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Gatekeeping in a News Agency – A Way of Influencing News Coverage Across Media

ABSTRACT

General media literacy also includes knowledge about the media system and the functioning of media institutions, including news agencies. The article therefore takes a deeper look at the understanding of the gatekeeping process and the prioritization of messages in current agency practice based on theoretical background and empirical research. Knowledge about the way agency reports are produced, which demonstrably influences news content across media institutions, is necessary for a better critical view and understanding of media production. Quantitative-qualitative research was carried out at the Press Agency of the Slovak Republic, where we used a quantitative content analysis to examine 1,373 articles published as part of domestic news in the period from 3/12/2022 to 3/3/2023. The qualitative part of the research included in-depth interviews with the editors of the news agency. We focused on the criteria for selecting news for the news and the decision-making processes of media workers. Focusing on current and important topics, dominantly aimed at the entire territory of the Slovak Republic, can be considered as significant results. If the topic affects all the inhabitants of the country, it has a significantly higher priority than a message focused only on a certain group, without considering the topic. At the same time, editors also decide what and how to publish based on their own experiences or their own interest in the topic, which partially affects the news service itself.

KEY WORDS

Gatekeeping. Impartiality. Importance of News. Influence on News. Media Literacy. News Coverage. News Agency.

1 Position of a News Agency in Media Environment and Its Importance for Media Literacy

The media production of individual media currently affects the entire society. In today's online world, we are overwhelmed with a lot of information every day, from which we only read a certain part. Media workers decide what reaches us and what does not, what our attention should be paid to, what should be discussed within society, or even how we should evaluate certain information. At that moment, we unknowingly become consumers of selected information of specific media workers. Of course, it is not possible for the media to report on everything – for financial reasons, lack of manpower or limited media space in the case of traditional media. From this point of view, it is important to know what factors influence editors in the selection of information and why some news reach us before others. We consider this knowledge to be one of the important areas of media literacy. The amount of news and information that reaches us every day is constantly increasing, and knowing how and who decides what gets to us and what does not can help us, from a critical thinking point of view, defend against the manipulation of public opinion through media discourse. If we know how things work, we know how to work with them. If we do not have this knowledge, those things know how to work with us. In our article, we deal with the subject of news that should bring us the most important information from home and from the world and that also should help navigate us in our everyday lives and make qualified and, especially, well-founded decisions.

1.1 Agenda Setting and Gatekeeping

Processing and presentation of individual information is significant in reporting. Kačincová Predmerská (2017) points out that "it is always important to know which information is relevant and beneficial to the public, and which only fills the pages of newspapers and magazines with entertaining stimuli without being of practical benefit in any way" (Kačincová Predmerská, 2017, p. 27)[1]. This means that every media worker is responsible for the informative value of an individual report. Those journalists who do not have sufficient experience and do not know how to work with relevant sources reach for easily available or sometimes superficial information that covers only a very small part of objective reality.

Every day, we hear, see and read in the media about facts that happened not only at home, but also in the world. The information is carefully sorted and processed based on many factors that editors themselves determine. By selecting and publishing specific news, media workers influence what we consider to be important or essential. This is what we call agenda setting (McCombs, 2009). In this way, the recipient is indirectly shown which topics are "important" in society and which should be given our attention. In this way, newsrooms and journalists themselves influence the atmosphere in society and public discourse. The media deliberately select information that should be attractive to recipients (Valenzuela, 2019). At the same time, Višňovský and Baláž (2012) point out that the media not only raise topics, but also offer their own interpretations of reality. As a result, the audience can take over the attitudes and opinions of individual media. The media offer certain frames into which the presented information is inserted, thereby influencing the public. Welbers et al. (2016) have similar thoughts on this topic: "Gatekeepers have a strong influence on society's perception of relevant developments and the interpretation of these developments" (p. 317). The issue of agenda setting is, of course,

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[1] The text of the quotation in the original language: „Vždy je však smerodajné, ktoré informácie sú pre verejnosť relevantné a prinášajú jej úžitok a ktoré len zapĺňajú stránky novín a časopisov zábavnými podnetmi bez toho, aby boli akýmkoľvek spôsobom prakticky prínosné."

not new in the academic community. It is one of the frequently discussed topics and we find interest in it both in older and contemporary scientific publications (for example, Ebring et al., 1980; Cook et al., 1983; Glynn, 2005; Boydston, 2013; Greguš & Mináriková, 2016; Višňovský & Radošinská, 2018; Čábyová et al., 2024).

