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## Media Manipulation And Propaganda In The Post-Truth Era

### ABSTRACT

The birth of the post-truth era, i.e. the advent of alternative media and internet social networks, has brought along a great deal of demagoguery, nonsense, lies, hoaxes, disinformation (a trendier term being 'fake news') and conspiracy theories, with propaganda and manipulation being the key features here. Dissemination of disinformation and its effects on individuals, society and politics are among the most debated topics of our day, although, frankly, it is in fact a very old phenomenon. The advent of digital media has brought, apart from other things, a decline of public trust in traditional (mainstream) media, and conversely a boom in alternative information sources. Meanwhile, it is not entirely clear what the term *alternative* with respect to mass media should actually mean. Perhaps free media? Independent media? Attempts to define alternative media against the background of mainstream media contain quite a few options to grasp the *alternateness*. In our contribution we endeavour to find the causes of the strongly negative connotations surrounding the term alternative media. This term is not infrequently linked to an unprecedented rise of media with disinformation and conspiracy agenda. Nevertheless, we point out why it perhaps should be more appropriate to grasp this term in a more neutral way, not only in academia, considering that such sources in many cases provide scope for different interpretation of the dominant ideology in society and information disseminated under its aegis.

### KEY WORDS

Media manipulation. Propaganda. Post-truth era. Alternative media. Mainstream media. Ideological truth plays.

# 1. Introduction

Digital media are becoming ever more dominant in the present post-television era, with media contents, their effects, systems and audiences being adjusted to this fact. The new media are being discussed by media theorists as part of the digital revolution and the onset of the digital age. When it comes to preferences of online audiences, the most important determining factor is their desire of having democratic relations with content producers. Debates of both academia and the general public on the so-called new (digital, network) media make it evident that a dramatic transformation of society and a shift in thinking catalysed by digital technology is underway. The discourse of media studies features ever more frequently individual elements of the post-truth era, such as an unhinged spread of hoaxes, misinformation and conspiracy theories. Techniques of media manipulation in the digital age are taking on new forms, which have now become the subject of intense scientific research by media theorists, sociologists, psychologists, political scientists and, last but not least, culturologists, semioticians and linguists. Individual methods and techniques of manipulation and propaganda on the internet and social networks have their specifics and we will address them in this paper. We believe that it will be difficult to grasp these phenomena properly, including in terms of methodology, without tracing their actual roots.

Without going into much detail about specific forms, tools and techniques, we will outline a broader context immediately related to post-truth that needs due attention. We maintain that it is important to understand in the broadest possible sense how the media work in the post-truth era – and the closely related issues of truth and truthfulness –, as well as the somewhat lax and inaccurate use of the term ‘alternative media’ in Slovak media discourse.

## 2. Methodology of research

When discussing the post-truth era, we consider it important to define our research strategy. Our study has a theoretical-empirical character and in addition to a critical reflection on propaganda and media manipulation in the post-truth era, it also outlines some secondary problems, including the need to develop media literacy and critical thinking vis-à-vis information overload.

In the introductory section, we acquaint the reader with the key conceptual apparatus related to propaganda and media manipulation.

In the following part of the study, we chose description as one of the fundamental research methods. Among other things, it can help us in the process of identifying specific phenomena related to the post-truth era. Our point of departure is an opinion embedment, within which we use the method of comparison to deal with individual issues related to the rise of digital media and alternative information sources.

There is no consensus in the professional and general public on alternative media, so we believe that it was necessary to evaluate their essence impartially and without bias. A comparison of views held by media theorists serves as a basic template for a closer examination of the phenomenon of alternative media. When it comes to research of these media, we use analysis to define the quality of the term ‘alternative media’, as well as their possible coexistence with mainstream media (which is rather problematic in the Slovak media environment, however). In Slovakia, we mostly see mutual rejection, aversion and conflicts between these two types of media. We also noticed the fact that alternative media are automatically labelled as conspiracy and disinformation outlets, and they are thus considered illegitimate by the mainstream media and most of the general public.

### 3. Postmodern Variants of Media Manipulation in Post-truth Era

The birth of the post-truth era, i.e. the advent of alternative media and social networks, has brought along a great deal of demagoguery, nonsense, lies, hoaxes, disinformation<sup>1</sup> (a trendier term being ‘fake news’) and conspiracy theories, with propaganda and manipulation being the key features here. Dissemination of disinformation and its effects on individuals, society and politics are among the most debated topics of our day, although, frankly, it is in fact a very old phenomenon. Propaganda, as a set of desired and deliberate actions towards others with the aim to subordinate them to the agent and/or their idea, is perhaps as old as humankind, as it forms part of communication as such. It is not possible to define the term ‘propaganda’ exactly enough in a single sentence or two. Although there are currently some widely accepted definitions, none has been accepted as universal.

The Dictionary of Media Communication defines propaganda as a form of persuasive communication, featuring „*deliberate and systematic efforts to mould ideas, influence and steer feelings, wills, attitudes, opinions and behaviours in order to achieve a response that would be consistent with the propagandist’s goals and needs.*“<sup>2</sup> The meaning of the word ‘propaganda’ has largely ceased to be neutral, and it has instead become rather pejorative (in order to label half-truths, lies, defamation etc.). From the etymological point of view, however, ‘propaganda’ comes from the quite neutral Latin verb ‘propagare’, meaning to ‘spread’ or ‘propagate’ ideas and opinions.

