
SECRET-KEPT TRUTH AND OFFICIAL LIES

Andrea Koltaiová*

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

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Abstract

Media space offers a place to all opinions. Some of them might be contradictory or they even stand in direct opposition to each other. Nevertheless, precisely the pluralism of opinions and the possibility of their presentation provide space for public discussion. In some cases it is not difficult to distinguish true from false, or misleading; but sometimes the search for truth is much more difficult. One of the phenomena that accomplish part of the information media space is also the conspiracy theory that in majority of cases carries negative connotations. At present, the term is used with pleasure in media battles when different parties try to discredit another/pluralistic opinion/ media.

Keywords: mainstream, alternative medium, conspiracy theory, theory of framing, context

1. Introduction

The communication situation of the millennium allows an individual an open access to the information. Taking into account news information, it can be concluded that there are still more and more publicly/mass published information, views and perspectives. Whether we want it or not, the journalistic information and perspectives shape our views, show the 'path' along which we should walk in terms of opinion-shaping and what we should consider as good or true. The Internet entered the competitive world of media and television and it has changed a lot. The 'old' media obviously compete with free information that is disseminated via the Internet, digital applications, news sites and blogs with much more difficulty. Moreover, the print media, as well as the TV, are facing fierce criticism. Their credibility literally shakes in their foundations and, to varying degrees, there are voices that journalists are not able to be independent and impartial and that the whole journalism has moved away from freedom of expression. It is publicly discussed on manipulation with the information, about the deliberate framing of issues, propaganda, targeted and not just an objective agenda-setting, not to mention the economic and political interconnections [1]. It is publicly discussed on manipulation with the information, about the deliberate framing of issues, propaganda, targeted and not just an objective agenda-setting, not to mention the economic and political interconnections [2]. Manipulation

*E-mail: koldrex@gmail.com

goes so far that sometimes we can hardly (if ever) distinguish truth from falsehood, the objective reality from targeted propaganda. (Let us mention for instance the events in Ukraine, confused situation in Syria, presentation of tense relations between Russia and USA, presentation of the refugee crisis, the collapse of the EU, etc.). This fact is not denied any more even by the scientific elite, whereas they directly and critically point out the manipulation, which is not unknown in the media. When visiting Bonn, a well-known American linguist, philosopher and cognitive scientist N. Chomsky said in an interview for the Mexican daily La Jornada that “*the general population doesn't know what's happening, and it doesn't even know that it doesn't know*” [3].

2. Mainstream vs. alternative

To the ‘traditional’ mainstream pole there comes an alternative that offers a broad spectrum of pluralistic views. An individual being has better choice but at the same time they appear in a rather unclear situation - what to choose, what to believe? On the one hand there is the information offered by the mainstream media that is repeatedly officially presented as objective, tried and tested, and in this context it is perceived by the general public. On the other hand, there is the information of an alternative counterpart, which is often called right by the mainstream media as untrustworthy, misleading, deceptive and manipulative. Economic indicators still speak in favour of the mainstream media. Similarly, Čulík points out the fact that media with a million circulation „*do not have to belong to the rank of 'commercial', but can also be 'alternative', or even in quadrant 'pluralistic'*” [J. Čulík, *Rozdíl mezi mainstreamovými nebo alternativními médii? Podivné* 3.12, 2010, <http://blisty.cz/art/55798.html#sthash.JbeIsBCV.dpuf>]. He is based on the segmentation of media according to a scale defined on the basis of the research of professor E.de Bens [4].

Over the last years we can see the rise of alternative journalism, especially in cyberspace – emerging news-providing portals, online dailies, blogs and pages on social networks focused on dissemination of news. One of the reasons is the flexibility and the speed of the medium, the other one is the low cost. Electronic journalism has many advantages that can be adequately capitalized (to provide readers with a broader context to the report, to refer them to the older information, to additional sources, statistics or other websites, etc.). It is exactly due to that why electronic journalism represents a significant element of competition, significant information source as well as significant readership.

In the context of media studies, the term mainstream may apply directly to the media, may refer to media organizations, as well as the nature of mediated contents. This is a “process of direct influence of the media on the recipient, in which there comes to opinion and value cultivations of their opinions” [5]. The respondents may come from different social and cultural backgrounds. To this cultivation it comes through relatively homogenized and stereotyped information, statements and images. As mentioned by Gerbner [6] although mainstream is dominant, prevailing structure of cultural values, beliefs, habits

and behaviours, it does not represent the total sum of existing cultural values. It is therefore rather a stable and functional mainstream covering a broad range of 'shared' and accepted views. The mainstream journalistic production [7] is based more on the creation of commercially-oriented messages, which should address a wide range of the population.

