THE MYTH OF QUALITY MEDIA OR SERIOUSNESS AS A BRAND

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Abstract

The study focuses on the phenomenon of creating myths about seriousness in media. The author operates from the premise that there is a contrived effort to create and strengthen the myth of seriousness in media. The purpose of these efforts is to legitimise an agenda created by activists among the ranks of journalists. At the same time, the relationships between media and political entities are identified, and are deemed the result of mutually beneficial, largely economic relations. The serious trait in media is considered good brand marketing in this regard. A strong connection between media and political entities is largely the result of the pragmatism exercised by political entities and the opinions and party affiliations of activist journalists working in media. Various other socio-cultural factors influencing the behaviour of media and journalists within the era of the radical commercialisation of society are also identified. They are conceptualised as the determinants of the legitimisation of tabloidization, biases, partiality and the manipulation of facts in media production and as a source of media and political activism among journalists.

Keywords: serious media, brand, political entities, political agenda, media activism

1. Introduction

Conceptualising the term myth within analysis of the current state of journalism and media production may at first appear unreasonable or provocative. According to media theorists, journalists should provide the most faithful representation of affairs, events and situations as they happened. They should not create false, untrue or deformed images and disseminate them as myths. They consider impartiality to be an integral part of a journalist's ethos, as a kind of ironclad ethical standard forming the foundation on which they build their modus operandi. According to Remišová, journalists should serve the public interest by reporting the truth, even when such truth does not correspond to their personal convictions [1]. In the context of the basic mission of journalism and measurement of its quality, many media are classified as serious, objective and trustworthy. However, could it be that this is the creation of a

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myth used to serve purely promotional purposes? Observations of the current state of journalistic work as reflected in many media outlets and as analysed in numerous studies lead to this question. W.R. McChesney's analysis in *The Problem of Journalism* [2] is one of the most relevant and blunt.

A myth in a cultural and anthropological understanding is interpreted as an important connection between the past and the present. It functions as a kind of collective memory and functions as a source of answers to basic ontological and gnoseological issues or a source of answers related to the postulated basic values of that society. Their important role in society is one of the important theoretical bases identified by Lévi-Strauss' research into myths. It is the legitimation of the system of ideas and life practices [3]. Barthes defines a myth from a semiotic perspective, conceptualising it in media production. In his opinion, a myth is subject to the powers of discourse as it is a form of expression and is applicable to everything because our universe provides an unlimited number of different options [4]. A myth may therefore be legitimised in the communication process as a dominant ideology with its own value system. Myths in current media practice may be examined in terms of the interests of the media themselves. They quite intentionally spread a system of ideas that are intended to convince recipients of their professionalism, objectivity and credibility. They promote their own perception of the truth as the only possible reflection of reality and thereby attempt to legitimise and ethically define their media brand. These visions of the truth indeed are sold by periodicals and radio and television stations or Internet-based media as serious, dedicated media reflections of reality. The naturalisation of the concept of creating the myth of seriousness in media is based on building the impression that they provide the one and only true reflection of reality based on causal relations. The cause in this case may be demand from recipients for true information and the result in this case should be the modus operandi of objective journalists in serious media outlets. Is this really the case? Can creators be objective and media serious in the modern world of hard commercialisation and the geopolitical interests of the powers that be and corporations? The questions that form the basis of research discourse in media studies therefore emerge in contemporary critical reflection on the actions of media and the implementation of policies and political power. For instance: Have we reached a phase where the media no longer check political power, but rather they defend them limitlessly, for money or simply based on conviction? Are they impartial and bipartisan, or have they become the mouthpieces of affiliated or ideologically-aligned political parties or movements? Is political activism practised by media in conflict with their basic ethos to freely, impartially and objectively inform?

These facts and questions lead the formulation of a premise according to which there is a contrived effort to create and strengthen myths of seriousness in media. The purpose of these efforts is to legitimise the agenda created by political activists among the ranks of media producers, i.e. journalists. The following assumptions are made on this basis:

- the myth of serious media is established in highly commercialised, secularised, narcissistic and hedonistic Western-type societies;
- relationships between media and political entities are the result of the creation of mutually beneficial, largely economic relations;
- good relations between media and political entities are built on a foundation of the viewpoints and party affiliations of media activists - professionals, journalists/media producers active in media outlets.