Nonetheless, most current definitions depict propaganda as a negative phenomenon. This does not mean that these definitions are wrong, however. Simply put, this term has acquired rather negative connotations over time, especially after the experience of the two world wars. Propaganda is a deliberate and systematic effort to shape understanding and manipulate thinking and immediate behaviour with the intention of achieving responses that would be consistent with the propagandist’s intentions. Propaganda means control of information flow, public opinion management and manipulation of behaviour.

In general, propaganda consists of several minor measures meant to act individually, jointly or in a complementary manner. In short, the most common propaganda tools include black-and-white depictions of reality, selections of facts to be published, non-disclosure of essential information, use of well-known experts or popular figures to persuade or attract potential followers, attempts to demonise the enemy and idealise one’s own system, use of the double standard when dealing with friends and foes, ‘we and them’ rhetoric, dissemination of disinformation and rumours, the staging of media campaigns, presentation of half-truths and assumptions as facts, the turning of a blind eye to inconvenient information, deliberate attempts to mislead and deceive others, obfuscation and ambiguity in key statements, oversimplification of complex issues, use of quotes taken out of context, throwing labels<sup>3</sup> around, scapegoating, use of easy-to-remember slogans and symbols, stereotypes, attempts to stir up emotion, misuse of history in order to fan negative passions, presentation of unsubstantiated assumptions, control and censorship of the media, public pressure, creation of idols and taboos, presentation

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about disinformation see also: KAČINOVÁ, V.: The topic of media-disseminated mis-information and dis-information as an integral part of general education in Slovakia. In *Media literacy and academic research*, 2020, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 18 – 31.

<sup>2</sup> REIFOVÁ, I. et al.: *Slovník mediální komunikace*. Praha : Portál, 2004, p. 192.

<sup>3</sup> For example, some people are condemned politically or socially and sometimes they are even publicly discriminated against on the basis of their current or past affiliation to a political party, group, race, person, institution, organisation etc., which is presently considered as politically discredited, socially unacceptable or it is at least widely viewed with derision. We pay more attention to this issue when discussing media manipulation techniques.

of a narrow range of 'experts' to comment on individual issues, ignorance of dissenting views, deliberate mixing of the real course of events etc.

All these instruments can be used alone, all together, as well as in various combinations, both during war and peacetime. Employed by propaganda, they all serve, to a greater or lesser extent, to influence and control the opinions and behaviour of the population, often without the latter even realising it.

Propaganda is currently most frequently viewed and generally defined as media manipulation aimed at achieving social control, especially in the context of politics. It is associated with efforts of political parties, organisations and governments. Manipulation can be understood as a way of influencing an individual, a group or entire society in order to significantly change opinions and attitudes of the target group, which ends up believing that it is the true initiator of a specific action and this decision is an expression of its own free will. In reality, however, it is behaving in line with the manipulator's script.<sup>4</sup>

Debates concerning the deficit of truth in the internet era and the issue of post-truth have become ubiquitous in the search for possible causes and consequences of the aforementioned phenomena and processes (demagoguery, rumours, disinformation, hoaxes and conspiracy theories). Philosopher M. Paleček,<sup>5</sup> when discussing *fake news*, notes that although their presence is being portrayed as a novelty, it is in fact a very old phenomenon. Dissemination of false news and disregard for true and verifiable information is neither new, nor experiencing its heyday in our times. In fact, it can be seen continuously since the invention of the printing press. Attempts to push through claims that would not aspire to verification date back to these very times and they reached their peak with the propaganda activities of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. *Joseph Goebbels'* Reich Ministry of Propaganda regularly used the mass media as the most effective channels for propaganda. They included the weekly tabloid-format newspaper *Der Stürmer*, propaganda films promoting intolerance<sup>6</sup>, German radio and film weeklies with domestic and international news screened in cinemas throughout Germany. They were all loaded with disinformation, purposeful interpretations of events, manipulated and distorted facts, which were often presented as scientific conclusions, and even open lies. All information to be published was carefully examined in advance and censored, if deemed necessary. This propaganda included both glorification of the Nazi regime and slander of all possible enemies. The propaganda machinery in wartime Germany was built with high precision, so that it was almost impossible to find alternative information. The ruling party thus easily maintained a semblance of truthfulness and credibility in the eyes of the public, which was fed on a daily basis with purposeful and targeted information, aimed at the subconscious with the goal of enforcing obedience.

The philosopher Hannah Arendt<sup>7</sup> distinguishes – mainly based on the example of Nazi Germany – between classic and totalitarian propaganda, with the latter having no opposition, while being chiefly backed by the movement that created it. According to Arendt, Nazi Germany represented an example of totalitarian propaganda, as persuasion was not its real goal, but it was instead aimed at the building up of power without the necessity of using violence. The totalitarian propaganda in Nazi Germany prevailed over the propaganda of other parties mainly because its content became indisputable, like the rules of arithmetic. One's own opinions were

<sup>4</sup> FTOREK, J.: *Manipulace a propaganda na pozadí současné informační války*. Praha : Grada, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> PALEČEK, M. *Strach v kultuře: fámy a falešné zprávy*. Presented at a scientific conference entitled 'Hradec Philosophical Days-Man in a Post-truth Society', Hradec Králové October 4-5, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> There are four basic categories of Nazi propaganda films according to social groups against which they were supposed to incite intolerance: anti-Bolshevik („*The Soviet Paradise*“), anti-Semitic („*The Eternal Jew*“ and „*Jew Süß*“), anti-democratic („*Rothschilds*“, „*The Heart of the Queen*“) and those promoting Nazism and German chauvinism („*Triumph of the Will*“, „*Olympia*“, „*The Victory of Faith*“, „*Day of Freedom*“, „*Theresienstadt (The Führer Gives a City to the Jews)*“ and „*Festive Nuremberg*“).

