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# THE REGIONALITY OF CHURCH MEDIA AS A MANIFESTATION OF THEIR DOMESTICATION

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## **Abstract**

The study deals with the effect of the technological communication revolution and cultural expansion on regional media. Media regionality and communication process are not studied traditionally from geographical point of view, but rather on holistic and culturological principles. The study pays special attention to Church media that constitute an autonomic media subsystem with a ritual communication model, compatible with Church doctrines. The Church, by means of the Pontifical Commission for Mass Media issues, stipulates Church media policy (for example the pastoral instruction *Communio et progressio*, included in *Inter mirifica* of May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1971); and via Church hierarchy monitors proper application of its doctrines in media communication. The regionality of Church media becomes compatible with the attributes of regional and local media only secondarily. The objective of this study is to highlight the fact that in this new media epoch, regionality takes on a new meaning, determined by new phenomena - particularly by fragmentation of mass media audience as well as global media domestication. Regionality undergoes a metagenesis – from a perception of geographic locality and region it moves closer to the so-called cultural and holistic lines. ‘Local or regional’ is a type of communication rather than locality (interest groups in a role of local audience).

*Keywords:* fragmentation, mass audience, global media domestication, Church media policy, media communication

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## **1. Introduction**

Regional and local media are generally perceived as highly effective mass media; their appeal and effect are derived from the following linear postulate – the closer the media recipients are to the event, the more interested they are in the news about it. At the same time, it is extremely complicated to base the appeal and effectiveness of the regional and local media on insufficient documentation, based on the normative theories and general understanding of the media effect assumptions. Each piece of information is indifferent; it takes on value only in a specific context resulting from the process of editing and

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transferring into the communication system. Each happening or event has the potential to contain both, general as well as provincial interests, or it can retain a completely loose interpretation. On that account, the mere close proximity of the event to the recipients of the journalistic message is not sufficient. Many factors that have the ability to significantly influence the value of information enter the communication process – namely topicality, comprehensibility, objectivity, media system structure and its organization, financial and technical conditions of editing and editorial work, distribution; but also many other factors that significantly determine saturation compatibility of functionality and efficiency of regional and local media [1]. Therefore, the regional communication process should not be studied from the geographical point of view (as is predominant at the present time), but mainly from the holistic and culturological points of view. To that effect, answers should be given to a range of questions which implicate the answers capable of unmasking the authentic status of regional media in a media system. A significant paradox observed in the process of regional media effect evaluation is a considerable asymmetry between normative theories and objective reality. The theory determines how this part of a media field should operate, whereas its regionality is perceived in a geographic sense of the word; the changes of reality brought about by information technologies and new media are being neglected. If we want to avoid preconceptions and erroneous conclusions in the process of studying media regionality, we have to take into account that the technological communication revolution had to have a general influence on the entire media, influencing its regional fragment in particular. Especially, after introducing the internet (which has become the medium of the information epoch), collective mentality and collective structure were changed. These changes have brought about new phenomena; in their context we have to view media regionality in an entirely different context as is possible by the traditional geographic principle.

The study comes with a theoretical analysis of media regionality in the era of information society [2]. Analyzing Church media phenomenon, it reveals precariousness and relativity of the traditional perception of regional or local media concept. (Church media: under this term we understand media in jurisdiction of Catholic Church. They have been analyzed as the media of the majority religion with the longest tradition.)

The practical significance of this study lies in the fact that it brings about new challenges for media typology in general, and for local and regional media typology in particular. At the same time it offers the opportunity to start a discourse about media regionality and its application in media theory and practice.

## **2. The concept of regionality**

Local and regional media typology came into existence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a reflection of period attributes of media systems. In the meantime, however, researchers failed to adequately respond to the dynamic development in the

media world that began in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in connection with information technologies development as well as introduction of new media. This failure was caused by their marginal interest in local and regional issues of mass media communication.

