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# SOCIAL MEDIA AUDIENCE'S INFLUENCE ON JOURNALISM

**Peter Murár\***

*University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Faculty of Mass Media Communication, Nám. J. Herdu 2,  
91701 Trnava, Slovak Republic*

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## **Abstract**

Social media changed accepted models of media communication. The clue is possibility of the interaction. There is no longer a one-way communication process where broadcasters and audience are in a complex relation of authority-receivers. In this situation, the audience are likely to influence the editorial board in its activity. This paper finds some possible influence of that and compares the situation in non-Christian and Christian media. It describes partial results of a more complex research focused on the social media's impact on journalism in general.

*Keywords:* social media, audience, feedback, Facebook, journalism

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## **1. Introduction**

There always has been an interaction between media and audience, stronger or weaker, depending on many factors. McQuail defines three types of feedback: a) the feedback initiated by the medium; b) the attempt of certain groups to speak for whole audience; c) spontaneous feedback by the audience [1]. Višňovský and Baláž – among many others – remind the approach in the media studies that says the audience is able to influence the media via opinion leaders [2]. Lehotzká explains the key importance of feedback for the radio. She considers the continuous monitoring of audience's preferences to be the basic assumption to keep (or increase) the position on the market [3]. The method of obtaining feedback determinates the different approach to examining the audience (a structural tradition, a behaviouristic tradition, a socio-cultural tradition) [1, p. 326-330] as well as technology. Letters were replaced by phones, SMS and currently by the Internet. The emergence of Web 2.0 was crucial for obtaining the feedback. It transformed the readers to contributors. The possibility to present your own opinions to a wide mass has definitely changed the paradigm of mass communication. According to Jenkins, there are no more 'end-users' [4]. Žilková pays attention to the fact that each new technology made the chain of reaction shorter and duration of this interaction, as well [5]. The

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\*E-mail: peter.murar@ucm.sk

fundamental change was the emerging social media, especially Facebook and Twitter. Both of them significantly expanded the possibilities of mass behaviour; primarily, by creating the platform for very easy information distribution. Anyone can comment anything just by one click. The feedback space is one of the most important benefits brought by social media. Brečka considers its absence as the main shortcoming of the pre-internet mass communication [6]. Although audience already had some forms of expression (polls, comments, forums...) it was the social media that became acceptable for the mass. The relevancy and usability of feedback depends on a lot of factors. McQuail points out the earlier works of Burns and Gans on gathering the feedback. They disbelieve the helpfulness of surveys initiated by media. Regarding the spontaneous feedback, he thinks it is useful mainly for local media. According to him, abundant feedback may be the certain indicator of popularity of national media [1].

## 2. Method - interviews with journalists

For our research, we have chosen an in-depth semi-structured interview. The main argument for this type was a big flexibility during the interview. As mentioned by Reichel, it is *partially regulated* interview, so the order of questions is not fixed. It is possible to adapt it depending on conditions [7]. Semi-structured interview also makes possible to develop information gathered within interviewing.

Participants have been selected in three stages. We have applied a non-probabilistic sample. In the first stage, we made the list of potential participants according to their position in the media. Subsequently, we selected some people by the supposed probability to pass through several selected requirements. The basic requirement was enough experience with work in media. We wanted to know the opinion of relatively experienced journalists rather than juniors. We suppose at least few-year practise is necessary to getting distance and sober reviewing the influence of audience on the editorial board. We have focused on the journalists, who have been working in media since 2009, the year of Facebook massive acceptance by the Central Europe. We also contemplate their engagement in social (relevant) media: Facebook, Twitter, Linked In, Google Plus and Instagram. We have chosen maximum variation sampling [8]. By this, we selected the following types of participants: editor in chief for dailies, editor for dailies, press photographer, magazine editor, radio speaker, editor in chief/editor in TV news. In the next stage, we contacted them via e-mail or Facebook and did an interview. In the last – third – stage we contacted people from Christian media: television, radio and press, as well. We could not be so strict in these rules in selecting the Christian journalists due their limited count in Slovakia. To increase the number of sample we also contacted Christian journalists from Czech Christian media.

18 from 20 media professionals agreed with the interview. Three of them were subsequently very busy so we did not meet. Therefore, the sample consisted of 14 participants, Christian journalists (4) included. The age range was from 25 to 49, most of them (10) were in their thirties. Ten participants had been working in the media for at least ten years. Except for Christian journalists almost all of them worked at least in two different media.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Interaction between the editorial board and audience

In terms of getting feedback (not only in the media), social media brought changes. Letters and calls have been replaced by the SMS, emails and currently by Facebook and Twitter. Whether they used to have some influence on editorial board is another discussion.