<sup>7</sup> ARENDT, H.: *Původ totalitarismu I. – III*. Prague : OIKOYMENH, 1996.

ruled out, while they were being steered by iron-like unquestionable rules. So it became very difficult to fight such propaganda.

Czech political scientist Oskar Krejčí states that Fascist propaganda elaborated „very effective principles for winning over people’s minds, with these methods being frequently used to this day: (a) bypassing abstract ideas and appealing to emotions instead; (b) constant repetition of a limited number of ideas, use of certain phrases following a single template; (c) exclusive use of supporting arguments only, while excluding opposing arguments; (d) constant criticism of the nation’s enemy; (e) identifying a specific enemy and developing special strategies to combat it.“<sup>8</sup>

Manipulation and propaganda in the post-truth era differ from the past especially in how quickly individual contents are distributed. The information boom, brought about by the internet and new information technologies, has allowed unverified, false and half-true information to spread like cancer.

Philosopher and media theorist Lee McIntyre emphasizes that „especially in the past two decades, there has been an explosion in the denial of science on topics such as climate change, vaccination and evolution, which attests to the existence of a number of tactics used in post-truth society.“<sup>9</sup> According to him, it is a characteristic feature of the post-truth era that ‘alternative facts’ and feelings replace real facts in order to make reality politically subordinate [to one’s will] (ibid.). The internet and social networks have created an environment that facilitates these messages to be spread at unprecedented speeds. The whole situation is exacerbated by the fact that the importance of content in the online environment depends on the number of clicks. The advertising system on the internet has turned into a money machine, creating a contest for obtaining as many clicks as possible, while the alternative media with their arsenal of disinformation and hoaxes get the upper hand over traditional media and serious news. „We live in a time of ‘sensationalist’ media narratives and decentralised events, which are devoid of spatiotemporal context. The new media have created conditions for the emergence of a virtual panopticon, where everyone is under constant supervision of all. Formerly fixed lines have become fluid, with everything requiring immediate attention, although it immediately gets forgotten amid an unstoppable information flurry.“<sup>10</sup>

According to Martin Paleček,<sup>11</sup> culturally moulded fears reappear periodically (such as in stereotyped fears of invasion by infidels, of contagion and extinction of civilisation as such). Playing with fear is one of the most widespread appeals to emotions, especially when society finds itself in an atmosphere of danger. Since 2001, when the so-called war on terror was announced, fear has become almost a commodity to be traded by the media and political elites and used to influence public opinion, frequently quite effectively. With the help of emotion-laden, disturbing and even frightening messages, in conjunction with the anxiety, weaknesses and fears of the audience, panic stories are being spread, e.g. about the imminent threat of a Third World War or a clash of civilisations.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, fear is being fomented by showing scenes of violence and aggression in news, films and other programmes, but it is a different kind of fear that concerns this manipulation technique: it involves the transmission and dissemination of information on threats related to changes in society (reforms and reshuffles, for example). The postmodern man thus feels permanent danger posed by terrorism, environmental threats, migrants and pandemic diseases.

<sup>8</sup> KREJČÍ, O.: *Mezinárodní politika*. Praha : EKOPRESS, 2001, p. 397.

<sup>9</sup> MCINTYRE, L.: *Post-truth*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2018, p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> OLEJÁROVÁ, A.: Štyri poznámky k diskurzívnym aspektom skupinovej polarizácie v dôsledku pôsobenia nových médií. In BUČKOVÁ, Z., KAČINCOVÁ PREDMERSKÁ, A., RUSNÁKOVÁ, A. et al. (eds.): *Megatrendy a médiá 2019 – Digital Universe*. Trnava : FMK UCM, 2019, p. 323.

<sup>11</sup> PALEČEK, M.: *Strach v kultuře: fámy a falešné zprávy*. Presented at a scientific conference entitled ‘Hradec Philosophical Days-Man in a Post-truth Society’, Hradec Králové October 4-5, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> GREGOR, M., VEJVODOVÁ, P. et al.: *Nejlepší kniha o fake news, dezinformacích a manipulacích*. Brno : CPress, 2018.

The post-truth era is generally considered as a transformation of the world for the worse, with the information age placing high demands on man when it comes to distinguishing between truth and untruth. Media expert Alexander Sänglerlaub from German foundation Neue Verantwortung told Czech Radio in an interview that he often meets people who feel intense pressure from the presence of fake news and do not know how to deal with it. He replies: „*And do you pay for journalism? This is a huge problem that needs to be discussed: people want reliable news, but they are not willing to pay for it.*“<sup>13</sup>

An undeniably interesting view was also offered by Michal Ivan, who claimed that people have never been factual, as the emergence of facts has always been accompanied by the appearance of non-facts. According to him, those involved in the post-truth language game seem to forget that they assume facts as being neutral and non-political.<sup>14</sup> He notes that due to excessive emphasis on the purification of facts, one essential point is being missed, namely that those with a certain established notion tend to feed it by the selection of certain facts. „*The picture enforces its own facts,*“ he says. „*And it is not only the lack of facts that irritates us and forces us to call this age as one of post-truth. Just having the facts does not necessarily mean being rational, but merely having a long list of facts. Only their classification, the creation of a big picture and the possibility of its use to describe the world as a whole make a linguistic game of rationality possible.*“<sup>15</sup>

We observe that in today's world, which is being dominated by the digital media, the issue of truth is becoming increasingly complex and ambiguous, with events and facts rarely having a single and univocal interpretation. The necessity of distinguishing the truth from falsehood has become the number one issue of media culture, while the truth is commonly understood as agreement of a statement and belief with the state of affairs. „*It needs to be discovered, however,*“ says philosopher Sabína Gálíková-Tolnaiová in reference to the truth, adding that this is far from being a simple process: „*The 'online truth' embodies the modern phenomenon of mass in a fluid present. It cannot be grasped, regulated, corrected and even less so silenced by the use of traditional tools, procedures and techniques ...*“<sup>16</sup> When it comes to the media, it is the internet that causes fragmentation and interruption of knowledge on the axis of cognition – feeling – interpersonal understanding.