In defiance to that, as Lohisse points out, “*media, as a form of communication, is in essential relationship with collective concepts and social organization of people*” [3]. The introduction of new media, therefore, means the creation of new forms of communication which change collective concepts and the social organization of people. Sociological factors - such as horizontal and structural social mobility and migration, countryside citification, educational mobility and cultural expansion, transport infrastructure, modernization, improvement of communication competences, and multilingualism. (*Horizontal social mobility* – all social movements taking place on one level, causing space or professional shifts. They result in some changes of social positions of individuals but their status in the stratification system is preserved. Horizontal mobility can be illustrated by moving employees from one working place to another in such a way that their office rank and consequently also their placement on a salary scale are not significantly changed. *Structural social mobility* – social movements that result from the changes of social status. This concept expresses dynamics of organized life development that is always related to termination of some and establishment of other social positions. E.g. termination of certain production organizations means also termination of all job positions, and vice versa, establishment of another production organization leads to creation of new job positions. In both cases we can observe certain movements of individuals- the process which can be considered an example of structural mobility. *Countryside citification* – movement of citizens from cities to the country, during which country residences develop the characteristics of a town. This social phenomenon came into existence in the most noticeable way at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Communication Competences* – technological literacy related to new media.)

These factors determine the content of local and regional concepts in such a way that they cause a kind of metagenesis of media regionality. (*Metagenesis* – the etymological meaning of the word is the alternation of generations, taking turns in sexual and asexual reproduction. In the media communication context, we will use the word metagenesis in relation to the change of original form, the way and content of communication.)

This fact is also related to the establishment of new information needs, the needs that were brought about by cultural expansion and led to the mass communication fragmentation. This relationship between media and society is rationalized by McQuail as follows: “*Mass media and society are in continuous mutual interaction and exert influence upon each other (in the same way as culture and society do). Media (as a branch of culture) react to the society demand for information and entertainment, but at the same time they stimulate innovation and contribute to the changes in the socio-cultural climate, which in turn make new claims to communication.*” [4]

Another determinant of the metagenesis of media regionality is virtual reality, the phenomenon that creates a new context as well as a new quality of communication. It is a technological world which allows us to communicate in a new space, the so-called cyberspace. This audio-visual space in the internet revokes three dimensions in the communication process and changes collective mentality. Collective mentality of the information society epoch creates a new social organization which was named by J. Lohisse as a cellular society. Cellular society represents individuals who are physically isolated from social environment, whose social needs are implemented through cyberspace, through which they communicate, work, shop, and carry out their leisure activities.

If in the mass era, the local and regional media were defined by the locality where they were effective, in the era of formless (information) society, local boundaries have lost their former importance [3]. Regional and local media have gained a new attribute through a new phenomenon of multimodality which is manifested for example by traditional media digitalization. Thus, regional and local media entered cyberspace and became a part of virtual reality. They lost their three-dimensionality, space-time continuum, as well as their endemic character.

In particular, we have to point out the process of mass audience fragmentation which in interaction with media initiated cultural expansion. This process can be viewed as a process of mass structuring, caused by new needs and expectations of the audience. There appears a new audience on media stage, the audience that is connected by common interests. Those interests create interest (social) groups, as well as the audience that is identified by specific characteristics, different from those typical for mass communicants. If we will not perceive the etymological meaning of the homogeneity concept in its entirety, we can speak of homogenous audience. This homogeneity is based on common interests, relationships, or affiliation with a particular group or region. Mass audience fragmentation created a cellular media system, characteristic by its autonomic and compatible character. Its autonomic nature lies in the fact that each individual media has its specific function and target group. Its compatibility means that none of the media acts in endemic way; rather it operates as a part of the global media system, which exerts influence over it in a paradigmatic way. Mass audience fragmentation and media extension from three-dimensional space into virtual reality resulted in metagenesis of media regionality. In the information society epoch it is simply unsustainable to perceive regionality as a geographical concept; rather it has to be viewed as a holistic and culturological category.

### **3. Typology of local and regional media**

While considering the novel configuration of regional and local media typology, we have to deal with the following key phenomena – the shift from an analog to a digital coding system, in combination with intensive development of new ways of transmission, virtual reality creation, mass audience fragmentation,

and metagenesis of media regionality. New communication technologies have become the platform on which Canadian communicologist Marshall MacLuhan formulated his vision of a global village [5]. If we accept this vision as the reality of the contemporary world, we can configure the following trichotomous media typology: global media, mass media and connection media.

*Global media* group includes media of general interest, effective in a multicultural and multilingual space, in the international context, and owned by global media organizations.

*Mass media* is a group of general interest media, functioning in a relatively homogenous cultural and linguistic environment within the boundaries of a particular country and owned by the media organization independent of foreign subject influence.