The agenda setting concept is closely related to the gatekeeping process. This is a way of working in the newsroom, the result of which is the decision which information will be processed and published in the form of reports and which, on the other hand, will not receive any media space. Of the amount of information that reaches journalists, it is humanly possible to process only a part of it, and therefore, there must be a certain decision-making mechanism, which we call gatekeeping. It is influenced by information sources of media workers, the functioning of specific newsrooms, the target group of the media, or the personal preferences of the journalist. The choice thus depends not only on the journalist' s personal setting, such as his experience or opinion (Greguš, 2018), but also on the editorial routine or external pressures of economic groups and the owner of the media (Greguš & Višňovský, 2020). Due to the constant acceleration of the online space and due to the ubiquitous digitization, there is currently an overflow of news and information. It is the ubiquity of a huge amount of news and their easy availability on the Internet that has caused the traditional insight into the gatekeeping process to be no longer completely sufficient. Currently, more and more researchers show that traditional gatekeepers share their position with algorithms on social networks or, in addition to them, with users themselves (Wallace, 2017; Karlsson et al., 2022; Salonen & Laaksonen, 2023; Scheffauer et al., 2024). In this way, we also become gatekeepers who choose from previously published news and information. And we choose those that we will trust and that will shape us. Despite the modern insight into gatekeeping, there is still one specific type of media institution that plays a significant role in the creation of many news reports across all media – news agency.

1.2 Agency News and Its Influence on News Production

Agency news has an irreplaceable role within the media. It belongs among the main journalists' sources (Hlavčáková, 2001; Šmíd & Trunečková, 2009; van der Meer et al., 2016; Greguš, 2018), while agencies' influence on media production is significant, which can influence the public opinion of the entire country (Vrabec & Zachar, 2018). For example, Greguš and Višňovský (2020) examined the influence of agency news on television news in the context of the Slovak Republic, while, for example, Welbers et al. (2016) and Boumans et al. (2018) focused on the impact of agency news on the print and online media in the Netherlands. Although journalists and editors choose what they will and will not report on from the agency news service, how they will process individual information or whether they will add any additional facts to agency reports. According to Welbers et al. (2016), news agencies greatly influence the media agenda that reaches people. The authors also add that relying purely on an agency can endanger the quality of the news itself, as agencies do not always bring verified information. At the same time, this phenomenon can affect the diversity of news content, since "in the Netherlands, where one news agency is dominant and used by almost all major newspapers, diversity could indeed be in peril" (p. 317). According to Boumans et al. (2018), online articles in the Netherlands are so dependent on agency news reports that up to 75% of all content is sourced by an agency, with a large amount of it being published with little or no modification from the version published by the news agency. At the same time, agency messages should be considered only basic material on a specific topic, which needs to be adjusted or edited (Vrabec & Zachar, 2018). The situation in Slovakia is also like the one in the Netherlands. Although there are two news agencies operating here, the public Press Agency of the Slovak Republic (TASR) has a more significant position in media production than the Slovak Press Agency (SITA). That has been confirmed, for example, in the case of the most read online portals in Slovakia, by several

studies (see, Greguš & Magurová, 2021; Greguš & Šulková, 2022). Although we are aware of the influence news agencies have on news production in general, according to van der Meer et al. (2016) there is "relatively little empirical research dedicated to demonstrating the influence of news agencies" (p. 1109).