The emerging issue of hyperreality also goes hand in hand with the media, as pointed out by the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard<sup>17</sup>, with the source of reality becoming unclear. Reality as a social fact enters social communication only as its interpretation, not as reality itself. Presented facts are only images, not real things; they are simulacra speaking of themselves and preferring a certain picture of the world to the truth. The creation of reality in the mass media and their contents takes place with the participation of the audience in such a way that the mass media do not adapt their meanings to reality, which is independent of them, but on the contrary – it is the audience that adapts reality to media meanings.

Recipients insert media images of reality between themselves and reality and out of comfort and laziness they no longer deal with what is „*real*“ reality. The world thus created is being fed further by the absorption of content from photos, press, television, film and the internet. The staged reality becomes perfectly mixed with the reproduction of real events, before these two entities merge completely. Reality mediated by the media tends to be twisted,

<sup>13</sup> SLEZÁKOVÁ, M.: *Potřebujeme veřejnoprávní facebook, pryč od trhu, efektů a emocí, říká průzkumník fake news.* [online]. [2020-07-02]. Available at: <[https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/rozhovor-fake-news-dezinformace-alex-sangerlaub-jeden-svet-media\\_1803080600\\_mls](https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/rozhovor-fake-news-dezinformace-alex-sangerlaub-jeden-svet-media_1803080600_mls)>.

<sup>14</sup> IVAN, M.: *Nikdy jsme nebyli faktuální.* Presented at a scientific conference entitled 'Hradec Philosophical Days-Man in a Post-truth Society', Hradec Králové October 4-5, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> GÁLÍKOVÁ-TOLNAIOVÁ, S.: *Nové médiá, pravda a realita* In BUČKOVÁ, Z., RUSŇÁKOVÁ, L., RYBANSKÝ, R., SOLÍK, M. et al. (eds.): *Megatrendy a médiá 2018. Realita a mediálne bubliny.* Trnava : FMK UCM, 2018, p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> BAUDRILLARD, J.: *Praecessio Simulacrorum.* In *Host*, 1996, No. 6, p. 3-28. [online]. [2018-04-20]. Available at: <<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/ baudrillard/ baudrillard-simulacra-and-simulations.html>>.



as the media favour dazzling and unrealistic images – with sensationalism eventually becoming the equivalent of reality. In the relatively short history of electronic and digital media, this symbolic representation of reality has too often been presented as reality itself.

Many popular myths and dogmas representing societal norms and desires originate from commercials and entertainment programmes. They are closely related to political and information images presented on TV, thereby creating a coherent and comprehensive environment of symbols. These are, of course, being interpreted from quite different perspectives. In addition, it should be borne in mind that all these interpretations come from media outlets that act in a selective manner and their nature is one of interpreting facts. The reproduced form of the event then gains more social importance than the original itself, and what is real essentially becomes an image of its images. The real thus must adapt and transform itself to its reproduction.

Last but not least, the way in which the audience approaches individual codes presented by media content creators is also important for the interpretation of journalistic texts. Prominent media theorist Brian McNair includes here both linguistic and ideological codes. Ideological coding contains, in addition to facts and values, and apart from information, also a framework for interpretation of these elements. McNair points out that the level of knowledge on a mediated topic and its decoding depend on the availability of alternative sources of information, including word of mouth and stories heard in daily contact with relatives or colleagues, but also personal experience with reported events.<sup>18</sup>

However, in addition to empirical experience, knowledge, intelligence level and algorithms, emotions also come into play. Meanwhile, emotions in the post-truth era are increasingly winning over common sense. „Where an individual is exposed to a tremendous amount of information and a plurality of equal views, emotions become his compass. At the same time, they are an obvious source of identification for a group that feels to be threatened. In a complex, complicated and chaotic world, in which pillars of support for trust are difficult to find, over-simplifications presenting easy-to-grasp models of how society works have provided the answer,“<sup>19</sup> says Andrea Olejárová, a cultural scientist researching the new media.

The advent of the internet and digital technologies has fundamentally changed the way recipients consume media content. In addition to the removal of spatiotemporal barriers, the way in which content is regulated by media owners has also changed. This has made it more difficult for the power elites to control the nature and quality of information in the public arena. Alternative sources of information represent a stumbling block and a subject of disputes, dilemmas, criticism and controversy, as well as an opposition to the traditional ‘mainstream’ media. Media theorist Henry Jenkins in his study *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* discusses a ‘convergent culture’, in which old and new media collide, local and corporate media meet, and where the power of media producers and the power of media recipients is exerted in unpredictable interactions.<sup>20</sup> This results in a range of convergent media combining information and communication technologies in innovative ways.