As their counterpart there are considered the so-called alternative media, also known as non-mainstream, independent, and standing in opposition to the public/dominant ones. As noted by Ch. Atton [8], the terms mainstream and alternative apply to each other similarly as the concepts culture and subculture or counterculture. The alternative offers space for groups of people who 'share' special/different values and norms, not the same as the standards set by the mainstream culture. They reflect non-dominant parts of the flows in the society and create communication and information platforms for various social movements. This is also reflected in the selection of media contents. Currently, an alternative medium is largely perceived as a „communication item that is in terms of political orientation and content structure progressive and explicitly oppositionally defined against specific manifestations of socio-cultural and economic dominance and provides space for the 'voices' and problems that are marginalized by the hegemonic media" [7, p. 149].

2.1. Alternative ≠ conspiratorial

Journalists should provide reputable, verified, well-balanced and objective information. They should not succumb to speculations and spread rumours. Such requirements for journalists are generally embedded in the first points in every journalistic code of ethics [9]. Mainstream remains at tried practices, schemes and it also extends to the agenda-setting - the choice and variety of offered and presented information, contents and ideas, whereas it remains purposefully 'blind' to some issues. The frequently used manipulative practices belong, among other things, withholding of uncomfortable information and disclosure of unverified information. Agenda setting belongs to the widely used manipulative practices. Selection and determination of the order of information are important because the public takes as the most important what is most often presented by the mass media. The most effective psychological strategy is simple relentless repetition that leads to popularity.

Alternative media in turn have the courage (or space?) to open topics, which others do not 'dare'. Therefore, they are often referred to as conspiratorial and their information presented as pending and misleading. By the official media the alternative ones are often referred to as channels of organized and planned dissemination of propaganda. Indeed, their focus and their content may be somewhat radicalized in some cases. According to Atton [8, p. 4] a radical political or cultural content is one of the defining criteria of the alternative media. Alternative media build their strategy on the idea of bringing concealed reports – to be more precise bringing undistorted messages as opposed to the distorted reports in the official (corporate) media. Of course, as the corporate

media are ideologically influenced, then even alternative media cannot be seen as neutral in terms of their worldview. Every report is influenced by the one who carries it. Every word carries its ideological load and nobody can avoid it.

The term conspiracy theory was initially more or less a neutral designation that gradually has acquired a rather pejorative meaning. If any report is marked as conspiratorial, it is thereby automatically made clear that it is regarded as fanciful and unfounded. Very often the term is used as an automatic rejection of the claim. It is also used with pleasure in media battles, when for instance different parties try to discredit another/pluralistic opinion. It cannot be denied that conspiracy theories [10] are often standing on inaccurate or fabricated facts and thus contribute to the information chaos around us. However, there are several instances when it was really confirmed that a conspiracy theory may have had some real basis. The British daily *The Independent* published a list of theories that were later proved to be true [<http://www.ta3.com/clanok/1062785/sest-konspiracnych-teorii-ktore-sa-napokon-ukazali-pravdive.html>]. They included events related to strategically stirred up military conflicts, some operations of intelligence services, as well as secret research of methods of psychological manipulation, or experiments with syphilis.

3. Framing

According to the theory of framing, media content is constructed with the help of schemes, which through selection and highlighting of certain aspects present specific interpretation of the framed content. Framing can be included into a wider ‘family’ of political manipulation models; its roots go back to the research of Cognitive psychology. In their experiment Kahneman and Tversky [11] have demonstrated that different framing had a significant impact on the choice of individuals. Their results have shown that the effects they observed break the fundamental principles of rational choice theory.

Agenda-setting and priming lean upon memory-based models of information processing, which assume that individuals form their positions on the basis of the most accessible positions in the moment of decision-making. There is no consensus on the issue of the definition of the frame and framing; there are several theoretical definitions [12-15]. Media frames are abstract principles that form the structure and organize the media content. What is essential in framing is exactly the emphasis – to make a part of information easy to memorize, more striking and significant. Information in the text can be easily strengthened by e.g. its location, repetition or association with culturally known symbols. Thus, in that way it mediates specific interpretations and understanding by focusing, evaluating and omitting of certain elements. The research of framing is often used in comparative design when comparing media interpretation of the same topic in different countries [16-18] or when comparing ideologically differently biased print within one country [19-23]. This paper focuses on the comparison of two alternative Internet news portals, which define

themselves as the alternatives. We have used the method of presentation of news data and the ways of their framing.