2. Socio-cultural factors, media and commercialisation

Critical reflection on the current state of journalism has a broader dimension reaching into media culture overall and penetrating deeply into various socio-cultural spheres. In the second half of the previous century, tendencies began to be formed that were then significantly amplified in the post-millennial years. Their nature and impact have had a significant influence, especially on the mental atmosphere of cultures existing in Huntington's Western Euro-Atlantic civilisation [5]. A typical characteristic is the 'anthropological mutation' of a person showing a strong affiliation, or nearly slavish love, for one's own body, their person, which results in the alienation of others [6]. The hedonistic mentality of capitalism, manifested through extreme individualism, banalization and trivialisation, as well as flexibility, hedonism and the anarchy of the individual, is created. Bell defined the parameters of a society accepting of consumption-based hedonism in the 1960s when he observed that the logic of understanding the market and economy began to create a hedonistic lifestyle. The idea of the immediate satisfaction of all types of needs is the dominant trait [7]. Narcissism, in the hedonistic creation of mankind, becomes a metaphor for existence [8]. The secularisation of society and its de-Christianization reached a climax in the second half of the 20th century when we bore witness to spiritual chaos. Manifestations included mysterious and often highly dangerous sects, superficial acceptance of Eastern religions, engagement in occultism, New Age movements, consultation with fortune tellers and witches, a fascination with UFOs, paranormal phenomena, astrology, amulets and enthusiasm for political extremism [9]. People found themselves in an atmosphere of unusual expectations. They started rejoicing in different rituals, games, mockery, vulgarism, and expressed a preference for sexual pleasure, and even obscenity. The boundary between serious and comical was lost and people were drawn into a search for excitement, entertainment and into the realm of commercialised culture [10]. Post-modernity and its cultural paradigm offer humanity a commodified, hybrid and personified culture, wiping out differences between media and genres, and questioning universal humanist values. Characteristics include plurality, chaos, cultural relativism and historical meta narratives. Development, order and a systemic nature, etc. have been gradually replaced in theoretical and artistic reflection with "other principles, previously considered in the minority and on the fringe, coming to the fore, such as discontinuity, chaos, paradox, asymmetry and nonsense" [11].

The post-modern way of reasoning and creation has also influenced media culture. Postman does not see the problem in media production in that post-modern media offer entertaining topics; rather it is the fact that they transform any theme, tragic, catastrophic, political or otherwise, into 'entertainment' [12]. Hallin and Mancini posit that priority in media after the year 2000 shifted away from the dissemination of humanistic ideas and towards the production of entertainment and information that sold well to the consuming public [13]. In a society with this type of mental outlook, media are forced to cope in the hard, competitive struggle to attract recipients. Entertaining formats and genres and entertainment implicitly present in a broad spectrum of media content have proven successful in such competition. According to Lipovetsky, commercial media and advertising logic was thereby created. Media production is overcrowded with spectacular practices and advertising. Films are shot based on marketing surveys, songs are recorded by individual seasons, books are written to order and the hypermedia coverage of stars has infiltrated the entire culture [6]. The essence of media entertainment is based on an escape from reality, into an imaginary world, which often takes the form of a variety of media simulations. These, in addition to a temporary escape from everyday reality and the relaxing effect they have, may lead to a loss of interest among individuals in relevant social issues or political events and permit political propaganda to operate effectively. According to Kunczik, the phenomenon of media escapism guarantees the stability of society as it gives individuals a certain form of escape from the oppressive reality of their surroundings into a dream world [14]. However, this may also be a concerted effort to manipulate the public [15]. People engage in trivial stories while escaping from the need to reflect on social and political realities for what they are.