Alternative media and sources of information are often labelled en bloc as disinformation and conspiracy outlets – a label that we consider to be misleading and biased. So we can see manipulative practices being applied also when dealing with the term ‘alternative media’ in the media discourse and beyond. We believe that this is due to insufficient critical reflection and a lack of interest on part of the professional public active in our socio-cultural environment. The following part of the paper will therefore represent a modest attempt to produce a terminological delineation of alternative media.

<sup>18</sup> MCNAIR, B.: *Sociologie žurnalistiky*. Praha : Portál, 2004.

<sup>19</sup> OLEJÁROVÁ, A.: Štyri poznámky k diskurzívnym aspektom skupinovej polarizácie v dôsledku pôsobenia nových médií. In BUČKOVÁ, Z., KAČINCOVÁ PREDMERSKÁ, A., RUSŇÁKOVÁ, A. et al. (eds.): *Megatrendy a médiá 2019 – Digital Universe*. Trnava : FMK UCM, 2019, p. 323.

<sup>20</sup> JENKINS, H.: *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York : New York University press, 2006.

## 4. Mainstream vs. Alternative

Ever newer alternatives in the internet environment allow the audience to gain new perspectives on domestic and global events beyond those presented by the mainstream media for decades. In the following part of the paper, we will take a closer look at the term 'alternative media' as understood in Slovakia. The trends of media culture evolution after 1989 largely correspond to globalisation effects brought about by the loosening of the borders between the West and the East.

Global media culture is characterised by a number of features typical of Western capitalism, including individualism and consumerism, hedonism and commercialism. For the media of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it holds that they are becoming ever more globalised; they are primarily concerned with profit, with this environment being dominated by mass media corporations, which pursue their interests.

The most important phenomena and tendencies of globalisation in media culture can be summarised as follows: preference for visual culture, commercialisation – currently reaching also the public-service media –, displacement of art of value, rise of low-level entertainment in all media, vulgarisation of language, mutual disrespect of the media and their audience, the influence of advertising on viewers' interests, the search for entertainment instead of experience, low professional reflection of media culture, stereotyping, commercialisation, uniformisation and homogenisation of media content.

The issues of objectivity, independence, freedom and diversity of the media in Slovakia must be seen in the context of the globalisation of the media and shifts in the information ecosystem with an emphasis on fragmentation, decentralisation and the levelling of information sources. In addition, other contexts need attention, such as the oligarchisation of the media, attempts to interfere with the content of newspapers, politicians' scorn for the work of journalists, threats to journalists' freedom and even lives, etc. A structural transformation of the public is taking place as we speak (as Jürgen Habermas has put it): communication is changing, the private and public spheres merge, bringing along a great deal of uncertainty.

The rapid rise of digital media has brought, among other things, a decline of trust in the traditional (mainstream) media and a boom in alternative information sources. Meanwhile, it is not entirely clear what one should imagine under the term 'alternative' when applied to the sphere of media. Perhaps free media? Or independent media? There are quite a few options to delineate alternative/independent media as opposed to the mainstream media. In this part of the paper, we will focus on why the term 'alternative media' has taken on significantly negative connotations, often referring to an unprecedented expansion of disinformation and conspiracy theories. Subsequently, we will point out why we hold it as more appropriate to adopt a more neutral understanding of this term (not only) on academic grounds, as alternative sources of information can be seen as providing space for different (independent) ways of how the dominant social ideology and mediated information are interpreted.

In contemporary society, the *homo medialis* of the 21<sup>st</sup> century can hardly imagine a life with a single unquestionable truth and without alternative interpretations of reality, including reality as presented by the media. Alternatives can exist to virtually anything – be it lifestyle or arts. So, alternative media make an important part of the media sphere when it comes to dissemination of information and diverse content. Alternative interpretations of the world represent a significant opposition platform to dominant opinion currents presented in the mainstream media. A diversified media scene is of key importance for the functioning of democracy, as it can be a catalyst for social change.<sup>21</sup> J. D. H. Downing has defined the term 'radical media', as generally small-scale media, which have various forms and present

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<sup>21</sup> ATTON, CH.: *Alternative Media*. London : Sage, 2002.; DOWNING, W. J.: *Radical Media. Rebellious Communication and Social Movements*. London : Sage Publications, Inc., 2001.



alternative views to political and cultural hegemony, their priorities and opinions.<sup>22</sup> It follows that one of the factors contributing to the emergence of alternative media may be the general dissatisfaction and radicalisation of society. Alternative media are the voice of those who are not given enough space in the mainstream media. „*Societal groups that are represented one-sidedly, disadvantaged, stigmatized, or even repressed can especially benefit from using the channels of communication opened by alternative media.*”<sup>23</sup> A large number of ‘alternative’ online sources have still not been recognized and legitimized in our environment, either by those holding official power or by the mainstream media. The degree of freedom of speech and media independence (which should actually be inherent to the media) varies in individual countries, but financial and political interests are to be seen everywhere. According to media theorists Maciej Iłowiecki and Tadeusz Zasepa,<sup>24</sup> it is possible to boast of freedom of speech, but it is difficult to recognise that the media are also independent. Their independence is greater, the greater their political pluralism and the higher the level of ethics of the journalistic environment. Let us add, however, that not only political but also media pluralism is important.