3.1. Comparative analysis of selected news-providing portals

The theory of framing identifies two constitutive aspects of framing – selection and emphasis [13, 14, 24]. In connection with the selection criterion, the answer is more or less clear – all published material passes through editorial selection. We do not have the possibility to take into account the omitted material, therefore in connection with the selection criterion we are interested in thematic richness (number of thematic articles) and the width of the information extent (which countries, topics are focused on). The criterion of emphasis can be understood in the context of framing as a frequency of contexts selections, in which there are individual pieces of information, events and countries (or their representatives) reported. We may also perceive as framing omission or ignoring of certain topics.

We were interested in how the same information was presented and framed in the selected Internet dailies. When choosing a sample for analysis, we decided to examine Internet news portals that are defined as news-providing alternatives. These conditions were met by a number of portals, but we focused on two of them: the daily Denník N (hereinafter DN) and the daily Konzervatívny výber (hereinafter KV). DN is defined as an independent daily which in the words of the editor-in-chief originated as a daily that is: „independent and ready to fight in the favour of the readers who do not want others. It is defined as a daily whose aim is quality writing and opening themes and debates.” The second examined sample was the Internet daily KV. It is defined as a daily focused on the most important information that provides an overview of what is happening and what is said about it. Another reason for the choice was also the fact that the mentioned newspapers see one another as a competitor.

Within the observed portals we concentrated on the offered news information from abroad. The content of the digital version of DN is divided into several sections: Headline, Slovakia, World, Economy, Culture, Comments, Shoots, Science, Sports, Blog, and News. News information can be found in various sections. In the section News there is flesh news that is updated throughout the day. Here, we can also find news from home and abroad, whereas it is divided into separate subgroups, which seems to be somewhat unclear and makes the orientation difficult (for example, if a reader is interested only in reading the information from abroad). Therefore, within the analysis we focused on the section World, which is oriented to the information and news from abroad. The structure of the news portal of KV is a bit less difficult. All the information is divided into following sections: Slovakia, Abroad, Opinions, Christianity, Sports and Interesting. We focused on the section Abroad.

In the comparative analysis, we used the inductive approach in order to reduce the reference material and to extract necessary information for the analysis. The survey sample consisted of 447 headlines of articles and leads (short texts that serve for readers to be briefly informed on the content of the article). Together, in the analysis they served as contextual units. It was possible to assign more than one code to each unit (headline and lead) in the process of analysis. We considered the possibility of assigning of only one content and theme code as too reducing. We constructed the categories in such a way as to take into account the basic principles of framing – selection and emphasizing through the calculation of the presented content and interpretation of the accompanying text. We considered them through thematic and content character as frames of the examined content. The accompanying text provided the frames at this level with expansion context. The reference period was the month of February 2016.

3.1.1. The first phase of comparison

The first phase of comparison was focused on the thematic range of the offered news reports. During the reporting period, in DN in the section World there were published 188 news reports from abroad (about 6 news items a day); KV offered around a third more of them – 259 (about 8–9 news items a day). Under the thematic focus, the majority of the reports were focused on the geopolitical situation in the world; part of the reports fell into the category various. When coding, into this category we included all the information that directly did not concern the geopolitical situation and thus did not fall into the framing of this content. It was for instance accidents, earthquakes, murders, and cultural events, information from the field of Science and technology, curiosities and so on. In this regard we have noticed significant differences. While KV was almost exclusively focused on the geopolitical situation worldwide (94% of articles), DN paid much less attention to these issues (68%); whereas more space was provided for other reports (about 32%). Even within the category Various we noticed significant differences. KV paid attention mostly to topical reports, such as health information (Zika virus), accidents, and natural disasters and so on. (Only 2 reports of the 15 concerned the attractions from the world). On the contrary, DN focused most of these reports on news from the fields of technology and communication technology (45%, 27 out of 60 reports), attractions and personalities (20%), travel, science, astrology, culture or health information. This approach can, on the one hand, be described as an information variety; however on the other hand it can be considered as somewhat counterproductive, because the structure of DN offers several other sections that focus on such content (Science, Economy, Culture, and Sports). We also followed what range of countries has been included into the information extent. The reach of KV was much larger in this context – the dissemination of information from 44 countries worldwide (including 25 European countries); in case of DN only from 30 countries worldwide (including 25 European

countries). The larger half of the information was related to European countries (about 57%). In this regard, both dailies showed the same results.