Media creators have a tremendous impact on how a society behaves and its opinions because its symbolic power creates public discourse. They direct how people think by preoccupying them and influencing their views. This is the traditional and legitimate role of journalism. Survival practices and the actions of contemporary media demonstrate that their mission, seriousness and responsibility are destroyed by their own commercial nature. The entertainment-hungry public is formed under the influence of the socio-cultural situation. However, the same public becomes dull with respect to real politics. Media also eliminate public debate in which all voices would be heard under the same conditions. From this aspect, it is possible to agree with Habermas's criticism of the effects of media and politics. He highlights a depoliticised culture, the absence of critical discussion, the trivialisation of questions in the public interest and the theatricalization of politicians and political power [16]. Journalistic texts have become another commercial product in a steadily growing media market oversaturated with information [17]. Economic interests have become a major characteristic of media and one that forms a predisposition for relationships with political entities [17]. The influence of various interests is expressed in a preference for specific topics and in tabling a diverse agenda. Various subjects can be identified as being behind such agenda as they "need to obtain or

maintain influence over media for political, entrepreneurial or other purposes" [18]. According to Prokop, large political parties especially have the capital needed to purchase space and people in media. This is an effective and simple way to promote their agenda or selected policies into individual media and keep them at the centre of their target audience's interest [19]. Prokop's arguments highlight a very subtle threshold between buying and selling an agenda, while the former indicates potential corrupt conduct among media and journalists. This plays out within the plane of direct corruption, i.e. compensation for work, and among media and various groups who create favourable business for themselves based on mutually beneficial agreements. Media practice in Slovakia shows that seriousness for numerous media who represent themselves externally in this way is little more than a trademark. They hide behind various adjectives that connotate seriousness. Examples include the *Sme* daily and its online version, which emphasises seriousness by using phrases like the 'most read' and 'most trustworthy', the *Dennik N* daily calls itself 'independent' news, the *Zem a vek* monthly periodical operates using the slogan of 'an independent print medium'. The moderators on the news programmes of commercial television stations also throw out various superlatives, including the most trusted, the most watched and others. The intentional over-exposure of these superlatives speaks to the evidence of differences in analysis of journalistic expressions. Some results of note can be found, for instance, in the content analysis of journalistic articles created by students at the Faculty of Mass Media Communications at the University of St. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava. They were published in various editions of the faculty's Media Literacy Student Magazine research periodical. Mojta's analysis called *Novodobá mystifikácia v masmédiách* [20] and which deals with the processes involved in the creation of media myths about their mission in society is also noteworthy. Another, equally thorny issue is the phenomena of the globalisation and the rise of media oligarchies because of the deregulation of the market in the 1970s, mergers and the expanding ownership of media companies. It is feasible to expect that media owned by large financial groups in Slovakia (Penta or J&T) or politicians active in Central Europe (Berlusconi, Rusko, Babiš and others) are just the visible tip of the iceberg. Behind it is the strong trend of financial oligarchs and the dominant political forces exerting control over media.

3. Myth of serious media and the pragmatism of political power

It should be noted that the term serious media is based on typological concepts seeking to bring about order in terms of terminology. Print media for the elite, according to Vojtek, is usually referred to as periodicals published for the educated class within theoretical reflection. They are defined for people who have taken up decisive positions in all social spheres, including politics, economics and culture. Periodicals of this kind are to provide serious information to educated members of society on important domestic and international affairs and events. "Despite this, printed media for the masses

represent periodicals published for a broad swath of society seeking to fulfil a recreational and regenerative mission by providing curiosities and various sensations" [21]. The division between elite and tabloid media in theoretical practice remains employed to the present day, even though a clear trend, specifically the tabloidization of media, is evident within reflections on media development tendencies over the last twenty years, a phenomenon which includes periodicals. Tušer notes the growth in the public of tabloid periodical titles and significant content and format changes in existing, so-called serious periodicals [22]. This is the result of the overall socio-cultural situation, the competition for recipients, and, as Radošinská points how, the highly sophisticated blending of industry and entertainment of global proportions that operates "with a highly organised and sophisticated system of production mechanisms" [23]. It has also been empirically proven that production strategies are applied in new journalism and influence the psychology of recipients, their desires and aspirations, including their attitudes and evaluative judgements [24]. Within the context of changing approaches and practices, McChesney identifies some typical examples that may be observed in media practices. They include the corruption of journalists, the degradation of investigative journalism, the degeneration of political news reporting, a clear preference towards the lives and attitudes of different celebrities, their intimacies, scandals and more [2].