Individual definitions of alternative media vary depending on several factors and criteria, e.g. concerning their attributes, their standing within the media system, and their position vis-à-vis the mainstream media. As for the latter comparison, alternative media claim to be independent, incorruptible and not seeking profit. The designation for the traditional, mainstream media is based on the term ‘mainstream/mainstreaming’. *Slovník mediální komunikace* [Dictionary of Media Communication] understands this term as a process in which intense reception of relatively homogenised and stereotyped contents from the media leads to a unification of opinions and values held by recipients from varying social and cultural backgrounds.<sup>25</sup> The mainstream media (MSM) are defined as presenting the preferred view of reality. Linguist and philosopher Noam Chomsky, with a dose of criticism, likens the MSM to corporate institutions and ideological tools.<sup>26</sup> Organisational structures of such media are essentially the same as in any other business company, including hierarchy, division of labour, specified procedures, goal-setting, supervision tools, with the main motive of their activities being the seeking of profit. The authors of *Understanding Alternative Media* state that the mainstream media are involved in creating ‘core’ societal values by their „*permanent exposure to the audience.*”<sup>27</sup> This produces a cultural hegemony, which most people may not even realise.

In any case, attempts to define alternative media have stirred up a lot of controversy. For example, Chris Atton<sup>28</sup> in his book *Alternative Media* asks whether anything that is not available in regular newsstands should be called an alternative – is it perhaps a synonym for underground, radical, opposition or samizdat press?

The authors of the entry ‘alternative media’<sup>29</sup> in an Oxford dictionary entitled *A Dictionary of Media and Communication* explain this term in three ways: 1. as one including both community and ‘underground’ media; 2. or denoting radical media and press; 3. or media that serve as alternatives in the areas of marketing and arts.

<sup>22</sup> DOWNING, W. J.: *Radical Media. Rebellious Communication and Social Movements*. London : Sage Publications, Inc., 2001.

<sup>23</sup> BAILEY, G. O., CARPENTIER, N., CAMMAERTS, B.: *Understanding Alternative Media*. Berkshire : Open University Press, 2007, p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> IŁOWIECKI, M., ZASEPA, T.: *Moc a nemoć médií*. Bratislava : TYPI UNIVERSITATIS TYRNAVIENSIS, 2003.

<sup>25</sup> REIFOVÁ, I. et al.: *Slovník mediální komunikace*. Praha : Portál, 2004, p. 126.

<sup>26</sup> CHOMSKY, N.: *What Makes Mainstream Media Mainstream*. [online]. [2020-09-11]. Available at: <[https://chomsky.info/199710\\_\\_/](https://chomsky.info/199710__/)>.

<sup>27</sup> BAILEY, G. O., CARPENTIER, N., CAMMAERTS, B.: *Understanding Alternative Media*. Berkshire : Open University Press, 2007.

<sup>28</sup> ATTON, CH.: *Alternative Media*. London : Sage, 2002.

<sup>29</sup> CHANDLER, D., MUNDAY, R.: *Dictionary of Media and Communication*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2011. [online]. [2020-07-14]. Available at: <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199568758.001.0001/acref-9780199568758-e-0078?rskey=E6JkId&result=155>>.

Mitzi Waltz, an activist involved in research of alternative media, presents another possible view of this term in her book *Alternative and Activist Media*: she uses it to describe media that serve as alternatives to widely available products of the mass media. As an example, she cites American news-based TV channel CNN, which could be viewed as an 'alternative' to a repressive regime, which prohibits activities of all foreign media, such as the regime in North Korea.<sup>30</sup>

M. Waltz<sup>31</sup> cites some specific examples, including bulletins issued by various fellowships, low-budget literary magazines, digital radio stations targeting audiences interested in marginal music styles, as well as newspapers of radical political parties. Also included could be websites of environmental activists, home-made punk fanzines and feminist radio shows aired by community broadcasters. All of them represent 'alternatives' by covering issues that do not receive enough attention in the mainstream media.

In the aforementioned publication, M. Waltz further conceptualised the so-called activist media, which directly call on their audiences to take action that should lead to social change. According to M. Waltz, a common denominator for alternative and activist media is their potential to influence society in terms of economic and social changes.<sup>32</sup>

Theory as found in literature frequently delineates the alternative media as an opposite to the mainstream media, which present contents widely accessible by the general public. Alternative media, mainly those presenting disinformation, are pointed out as actively resisting the dominant culture. „*They have the function of a binary opposition to the mainstream. We are discussing here an opinion 'alternative' and the dissemination of information described by its creators as intentionally concealed by the 'mainstream media'. (...) These are media that, in addition to publishing news produced by news agencies, make extensive use of fake news in various forms, most often as disinformation, conspiracy theories and hoaxes.*“<sup>33</sup>

Alternative media in the Slovak media environment tend to be automatically labelled as ones spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories, as evidenced, for example, by the antipropaganda.sk website, operated by the Slovak Security Policy Institute. This website presents 'alternative' media as agents of purposeful disinformation and fact distortion.<sup>34</sup> We believe that such biased attitudes result in all alternative information sources in the Slovak context being put automatically into a single basket with disinformation sources and subsequently labelled as illegitimate, without any effort to verify whether they publish true information or not.

According to journalist Jaroslav Bublinec<sup>35</sup>, it is not difficult to make the right guess about the agenda of alternative media: it is largely about presenting alternative views to everything and at any cost. This especially holds if the mainstream media – with their main agenda being the moulding of society according to the liberal worldview – have been convicted by the audience of long-term lies on some key issues.<sup>36</sup> Their missteps thus significantly contribute to inclinations of the public to alternative information channels, including those spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories. Concerns arising from the flooding of public space with deliberate distortions of facts, manipulations and lies often lead to people with a lack

<sup>30</sup> WALTZ, M.: *Alternative and Activist Media*. Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 2005.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> KAPEC, M.: Mainstreamové a alternatívne médiá v slovenskom mediálnom priestore. In BUČKOVÁ, Z., KAČINCOVÁ PREDMERSKÁ, A., RUSŇÁKOVÁ, L. et al. (eds.): *Megatrendy a médiá 2019 – Digital Universe*. Trnava : FMK UCM, 2019, p. 96.