*Connection media* is a group of media that came into existence as a result of mass audience fragmentation based on the *connection to something*. For example, *connection* to the region, *connection* to the locality, *connection* to a particular social group, *connection* to particular interests, connection to a particular type of entertainment, life style, and the like.

#### **4. Church media system**

The specific feature of the church media (as a relatively autonomous media system) is so-called Soviet theory related to the media operation as well as a ritual model of communication. A team of three American research workers formulated four theories of press that have a constitutional character in the media theory. They were based on the normative theory as well as period knowledge and became a principal basis for understanding media effect on the society [6].

The attributes of the Soviet theory:

- Media play the role of a collective agitator, propagandist and an educator, facilitating the process of building communism – *in case of Church media facilitating spreading religious beliefs;*
- Media have to subordinate to the one and only legitimate voice and representative of the working class and the communist party – *in case of the Church media to the Bishop of Rome – the Pope, who is the only representative of God and God's will, to the Church and religious community;*
- positive role of media in the society and the world is promoted, with a strong emphasis on culture, information, economic and social development – *in the case of Church media the emphasis is on spreading the Gospel, Christian moral values and testimonies, as well as on pastoral activities.*

The fundamental document dealing with press, radio and television from the point of view of Church is *Inter mirifica*, the decree, passed by the Second Vatican Council on November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1963. In Articles 2 and 3 it defines a Church – media relationship as follows: “*The Church recognizes that these media, if properly utilized, can be of great service to mankind, since they greatly*

*contribute to men's entertainment and instruction as well as to the spread and support of the Kingdom of God. The Church recognizes, too, that men can employ these media contrary to the plan of the Creator and to their own loss. It is, therefore, an inherent right of the Church to have at its disposal and to employ any of these media insofar as they are necessary or useful for the instruction of Christians and all its efforts for the welfare of souls."* From this doctrine evolves the Church mass media policy as well as other control norms that guide the Church hierarchy, all the way down to the lowest levels of the Church administration, in the process of employing mass media communication. (For example the following doctrines: The future priests' instruction guide regarding the tools of social communications (1986), Criteria of ecumenical and interreligious cooperation in the means of communication (1989), 100 years of cinematography (1995), The ethics in communications (2000), Church and the internet (2002), etc.)

Pontifical Council for Social Communications was established in order to specify 'proper' course of action for bishops and other individuals who are involved in the Church mass media activities. The Council's tasks were stated by John Paul II in the Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus* of June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1988. It incorporates the following symptomatic principles:

- *The Pontifical Council for Social Communications is involved in questions regarding the means of social communication, so that, also by these means, human progress and the message of salvation may benefit secular culture and mores (Art.169, §1).*
- *In carrying out its functions, the Council must proceed in close connection with the Secretariat of State (Art.169, §2).* (Institutionalized administration of the Catholic Church duplicates constituent power of the Church hierarchy. The Pope is at the head of the city-state Vatican, which is the seat of all central institutions of the Catholic Church. *Its State Secretariat* is a parallel of the government office in a civil sector.)
- *The chief task of this Council is to encourage and support in a timely and suitable way the action of the Church and her members in the many forms of social communication. It takes care to see that newspapers and periodicals, as well as films and radio or television broadcasts, are more and more imbued with a human and Christian spirit (Art.170, §1).*
- *With special solicitude the Council looks to Catholic newspapers and periodicals, as well as radio and television stations, that they may truly live up to their nature and function, by transmitting especially the teaching of the Church as it is laid out by the Church's magisterium, and by spreading religious news accurately and faithfully (Art.170, §2).*
- *It fosters relations with Catholic associations active in social communications (Art.170, §3).*
- *It takes steps to make the Christian people aware, especially on the occasion offered by World Communication Day, of the duty of every person to work to ensure that the media are of service to the Church's pastoral mission. (Art.170, §4).*

Pontifical Council for Mass Media coordinates and organizes the Church media activities on a global platform. At the same time, on the particular basis of local churches, it gave Bishops the authority to establish “*national offices for affairs of the press, radio and television with participation of laymen, who are experts in Catholic teaching and mass media issues*” (Inter mirifica, Art.21).