It is also undisputed that the current political and media system has created a mutually convenient environment for individual elitist structures. This extends from those who inform the public, i.e. the media and their symbolic power, to those who rule, legislative and executive power, political parties, corporations and other interest groups. They have created a very pragmatic relationship between themselves based on mutually beneficial collaboration and coexistence. Their goal is to obtain and maintain dominant power and economic standing in the given society. It is the most efficient method for convincing the public of the correctness and necessity of any decision and to block changes to the social system and socio-economic platform. The generation of consent among the public with decisions made by the dominant structures and the given political, economic and legal situation has proven to be a stabilising means in every society. Chomsky considers the generation of consent to be primarily carried out via the media. They effectively promote a culture of consumption that dulls the senses of recipients to social and political issues and, at the same time, spreads an atmosphere of fear of an external enemy. An atmosphere of fear for one's life and social certainty is a good reason to agree with executive decisions that contradict the ideas of humanism [25]. Such a survival strategy among the power-wielding elites is nothing new in the modern age. Moreover, Williams says that survival makes it in the interests of every ruling entity to identify "ways to implant the right ideas into those over which they rule" [26].

These aspects indicate that cultivating the myth of serious media has an ideological, economic, political and cultural background. The labelling of media with attributes connoting seriousness is ultimately the result of an effort to manufacture a trusted marketable brand on the media market. The brand of a

show, a publication, etc. aids in the generation of consent among the public to published content. Recipients build a positive relationship to the brand based on seriousness and credibility. The myth of serious media does run into a hard reality, and that is media practices. The publishing practices of media and journalists in Slovakia and abroad are proof of this. Examples include corrupt conduct on the part of journalists, their buying off or payment by different interest groups to defend their interests or damage the competition, while offering various benefits. The outcomes of such conduct may result a loss of news independence and objectivity, its tabloidization, biases, partiality, manipulation of the facts and the political activism of journalists themselves, and so on.

Chmelár writes about one of the first corruption scandals after 1989. He notes that the then Slovak Democratic Coalition party (SDK) used a hired PR agency to pay off journalists in the build-up to parliamentary elections. A total of 19 journalists were contacted with an offer of 10,000 Slovak koruna per month to write about this political entity in a positive light. Three of the journalists who received offers published them, but the then leader of the opposition, Mikuláš Dzurinda, refuted the story and a portion of the public considered it an effort by the opposition leader to discredit then Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar. Chmelár focuses primarily on mainstream media in Slovakia in his criticism of proven corrupt practices. A prime example of the corruption of journalists was the offer of a free ski trip in the Austrian Alps in the spring of 2007. The insurance company Allianz paid for eleven journalists from mainstream media, including STV, TV Markíza, TV JOJ and TA3 television stations, Pravda, SME and Hospodárske noviny dailies and the Trend weekly periodical, to go on this trip. It is significant that the selected journalists were intentionally targeted. They focused on pension reforms and Allianz is one of the largest pension savings administration companies [27].

Corrupt practices under the banner of serious media have another form as well. Violations of the principle of impartiality and the tabloidization of news genres have been elevated to the modus operandi of many journalists. Failure to observe the principles of depersonalisation, critical separation, reality and objectivity, the so-called traditional criteria of journalistic practice in the production of media content legitimises the new era of journalism in the post-millennium era. Post-democratic and post-journalistic tendencies are very pronounced in them as well. According to Hudíková, a fundamental change in the formation of the professionalism of journalists has occurred in addition to readable manipulation in news and publications. Media lobbying, according to Jirák and Köpplová may be behind this; such lobbying involves the implementation of a political decision by an affiliated publisher, advertiser or any related interest groups. It may involve media activism, or efforts to direct political developments in a specific direction that is close to people in the media [18].