3.1.2. The second phase of comparison

In the second phase of comparison we worked only with the reports that were related to the geopolitical situation in the world. In this context, the research sample consisted of 128 reports in DN and 244 reports in KV. We were interested not only on the width of the information extent, but also the frequency of information on particular countries (mainly the economic powers USA and Russia, current situation in Syria and migration crisis). The most preferred topic in both newspapers was the issue of the migration crisis. In terms of its frequency, most of space was devoted to this issue (DN 27% of reports, KV 25% of reports). Other frequent topics included information concerning Russia (DN 18%, KV 19%), USA (DN 16%, KV 11%) and Syria (DN 11%, KV 12%). Thus, it can be stated that both dailies devoted to roughly the same topics in terms of the geopolitical situation, though in terms of the amount of reports covering various topics it was definitely KV that offered a broader information space. The difference can also be seen in the interest in individual countries (Russia, USA, and Syria). While DN manifested the greatest interest in the events in the USA, KV paid more attention to Russia. Between the dailies we noticed significant differences also in the contexts and connections, in which these countries were mentioned. In both dailies, Russia was mentioned in particular in relation to the military conflicts in Syria and Ukraine; KV however paid attention to other areas (economy, bombings, national politics, terrorist attack on a Russian plane, international contacts between Russia and some European countries and so on.)

We observed significant differences in the presentation of the USA. Despite the fact that both dailies dedicated to this economic power the same space in percentage (when converted to the number of reports), comparison showed that in this respect DN was noticeably more one-sided. The core of all the information was the US presidential election (15 reports out of 21). KV dedicated the same space to this theme, but reports concerning the presidential election accounted for only about one-third of all the information from the USA (10 reports out of 28). Interestingly, we have also found out that the USA was mentioned in relation to the military conflict in Syria only minimally (in secondary and tertiary contexts), which we regard as somewhat misleading.

Even more striking difference between the two dailies was recorded in reports referring to the UK. In this respect we can claim that the information reach of DN was significantly unilaterally overexposed. Most attention was paid to the issue of possibility of the UK to leave the EU - Brexit (10 reports out of 11). For comparison – this topic was covered with more or less the same space as the military conflict in Syria. We consider as an extremely interesting fact that in DN we saw only one report referring to the ISIS (Islamic State), despite the recency of this issue. On the contrary, KV devoted this issue ample space,

whereas the issue was not processed from the one-side perspective, but it was reported in number of contexts and connections.

3.1.3. The third phase of comparison

In the third phase of comparison we focused on framing of selected countries – on media depiction of Russia and the USA. Out of all text units, we have selected those in which these economic powers were mentioned, either directly or by reference.

We have examined not only the frequency of their occurrence in the headlines and leads, but also contexts and connections, in which they were mentioned. For the needs of comparison we have defined three levels of contexts: the first level – the country as a direct actor (or direct source/originator of the information); the second level – direct connection with another country (where all countries are perceived as equal actors); the third level – providing information from the third side (information given indirectly, through the third side). Even in this case we have come across significant differences between the newspapers. While KV presented both countries in the same way, DN was more one-sidedly oriented. In KV both countries were most frequently mentioned in the context of the first level.

These reports accounted for nearly a half of all reporting information on the given countries (Russia 49%, USA 55%). The context of the second level was rather frequent, as well, while the results were again more or less the same (Russia 40%, USA 35%). The same was true for the context of the third level (Russia 11%, USA 10%). This type of context occurred least often in the reports. Within the context two, Russia was most frequently connected with Syria, USA and Ukraine, and in roughly equal proportions. USA was mostly associated with Russia, Syria and South Korea. DN did not advance to inform in the same well-balanced way. It was also possible to find all three levels of contexts, but their proportion was not the same. News/information relating to the USA was presented almost exclusively in the context of the first level (up to 90% of news, 18 out of 21 reports). Information of the second and third levels in connection with the USA occurred only minimally (context of the second level - 2 reports, context of the third level 1 report). On the contrary, in DN Russia was mentioned particularly in the contexts of the second and third levels, in the same proportion (about 46 % of all information).

The context of the first level occurred only in one report. Paradoxically, it was the information of a less news value – an exhibition in honour of Brezhnev. In the second context, Russia was as for frequency most often associated with Syria and it was in a larger extent. USA was associated most frequently with Russia, but always in connection with the military conflict in Syria. Otherwise, the USA was presented only sporadically in connection with other countries.