From the Church media system analysis, its organizational features can be noticed - such as the way of its organization, inclusion into the whole, units, systems, management, administration, and the like. Based on these principles the Church media production is implemented in many different forms. The hierarchical units on the parish-diocese-province axis, but also seminaries, monastic rules and orders, or different religious communities, functioning as citizens’ associations or non-profit organizations can act in the capacity of Church media organization.

For example, there are 46 printing media in Church provinces in Slovakia, as well as functional television and radio broadcasting. (Roman Catholic Church administration division: parish-diocese-province is based on the ancient administrative structure of the Roman Empire.) The Conference of Slovak Bishops that organizes Church dignitaries of Western and Eastern Provinces, owns the newspaper *Katolícke noviny*, radio *Lumen* and television *Lux*, all effective within six Provinces. The range of Church media producers is completed with print media belonging to the religious orders or other communities.

Church media financing is symptomatic. The Church, as a whole via local churches, contributes to the financing in two ways:

- It mobilizes media activity of the believers via parishes, by means of recruiting subscribers, listeners and viewers;
- It promotes Church media distribution, by means of spreading it with help of parishes;
- It helps to organize collections to support Church media.

Therefore, even those Church media that do not have the economic value, still survive. Economic value is related to the commodification of symbolic announcements. According to Thomson, commodification is a special kind of ‘appreciation’- that is in two ways. ‘Symbolic appreciation’ is a process of assigning ‘symbolic value’ to symbolic contents. This is the value that the objects have due to the fact that they are to some degree appreciated by individuals – they are either acknowledged, or despised, celebrated or condemned. On the other hand, the ‘economic appreciation’ is the process in which the symbolic announcement is assigned a kind of ‘economic value’ – the value thanks to which they can be the object of trade. Thanks to the economic appreciation, symbolic announcements turn into *commodities* [7].

Media that do not have this support perish soon after their establishment. For example, in Slovakia only 6% of Church media achieve the economic value for their content, the rest of them are subsidized by Church either directly, or by other forms which are determined by their relation to the Church. Pontifical Council for Social Communications is followed by other organizational

structures, and, on that basis, the institution can be identified as a multimedia, multinational organization, operating as a global media company. According to Thompson, multimedia multinational companies *operate globally, and are perceived as regional entities*. Their regionality is manifested in their domesticated global features. Messages, spread by the Church media in local church environments, are not so much an outcome of individual (local) activities (even if it may look like that), rather they are an outcome of the entire Church organization activities as well as its social status.

A specific feature of the Church, in the role of a media - producing organization, is the fact that media production is not its primary function, but it is this very media production that is one of the means as to how the Church carries out its primary functions.

A characteristic feature of the Church media is a ritual (expressional) model of communication [4, p. 82]. Emphasis is put on the inner gratification of communicators and recipients of Church media messages, rather than on their special-purpose usage. The ritual Church communication is using special language expressions, characteristic for religious culture environment. Its goal is a pastoral activity, sharing Christian religious values, Christian faith and feelings of togetherness. Church ritual communication depends upon using associations and symbols which may not be the communicators' choice of expression, rather they are the expressions expected to be used in religious culture.

On practical level of media functioning, the ritual model of Church media communication indicates media functionality and in certain way determines its influence on the audience. Mass communication model makes it possible to identify in what social conditions communication takes place and what is expected from the media.

## **5. Conclusions**

Not everything that seems to be regional is regional. In an information society, the original meaning of media regionality has been changed. Technological communication revolution, cultural expansion and globalization brought about the processes that changed the original character of media and media field. New phenomena, like domestication of global media and mass audience fragmentation determine media existence and indicate new approaches to their study and understanding. At present time, it is not sufficient to assess regional and local media traditionally, from a geographical point of view. They can be identified completely and objectively only when using holistic and culturological approach. For example, if a parish newspaper was traditionally perceived as a local media, from holistic and culturological point of view, it is perceived as a domesticated global media. If county newspapers were typologically assessed as a regional media, by their extension into cyberspace, they became more diffuse and different. They have surpassed the borders of the region and their audience is formed on the principle of its connection to the region rather than local affiliation.



Until now, we were not able to typologically identify, for example, a crossword magazine, school journal or the so-called life style magazine, but metagenesis of media regionality enables us to typologically classify them as *connection media*.

*Connection to something* has become the criterion on which base a new audience is being configured; the audience that has emerged and is still emerging in response to new information needs and new forms of entertainment or, as the case may be, as a consequence of global media domestication.

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