<sup>34</sup> *Ako pracujú tradičné a „alternatívne“ médiá*. [online]. [2020-09-09]. Available at: <<https://www.antipropaganda.sk/ako-pracuju-tradicne-a-alternativne-media>>.

<sup>35</sup> MORAVČÍKOVÁ, E.: Interview with Jaroslav Bublinec. [2019-03-04]. [cit. 2020-09-02]. Personal communication.

<sup>36</sup> For example, this was evident after the public learned that „...some media have not been critical, but rather propagandistic (as in the wars in Iraq and Syria, when they echoed the establishment's lies)“ See DANIŠ, D.: *Komentár Daga Daniša: Prečo ľudia neveria systému a médiám*. [Commentary by Dag Daniš: Why People Don't Trust the System and Media]. Published on January 17, 2017. [online]. [2019-04-14]. Available at: <<https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/407272/komentar-daga-danisa-preco-ludia-neveria-systemu-a-mediám/>>.

of critical thinking and without elementary media literacy opting for the alternative media. „*Distrust in the mainstream media and preference for alternative information sources (including those working with hoaxes and conspiracy theories) could be associated with uncertainty experienced by individual members of society. This uncertainty could have its source both in everyday and wider political and economic contexts and could be recursively reinforced by the reception of content from specific media sources.*“<sup>37</sup> According to Jakub Macek, who is a renowned Czech expert focusing on the new media, it is necessary to examine the relationship between: a) trust (or its lack) of members of society in specific information/news sources, b) attitudes of these members of the public to politics, and c) their experience of attaining control and their feeling of ontological security (Giddens, 1991).<sup>38</sup> Similar conclusions were made by researchers Václav Moravec, Marína Urbániková and Jaromír Volek in a study demonstrating a relationship between the decline in trust (as seen in the Czech media environment) and responsibility attributed by media consumers to journalists for their share in legitimising the transformation process after the Velvet Revolution of 1989 and related social problems.<sup>39</sup>

The roots of distrust in authorities can therefore be found in an erosion of social justice, globalisation processes, migration, corruption and people’s awakening vis-à-vis values. As a result, we see the emergence of the post-truth era, including its deficit of truth and facts. This implies another important consequence for life in post-truth society, namely a growing pressure from the public for the regulation of media contents spread especially in the environment of new media, chiefly social networks, as well as for the ethical and legal accountability of those running these information channels. However, state regulations and the imposition of fines for the dissemination of disinformation could obviously be misused: for example, they would provide legitimate means for punishing only those with inconvenient or ‘seditious’ views. Regulation is always a sensitive issue and there can be a fine line between freedom and its violation. In our opinion, monopolised control over the process of distributing media contents is not possible without restricting the freedom of speech – which would be contrary to some of the fundamental pillars of democracy.

But how are we to understand the world of media, with which we do not live, but – as media theorist Mark Deuze<sup>40</sup> puts it – in which we live? How should we discern these manipulation techniques? How are we supposed to find the truth in an information jungle? And can we even distinguish essential information from irrelevant information?

McNair<sup>41</sup> writes that the extent to which journalism produces a „*trusting*“ subject depends on many circumstances, including whether the latter uses critical thinking in assessing journalistic outputs. Tired, lazy or uneducated audiences can be so intoxicated by fluent and gleaming streams of television news, modern looks and technology that they fail to see that such reporting is as fabricated as products of the yellow press (and, let us add, of disinformation and conspiracy journalists).

Petr Nutil, an independent journalist and author of a book entitled *Media, Lies and a Too Fast Brain*, writes that one fundamental and meaningful task that a responsible state should take on concerning the media would be education of its citizens in media literacy and critical, independent and analytical thinking. Critical thinking is a conscious, rational process that leads to certain conclusions, he says, adding that anyone should be intelligent enough to be allowed to examine even nonsense. „*Individuals should be aware of how the media work, who controls*

<sup>37</sup> MACEK, J.: *Média v pohybu. K proměně současných českých publik*. Brno : Masaryk University, 2015, p. 120.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>39</sup> MORAVEC, V., URBÁNIKOVÁ, M., VOLEK, J.: *Žurnalisté ve stínu nedůvěry: K některým příčinám klesající důvěryhodnosti českých novinářů*. In PETRANOVÁ, D., MINÁRIKOVÁ, J., MENDELOVÁ, D. et al. (eds.): *Megatrendy & médiá 2016. Kritika v médiích, kritika médií II*. Trnava : FMK UCM, 2016, p. 82-123.

<sup>40</sup> DEUZE, M.: *Media life. Život v médiích*. Praha : Karolinum, 2015.