The term media activist is currently used to classify journalists who clearly engage in efforts in favour of specific political parties or certain platforms of opinion. Often this is more than simple defence of programmes and ideological themes; it may also involve the targeted and spiteful scandalisation of the proponents of other attitudes and opinions. It should be noted that activism in journalism is far from a new phenomenon. It has been a specific type of journalistic production since its beginnings. One example is in the former Communist regime in Czechoslovakia, in which it was perceived as a term of party involvement. "The editors of Marxist-Leninist journalism were never considered to be literary or professional journalists; rather they were party officials performing their party work in revolutionary proletarian journalism." [28] The term party involvement in Slovakia became taboo after the fall of communism in 1989. However, engaging in the defence of specific values and programmes of individual political parties and streams of thought was already established as a significant feature of journalism and in broader media production. Two strong journalistic platforms emerged from the 1990s. The first defended national, Christian and social values while the other platform preferred neo-liberal ideas and the projects of globalisation and multiculturalism. These bipolar views have not changed significantly, though the strengthening of the oligarchizing and the globalization of the media scene is now clear in the quantitative predominance of the second, neo-liberal platform.

The fact that media makers in both platforms endeavour to determine a preferential framework of topics has been proven. They determine which questions, in what form and in what responses and evaluations, receive priority, craft the structure of these messages, choose appropriate arguments, take up positions of judgement, etc. They create the space needed to communicate the contents of these messages to target and potential groups of recipients. It must be emphasised that media activism to the benefit of certain political entities is not a phenomenon restricted to journalism in Slovakia or its former regime. It also is not a significant trait of new media, especially social networks, on which the crafting of diverse communication strategies defending the same platforms of opinion can be observed. Pariser examines the effects of the creation of such filter bubbles in the context of news media and social networks and the "ghetto of thought" [29]. The activism of well-known mainstream media was clearly on display in one of the most followed presidential campaigns in the USA in 2016. It was marked by intensive efforts on the part of media to scandalise their opponent and unilateral critic, Donald Trump. Naturally, the criticisms of the candidate aligned with the views and opinions of his opponent, Hillary Clinton, and ideologically affiliated mainstream media such as CNN, the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times and others. Despite stinging criticisms from the strong, so-called mainstream media, the most frequent target of their attempts to scandalise, Donald Trump, won the election. At a press conference attended by around 40 representatives of the leading news stations and newspapers, he repeated the following several times: "We're in a room of liars, the deceitful, dishonest media who got it all wrong" [T. Lébr, *Trump se*

opřel do médií. Bylo to jako popravčí četa, řekl účastník schůzky, http://zpravy.idnes.cz/trump-novinari-jednani-bily-dum-dn4].

4. Conclusions

A society formed by strong secularisation and the cult of entertainment is exposed to 'curved' mirrors defined by the media. Labelling media with the tag of 'serious' considering the facts provided above confirms that this process involves the creation and nurturing of a myth and the intentional creation of positive relationships to media brands. Various adjectives are used in media practice to connote seriousness, such as 'most-read', 'independent', etc. Media tries to use these adjectives to convince the public of their credibility and increase or maintain their social and moral credit. The myth of serious media in this case is legitimised in the communication process as the dominant ideology offering a certain sum of values. However, the conclusion can be made that just such a situation is agreeable to different interest groups and pragmatically-thinking political entities seeking to gain or maintain executive power. Labelling media using different superlatives is an attempt to create a brand that can promote a suitable political agenda and the representatives of political parties to potential voters. The fact that journalists (see media activism) and editors (see media lobbying) internally identify with the information from political entities is the first prerequisite for the success of the media agenda of political parties. The current rise in criticism of activism-focused media is reflective of this. According to Gnezdilova, the goal of these discursive manipulative practices is to get the public to align with the published truths [30]. This perspective points out the absence of critical assessment of published content by the general public. Petranová reflects on this situation and identifies the need to teach critical thinking skills to recipients [31]. So far, this has proven to be the only possible way out of the vicious circle of media that legitimises tabloidization, biases, partiality and the manipulation of the facts and the political activism of journalists as a modus operandi. The increasingly prevalent phenomenon of media activism serves as confirmation of the premise according to which the myth of serious media is artificially created and reinforced. The intention is to legitimise and promote content created by media activists in the spirit of the agenda of affiliated political entities.

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