3.1.4. The fourth phase of comparison

In the fourth phase of comparison we have explored the way how the mentioned dailies approach to covering the military conflict in Syria. The sample consisted of 42 reports – in DN 14 reports, in KV 28 reports. We took notice in which countries (representatives, organizations and groups) this issue was most frequently associated with. In detail, we were interested in what way there were presented economic powers – USA and Russia – in this context, that is in what frame there were presented – in a positive one (frame A), a negative one (frame B) or a neutral one (frame C). Within the criterion of the frequency of occurrence of information on the events in Syria the results were more or less the same. In both dailies it was the fourth most frequently covered topic. As we have already mentioned, in both dailies Syria occurred in connection with Russia and the government party of Bashar al-Assad. In other points, the dailies went apart. In this issue, KV offered broader and more complete information and paid also attention to such questions, which DN mentioned only marginally, if ever. For instance, in case of an open and escalated conflict between Kurds and Turkey, only KN devoted to providing detail information (direct reference on the conflict was mentioned only 4 times, however they devoted to this issue in broader context). DN mentioned this connection only once. Similarly, KV covered also the opposition side of the conflict – situation with rebels and Islamic State. DN devoted only one reference to this side of - according to us - important and serious side of the presented problem, in which however only opposition pro-government powers were mentioned.

The presentation of the economic powers USA and Russia in connection with the conflict in Syria was different, as well. KN referred to this context in connection with Russia in the explored text units 16 times, with USA 4 times. DN in connection with Russia 8 times, with USA 4 times. After calculating the proportion it was – in case of Russia – the same frequency of occurrence in both newspapers (57%). In relation with the USA the results were different. The USA was mentioned in this context more frequently in DN (28%), while in KV (14%). The results of the comparison showed that KV had a more objective approach to covering the issue. Both economic powers – Russia and USA were presented in a more balanced way, i.e. in positive, negative and neutral contexts. DN was a bit more one-sidedly oriented. It was much more critical, especially to Russia. Presentation of the USA was basically the same.

4. Conclusions

Within the thematic orientation, majority of reports in the explored sections in both news-providing portals was focused on the geopolitical situation, as we had assumed. In comparison, KV proved to be more news-focused (it focused nearly always on the geopolitical situation). DN pays rather lot of attention also to information from other areas. The most preferred topic in the month of February 2016 was the issue of migration crisis in both

newspapers. In overview, both dailies devoted to approximately the same topics, although from the viewpoint of the number of reports covering individual topics, KV was definitely the one to provide broader information space. In this respect, its relation to the information-providing it was more varied and more-sided, it engaged in broader extent of information providing. The difference was also visible in the interest on different countries. While DN was more interested in the situation in the USA, KV paid more attention to Russia. For example, DN put emphasis on the election of the American president, which may be in comparison with other topical and serious events in the world considered as less important. DN put relatively strong emphasis on the issue of Brexit. This topic was from the perspective of frequency of occurrence presented as very important and significant. We consider as very interesting the fact that DN avoided several serious and absolutely topical themes. (Naturally, we took into account only information published in the examined section. We did not include flesh news published in the section News into the comparison.) Between the dailies, we noticed more striking differences in media depiction of Russia and USA. Differences were also in the contexts and connections, in which both countries were mentioned. While KN presented both countries in a similar way, DN was focused on one-side. We devoted in detail to the issue of military conflict in Syria. Within the criterion of frequency of occurrence of information on events, results were very similar in both portals. Again, KV offered in this issue broader and more complete information and also paid attention to such issues, which were only marginally or even completely overlooked by DN. In this regard, KV proved a higher level of balance and objectivity; it took more neutral attitude and gave space to a number of perspectives and versions.

As already mentioned, the theory of framing names two constitutional aspects of framing – selection and emphasis. Despite declared neutrality proclaimed by media, in real practice ‘neutral’ media are increasingly identified with certain side (political, opinion...). Freedom of media communication has according to McQuail [25] a dual character: it should offer a wide range of opinions and at the same time react to a wide range of requirements and needs. Thus, independent media should not be too conform and should be distinguished by manifold opinions and information. In case of necessity, they should be even prepared to “offend opinions of the powerful, express controversial opinions and diverge from conventions and ordinariness “ [25, p. 205]. Diversity and variety can be thus regarded as key terms in connection with freedom of expression in media. The issue of diversity of media content may be judged in connection with various aspects, however in the field of newscasting the point is the spectrum of the processed topics, presented political viewpoints, as well as the same access of all opinions.

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