As mentioned above, TASR has an irreplaceable role and position in the Slovak media environment and reports from its editors can be found in all types of media – print, online, radio and television. Its main task is to inform the public about important and interesting events in Slovakia and around the world. The creation of articles should meet the basic agency requirements, such as verified information, objectivity, impartiality, providing space to all concerned parties, etc. In addition to its own content, TASR currently receives services in the form of text, videos and photos from several global agencies, while these contents are further provided to subscribers. The clients of TASR are many relevant media in Slovak republic (TASR, n.d.). It means that they can use news information on their websites, in periodicals or on radio and television broadcasting. TASR news reports are mainly intended for journalists and editors for further processing. However, the agency also publishes them on its own page Teraz.sk. There is also cooperation between TASR and educational institutions in the Slovak Republic. Primary and secondary schools as well as universities have free access to TASR news services. As Vrabec and Zachar (2018) add, "schools can use this information within media education, civic education or extracurricular activities, whether in the creation of school magazines, school newspapers, or when carrying out other extracurricular activities" (p. 46). Thus, media production of TASR does not only influence the media and ordinary recipients, but is also involved in the educational process, which to some extent influences media literacy of children and youth in the Slovak Republic. It is also necessary to specify that, according to the results of the research by Vrabec and Zachar (2018), "there are still quite a number of schools that do not use this valuable service in their educational activities at all" (p. 43). Such projects, where students meet, for example, with media practice, are suitable for improving media literacy. There are even studies that dealt with the possibilities showing the gatekeeping process or the functioning of agenda setting to actual students (see, Gross, 2020).

We mentioned above that agencies influence news production. Compared to other agencies, such as Reuters or SITA, TASR has a specific way of labelling the produced news. Like the Czech Press Office in the Czech Republic (Šmíd & Trunečková, 2009), it uses news prioritization within individual news services. Although the reports are published chronologically, each of them is marked with a specific priority given to it by the TASR employees themselves, while it is also up to them to decide in which journalistic genre the information will be processed. According to Hlavčáková (2001), there is a connection between the priority of a report and the genre it is written in. In total, she describes five priorities. According to her, number 1 denotes the urgent message, which informs about an extremely important event. It does not contain the title, domicile, date or agency brand. It is characterized by its conciseness, or it is highlighted from other messages with capital letters throughout its length. It is just a short piece of information that immediately needs to go "to the world". According to Hlavčáková (2001), the second priority is flash message. The third is the current or brief message, the fourth priority is the classic, extended message and the fifth is the so-called everlasting message. These do not belong to frequent content and are mainly announcements, texts of documents and speeches, daily reports or summaries. According to Hlavčáková (2001), priority numbers are assigned to individual genres. Determining the priority helps the media to better navigate themselves in the flood of news, i.e., it tells them what not to miss and what to notice first. In this way, the editors are influenced, as a highlighted or a higher priority message compared to the others "dazzles" the editor, while it can overshadow another, similarly important message, that TASR itself did not mark as more important. Since determining genres and priorities belongs to the competencies of TASR media workers and is subject to their choices, these factors can be included in the gatekeeping process. Therefore, the explanation and definition of priorities

in a news agency is part of the necessary theoretical background for our research. Based on theory, we know that TASR determines priority using a scale from one to five, but media practice is somewhat different. Greguš and Višňovský (2020) pointed out that the priority with the number 5 is the lowest and indicates mainly overview materials or summaries and daily plans. Classic, extended messages are marked with the priority of 4 or 3, while a message with priority 3 is more important and can be in some cases processed also as a brief message. The authors add that a message with priority 2 indicates extremely important information, which is also color-coded in the agency's service. At the same time, messages with priority 1 are not used in agency news. Nevertheless, we can confirm from our own experience that the editorial system also offers this option. The priority must be entered by media workers in TASR before the news is published.

2 Methodology

The aim of this study is a deeper look at the understanding of the gatekeeping process and the prioritization of messages in current agency practice based on theoretical background and empirical research. Knowledge about the way agency messages are produced, which demonstrably influence news content across media institutions, is necessary for a better critical view and understanding of media production. The selection of news and prioritization of individual information that is published and, therefore, opens public discourse on the topic, is very strict. Nevertheless, this selection is partially influenced by the subjective feeling of the journalist. Through empirical research, we found out which topics are prioritized in the Press Agency of the Slovak Republic and what, according to their editors, affects the processing of information, since prioritization ultimately affects the Slovak media environment and TASR subscribers. In the empirical part, we investigated which news and topics editors choose and why they choose them. We have also identified which decisive processes they are subject to, and which influence them.

Thus, we have performed quantitative-qualitative research which was carried out at the Press Agency of the Slovak Republic (TASR). The research consisted of two interconnected parts – quantitative research of news agency reports; and qualitative in-depth interviews with editors of TASR. We focused on the criteria for selecting news for the domestic news service and the decision-making processes of media workers.