<sup>41</sup> MCNAIR, B.: *Sociologie žurnalistiky*. Praha : Portál, 2004.

them and what their agenda is. They also understand key principles of the information war, propaganda and how it works. Critical encounters with sensationalist aspects of the media, fake news and disinformation websites could serve as great intellectual vaccination for media-literate persons.<sup>42</sup>

When discussing the media and their content, we consider it necessary to draw attention also to another important and often unnoticed aspect of the presence of fake news in post-truth society, namely that fake news makes part of the so-called *hybrid war*, as pointed out by journalist J. Bublinec.<sup>43</sup> In this war, according to him, perhaps a stronger weapon than fake news itself is the ability of effectively slamming the opponent for allegedly spreading disinformation: „A question emerges: is this slamming of opponents a display of hysteria or part of a deliberate strategy? These alternatives are not mutually exclusive, however – both hysteria and strategy are at work here, albeit each in different agents, and these two approaches feed each other. With this in mind, it is not primarily a question of being well-versed in journalism, but rather of being able to find one’s bearings in propaganda as part of war machineries run by several stakeholders in parallel. This also demonstrates: a) how easy it is, in technical terms, to create a reputation of fake-news spreader about anyone; b) how this phenomenon has become a ready-to-use weapon in political struggle. The formerly used label ‘enemy of progress’ is a blood relative to this new one in addressing the recipient’s rationality, reading: ‘fake news!’<sup>44</sup> So we consider the general term ‘fake news’ as too simplistic and superficial, when it comes to placing individual statements in the category of misleading and fake content.

Also, we view attempts to squeeze alternative media into a box labelled as ‘conspiracy and disinformation agenda’ to be misleading and far too little conceptual. For the purposes of our research, we agree with definitions of the term ‘alternative media’ as presented by Jiří Ftorek<sup>45</sup> and Petr Nutil<sup>46</sup> as the most appropriate for our theoretical research of the post-truth era. We understand alternative media and their contents as standing in opposition to dominant elements present in the public space and providing different interpretations of the dominant social ideology and mediated information. Alternative media and media linked to individual social movements offer the possibility of different (alternative) sources of information in the media environment. They have been disturbing the information monopoly and challenging the credibility of traditional media (press, radio and television) on the internet. „The possibility of comparing the formulation of one’s own opinion on the basis of alternative information, the credibility of which is confirmed over time, then boosts the popularity and relevance of the online media alternative at the expense of the traditional mainstream media (press, radio, television).<sup>47</sup>

Alternative media undermine – at least implicitly – the current concentration of media power. It can be alternative information channels that eventually point to the unfortunate fact that the media and journalists, instead of serving as watchdogs of democracy, often become obedient and complaisant servants to their masters.

## 5. Conclusion

The media have become an arena in which a whole range of public life events take place; they are a source of power, a potential means of influencing the masses and of control, and an instrument allowing the promotion of one’s interests. They work like any production factory – they produce their own messages, media personages, opinion leaders and pseudo-experts.

<sup>42</sup> NUTIL, P.: *Média, lži a příliš rychlý mozek. Průvodce postpravdivým světem*. Praha : Grada, 2018, p. 92.

<sup>43</sup> MORAVČÍKOVÁ, E.: Interview with Jaroslav Bublinec. 2019-03-04. Personal communication.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> FTOREK, J.: *Manipulace a propaganda na pozadí současné informační války*. Praha : Grada, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> NUTIL, P.: *Média, lži a příliš rychlý mozek. Průvodce postpravdivým světem*. Praha : Grada, 2018.

<sup>47</sup> FTOREK, J.: *Manipulace a propaganda na pozadí současné informační války*. Praha : Grada, 2017, p. 75.

This is a key problem of the entire media industry: there are unlimited opportunities for the (uncensored) manipulation of recipients.

Of course, a positive role of the media must also be admitted. First of all, they create a space for the presentation of opinions and they inform (either truthfully or in a distorted manner) about events from other parts of the globe, thus allowing the public to reach, effectively, the whole world. Almost any part of human knowledge is just a few clicks away on the internet. The media create pressure on politicians and public figures, and their reach allows them to serve as regulators of political life. They examine individual problems, including by way of investigative journalism, and help to detect and solve social problems. It is indisputable that the media a priori support social values, including literacy and education, but their interest in ordinary people can easily be only a cover for their own interest in profit, as admitted (self-critically and with a smile) by Vladimír Železný, former director of the Czech private TV broadcaster NOVA. He said that it was not programmes that he used to sell on the screen, but viewers – especially to advertising agencies and other customers. Viewers are nothing else than wrapped goods tied with a bow, while there are thousands of them...

We can observe that explicit efforts on part of the media to persuade the public about the veracity of their messages cannot be denied. Nevertheless, plurality of the media scene, unfortunately, does not automatically secure plurality of opinions, as the media instead frequently assault people's minds with distorted, manipulated, tendentious and superfluous information and a torrent of artificial entertainment.

In conclusion, we would like to make a strong appeal aimed at the development of critical thinking and media literacy. Critical thinking means independent, analytical, conscious and rational thinking. Petr Nutil, an independent journalist and author of *Media, Lies and a Too Fast Brain*,<sup>48</sup> relies primarily on the individual and his or her intelligence, which allows the person to freely examine even the greatest nonsense. The solution also consists of the systematic strengthening of information literacy<sup>49</sup> and critical thinking in schools and outside them, ie in the support of a critical-reflective approach to the media in formal and non-formal education.

Ideological manipulation can only be defeated if people educate themselves and actively work with information and information sources. We believe that the most potent weapon in this unequal struggle will be sceptical and critical views, verification of information and active thinking. This requires one's own effort to be transformed from being a passive, yea-saying consumer of media messages to a critical evaluator. As Aristotle put it, he who tries to teach others must above all be able to doubt. It is because doubts of the spirit lead to revelation of the truth.

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<sup>48</sup> NUTIL, P.: *Média, lži a příliš rychlý mozek. Průvodce postpravdivým světem*. Praha : Grada, 2018.

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