**Table 1.** List of mentioned categories.

Categories	Sub-categories
Media critics (5)	Strong influence on individuality (2)
	Weak influence on individuality (3)
	Strong influence on editorial board (2)
	Weak influence on editorial board (4)
Impulses from social media (6)	Sporadic impulses (4)
	Common impulses (2)
Critics under true name (2)	Irrelevance of anonymity (2)
Determinativeness of feedback (4)	Writing in an emotional surge (1)
	Risk of unjustifiable generalization (1)
	Friends as an indicator of quality (1)
	Tracking the trends for future news direction (3)
Added value of content (3)	Value beyond information as such oneself (2)
	Publishing the partial outputs (1)
Controlling the media by audience (4)	Relevancy and processing the information (2)
	None pressure on quality of content (3)

The most noticeable subject is the critic tone of posts. As participants (5) mention, there are not any constructive opinions. Positive feedback appears much less. One of participants symbolically says about ratio 1:1 000 000. Two participants believe the journalists are enough professional and this type of feedback doesn't affects them. Anyway, some others (3) mention that it is very hard for journalists, because nobody naturally likes negative response to his/her work. One of the participants indicates the situation in tabloids might probably be a better. He thinks the journalists in tabloids somehow automatically reckon that many people will hate theirs work, so they are steeled against critics. Another point of view is the influence of audience on editorial board. That is minimal, although few exceptions exist.

Selecting the subjects based on inputs from Facebook or Twitter is according to participants (4) rare. Tabloids are the only exception, where the processing tweets and posts from Facebook is, on the contrary, everyday matter. One of the participants concedes that some certain hot topics dealing with Facebook appeared in the media. According to him, it was not directly connected to their popularity in social media.

In other words, these topics had not been processed due to their popularity in the social media- they had strong subjects that they *also* appeared in the social media. Revelation of new topics is a similar type of influence. It might seem the social media will be a very strong platform to do so, but, in fact, it is most likely not. One of the participants estimates about 5% of posts. He believes that the most people have a problem to think of, where the media might look at them as individuality: "There were some situations on Facebook, where we opened the discussion about some problem and there were a lot of comments, how big problem it is. But we did not receive any email with concrete experience to quote, when we called for them." He considers that it is much easier and safer to write general phrases than a particular experience or opinion. The results also indicate that there is the one really influence audience on the editorial board: blogs. According to the participants, there are quality blog posts which may captivate both, the audience and media, as well. It may be an inspiration, impulse for next media output. This is the key influence of audience on the medium. The ulterior outcome, but a very interesting one, is a finding that rudeness in the users' expressions is most probably not related to their anonymity. Statements of some (2) participants point out the level of the nickname-based comments on the website has the same level of rudeness as the comments on official Facebook page, where some posters appear with true name and theirs (vulgar) posts are visible for their friends. Our consequential observing of a few media Facebook pages validates this thesis.

Relevancy of gathered feedback was a serious subject. It has its limits and there is a logical requirement on the journalists to know them. One of participants warns against unjustifiable generalization based on Facebook posts. He thinks about these major causes: a) rapid, uncontrolled evolution of the core (continuous tuning (changing) the basic functions and (un)availability of the dates; b) the lack of sample representativeness - Facebook represents only the certain segment of media audience. Remember the case, where the managers of television restored a cancelled programme based just on negative feedback on Facebook. It may arouse a good impression –TV takes the public opinion into the account- but this participant points out as follows: the voice of 'vox populi' may be very unsystematic. It may really limit creating and scheduling some new programmes. He thinks the feedback from social media is acceptable only for observing the trends. Another participant talks about *anecdotic evidence*. It is her opinion that anecdotic evidence could be taken into consideration. She considers the journalists' friendships on Facebook to be a relevant feedback because they may want to publish content just for them. "It is not possible to create marketing strategy based on them, but it definitely takes a bit to take into consideration."

Despite all, these views are not contradictory, they point out the same subject, but in a different way: qualitative and quantitative.

