaning conspirators, was set up by the advertising industry together with representatives of mainstream media, academia and publishing houses (Toto..., 2016). Its aim is to help firms and companies avoid damaging their reputation and stop their ads appearing on websites with untruthful, fraudulent, conspiracy or propaganda content (Ochráňte..., 2020). They provide a public database with 185 websites

currently on the black list (Zoznam..., 2020). The same year Konšpirátori website was launched, representatives of Hlavne Spravy and Zem a Vek together with Slobodny vysielac, Medzicas and Dav Dva founded the Association of Independent Media (ANM). According to their statement, they aim to defend the freedom of speech as well as defend each other when attacked by mainstream media, legally, if needed. They also expressed their ambition to give opinions on draft bills related to media (Vznikla..., 2016).

Until recently, all three selected media were included on the black list of Konšpirátori, however, Hlavne Spravy filed a lawsuit and Bratislava II court ordered Konšpirátori to remove the online news outlet from their database (Súd..., 2020). Hlavne Spravy's Sopko called the initiative of Konšpirátori a fight for advertising revenues, saying they are "in a furious economic war" (Manifest..., 2020).

According to a survey conducted by Slovak polling agency Focus in 2019, both Hlavne Spravy and Zem a Vek would be recommended to students by more than a half of teachers (57 and 53 percent respectively). Website InfoVojna would be recommended by 20 per cent of the respondents. In their reports on the poll, which was conducted for People2people project, mainstream media called it an alarming sign (Goda, 2019). From the situation described above, the divide between mainstream and alternative is clear. However, when comparing the typical features of mainstream and alternative media, we can see that Hlavne Spravy takes on a lot of those of mainstream media. According to some analysts, it is the similarities with mainstream media that make Hlavne Spravy so popular. They believe the choice of the name, borrowing features from mainstream media might have been intentional as they bring the notion of trustworthiness to the media (Šnidl, 2016).

Additionally, there is an aspect of Hlavne Spravy that we find interesting and consider it worth a mention. We believe that the popularity of Hlavne Spravy might be also connected to the fact that they provide their audience with a quite large number of news stories every day from various areas. Providing their readers a daily dose of news from home, world, economy or sports might also lead to lessening the need of their audiences to turn to mainstream media for more comprehensive collection of news on daily basis. In general, daily format is not very usual for alternative media. Due to organizational and funding reasons, alternative media produce less articles, therefore a more typical format is weekly. That is why readers typically have to turn to mainstream media for the most current news. However, in Slovakia there are more examples of such alternative media apart from Hlavne Spravy.

This recent tendency can further contribute to confusion among readers and further complicate orientation in complex world of digital media. Based on the results of the analysis, we believe that these tendencies to mimic mainstream media practices and visuals are intentional and are taken to increase the alternative outlet's trustworthiness and thus increase the media's readership. However, this is a rather recent development and requires further attention from researchers. Investigating alternative online media for signs of similar trends in other European countries is necessary. Moreover, these findings need to be further verified through methods of qualitative and quantitative research namely, narrative qualitative method, as well as discourse and comparative analyses.

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