Our research also reveals the trends in content creating. The most important outcome is the fact that the audience (it does not depend on the fact if we talk about social media or internet audience generally) puts continual (positive) pressure on the quality of content. It is being done on two levels. Some of them (2) have noticed the *formal changes*. They speak about the evolving journalistic style, convergence of media and so, and point out that the online audience has taught journalists to create attractive (clickable) headlines. At first, there were the bloggers that started to experiment, in order to raise awareness, with informal style and creative headlines etc. Their top benefits were no restrictions by any official editorial board. The next factor that affected the writing style was tracking and analysing the websites. Journalists had already learnt to write shorter sentences, put more sub-headlines, embed third-party content etc. Social media emphasizes these trends.

Another participant focuses on the quality of content. He says the audience affects journalism by continuously controlling the content. According to him, media know well that they are not able to compete with the speed of publishing information with the crowd on social media. Posting the information is not enough. Audience ask for more. Three participants refer to this fact. Two out of three describe the changes in journalism. The crucial question for every day, every issue is: "What could be an added value for our readers/listeners?" The facts in the articles have to be interesting but correct; there are lots of erudite readers/listeners on every discussion on Facebook, Twitter or the website. They make the journalists to write more responsible, to find the relationships, to create context. One of the participants described the difference between current and old journalism: "We all remember the attacks on WTC. Most of us had seen it in the television. If not so, we have been watched it on the evening news. That was amazing – we could see what happened in New York – almost in real time. If it had happened today, we would have got information – not more quickly, it is impossible – but more complex, by more various ways. They would have complemented each other and made the context richer. If you had had a friend on the Manhattan, you could have contacted him to ask for fresh information, photos, etc." We find a possible relation between these statements and another one from another participant, who speaks about the crisis of television. We dare to think that one of the prime causes of this crisis may be just this strong focusing on content, not on any certain media.

### ***3.2. Differences between Christian and non-Christian media***

The separation of Christian journalists' responses highlights some significant features. Firstly, it is a significant difference between target group of Christian and non-Christian media. According to journalists (3), the target group of the Christian media by far is not so active in social media, so dependence of these media on the social media is not so intensive and solid. The young

Christians on whom Christian media are mainly focused on the Facebook are only a small part of the whole target group. The majority does not use social media too often – if ever. So, the journalists admit (2) the potential failure of Facebook would certainly not be fatal for their medium. This fact also explains the next difference: absence of quality press (3) mentioned by journalists from non-Christian media (2). The target group of Christian media does not expect extra quick posting on wall or tweeting, as well. In the journalists' opinion, producing the content in Christian media is independent from the audience. Generally speaking, the only way the audience of Christian media influences the editorial board – indirectly – is by providing the feedback. The gathered information, however, is considered as a long-term trend-tracking. They do not affect an editorial board in real time.

#### **4. Discussion**

Al-Badayneh defines three stages of human behaviour on the Internet: 1) intention to retrieve information, 2) site visiting, and 3) action [9]. These stages – especially the last one – are noticeable better on the social media than anywhere else. Facebook, Twitter and similar platforms are perfect for making the action (virtually) visible, so they become a basis for the future communication. The communication potential is one of the most frequented features of the social media. Several experts [10, 11] point out the possibility to interact with audience. That is why we are interested in this way of communication: what are its true effects. Statements of our sample implicate, that most of feedback is not constructive. These results are in compliance with Bednář's view on the crowd-mind. He states that they are: a) radicalised, b) unqualified, c) uninformed, d) sceptical [10]. Šmahel agrees that the opinions on the Internet are becoming more decisive, especially for teenagers. According to him, it is related to the fact that the Internet is space without any limits [12]. Wallece thinks the aggression on the Internet is coming from a) the sense of safety due to physical distance and limited impacts b) the anonymity [13]. This aspect of aggression is not so markedly in the Christian media, where the reactions of the audience are not so expressive.

Our results indicate the argument of anonymity to be not so strong (at least in the news commenting) as it is generally understood. The experiences of participants show the level of rudeness in the comments on Facebook and on the website to be very similar. Ondrášik says “[...] some posts can be a necessary feedback to the writing a future articles.” [11]. It turns out that this way of obtaining feedback is not as common as we could expect. The primary reason could be the requirement for some certain level of anonymity (it may handle with delicate information) that Facebook, unlike email or phone, does not provide it. It is just a speculation, so it might be a subject of the future research.

As we mentioned, we can differ two levels of audience influence on editorial-board. Regarding the first, there are more impacts on the mood of editors. Participants agree that this impact really exists, although some of them

think the journalist should be professional and keep distance from that. However, the next level of influence is more interesting: the real impact on the work of editorial-board. Bednář describes this impact as minimal. "Everything that happened is just the illusion of freedom and pluralism. The decisive role is definitely on the editors." [10] Anyway, he admits (it is implied by one of participant, as well) that: „Sometimes we can see a situation where the public opinion has more importance than anything else.” [10] Extreme, but very illustrative is the case of restoring the cancelled programme. Judging by the statement of that participant, it could be determined by the poor knowledge of social media environment. Our results indicate that this view of the problem is particularly pronounced at Christian media and emphasized by a really small percent of their social media followers.

In the less pronounced form, it may be about focusing on more likeable themes. Kasarda sees it as a threat, but admits as follows: the audience might be very lucrative in the headlines. We contribute - in the status updates, as well. "Following the audience may be a double-edged sword. It may be some sociological survey, but, on the other hand, it may lead towards reducing to a few fancy topics." [14] Preferring the easy topics is criticized by McChesney, as well [15]. I think this type of influence could not be simply condemned. Haller notices the merits of journalism that do not obey the audience, but explore, revealing the hidden [16]. Also, in this case a conservative view of the Christian media, the problem is clear. The mentioned evolutions may not be important for them due to: a) the economic independence and b) the natural focus on minority topics. Anyway, conservatism may not be only strength. According to the participants, non-Christian media were able to improve their headlines based on reactions of the social media audience, while the Christian media were not.

According to the results of my earlier research, users mainly appreciate reporting the hot topics in real time. The most re-tweeted and shared posts are the breaking news [17]. On the other hand, it is obvious that the media cannot compete with press agencies or the crowd in the speed delivering of the hottest news. Finally, there is the topic of added value of published content. The statements of participants dealing with evolving the journalism genres are explained in Brečka's and Kasarada's assertion, the using of all shared content, content of third parties etc., it is just looking for some innovative forms of traditional journalistic genres [6, p. 231; 14, p. 87]. Kruml alerts even that using of all innovative forms do not enough keep any leader position at the market. That is the quality of content that matters [18]. Participants agree with him. They indicate these formal changes to be only side effect. What is most relevant is the subject of added value; especially for print, where the service of delivering information is not enough. The core of added value might be creating the context and relationships finding. Šmíd has a similar view [19]. Quality of the content is related to control of media by the audience. That is very strong trend, much stronger than ever. This view is also shared by Bednář [10]. We may see strong (but indirect) influence on the editorial board, except the Christian media. The possibility of prompt feedback puts a pressure on editors to keep the quality

standards (factuality, argumentation...) - or tune them up. The position of the Christian media seems to be different, because its focus on spreading the testimony of life in fidelity to Christ via new technologies, as it is mentioned by Solík et al [20]. It is the main base for the added value – of generating Christian content. It may explain, to a certain extent, the absence of the quality press, or rather the necessity of finding *another* added value. Ignoring this, however, gradually increases the differences between quality of the non-Christian and Christian media, so it would be very useful for Christian media to begin thinking about quality of content today.

## 5. Conclusions and limits

This research documents an influence on the audience on editorial board. Anyway, how I mention further, there are strong differences between Christian and non-Christian media. We can see two levels as follows: direct and indirect. While the direct influence is the most probably really limited, particularly in the Christian media, indirect influence is much stronger. According to the sample, the journalists are largely affected by the audience of social media. Especially in non-Christian media they are aware of the fact that the contemporary audience have many more expectations and – at first - they have definitely decided to follow the quality content, regardless of the brand. It makes them to write in a more interesting way, selecting attractive topics, attempting to in-depth analysis and revealing the relationships. Last, but not least, this is the most probable direction the journalism should go to. Unfortunately, most of these trends are very weak in the Christian media, because they have not enough fans. They are often less than 20 % of the total target group (in Slovakia and Czech Republic), so it is normal that the influence of audience is minimal. On the other hand, this feature is emphasized by conservatism of these media. It may be an advantage (not to succumb the crowd – easier to keep the orientation of the media), but it also limits their progress. It is a major dilemma, not just related to acceptance of new media. It is about the acceptance of a new paradigm: one-way (monologic) model versus two-way model (dialogic). To be focused mainly on the majority based on traditional formats/media or to accept an audience (modern Christians) who is currently not so numerous, but fast growing.

We are aware of the fact that the sample was quite small and geographically-limited, but we did not have an ambition to find any statistically-relevant data, just pointing out some important changes the social media established. It would be useful to verify these finding outs in some future research.

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