The Press Agency of the Slovak Republic (TASR) was selected for the examination due to its almost monopole position in Slovak media environment. There are just two news agencies in the Slovak Republic. While TASR is a public institution, the other one, Slovak Press Agency (SITA), is a commercial company. Their position as the media's news source is also quite different. News service of TASR is commonly used throughout the Slovak media production, but the frequency of news reports from SITA is none or very limited (Greguš & Višňovský, 2020; Greguš & Magurová, 2021; Greguš & Šulková, 2022; etc.). Therefore, TASR has much stronger impact on media production in the Slovak Republic than SITA, which makes it a suitable research sample.

In the quantitative part of our research, we used a quantitative content analysis of domestic news service of TASR. We examined 1,373 news reports in total, which were published as part of domestic news in the period from 3/12/2022 to 3/3/2023. These reports were published in 14 individual days which we selected based on the technique of constructed week (see, for example, Sedláková, 2014; Riffle et al., 2019). In Figure 1 you can see the distribution of the news throughout the examined period.
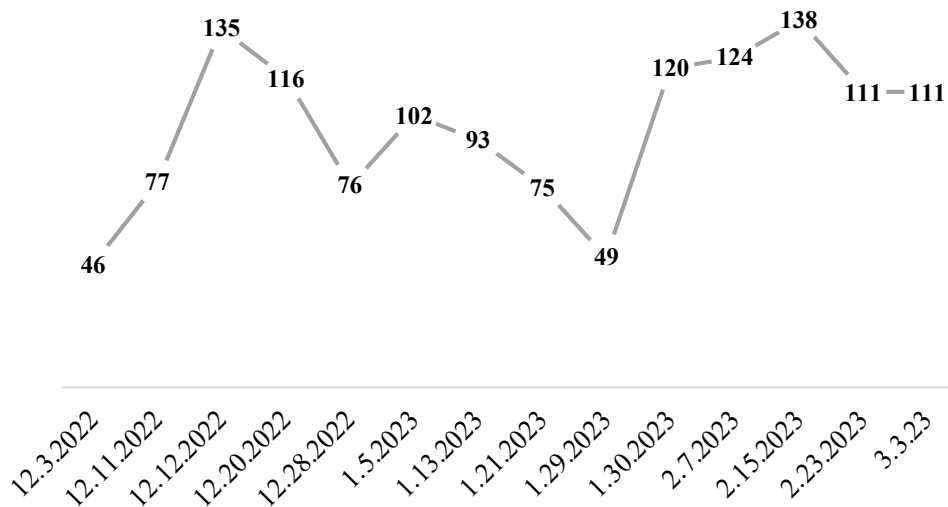
Within these reports, we focused on several variables – date of publishing, topic, priority and news genre. These variables did not need to be defined by us since TASR estimates these characteristics in news reports. Therefore, there was no need to determine intercoder reliability either. Every variable was just transformed into code based on the coding book while there was no case of coding misinterpretation. The variables could obtain following values:

- Topic – military and civil defence (1); church and religious groups (2); documentation (3); transport (4); disasters (5); culture and art (6); media (7); local government (8); employment and social issues (9); plan and daily overviews (10); weather (11); police reports (12); politics (13); news summaries (14); courts and prosecutor's office (15); tourism (16); science and research (17); education (18); interests and curiosities (19); healthcare (20); and environment (21).
- Priority – priority 2 (2); priority 3 (3); priority 4 (4); and priority 5 (5).
- News genre – flash message – consists of one or two sentences and covers basic information about a very important current event or phenomenon, usually, it is followed by other types of messages on the same topic (1); brief message – consists of several sentences and covers an important current event or phenomenon (2); extended message – is a long report of an event or a phenomenon which can or does not have to be current or important and, besides the basic information, it also consists of background information on the topic (3), and overview material – usually information summaries in a form of a list, it is used as an overview of past or future events (4).

The qualitative part of the research included in-depth interviews with five editors of TASR. The interviews took place in April 2023. The editor's decision-making processes as well as the influence of external and internal factors are subjective and it is not possible to predict the results in advance. Thanks to in-depth interviews, we had the opportunity to gain a better overview and understand the decisive processes that media workers face every day. In addition to the precisely written questions, we also asked media workers additional questions that emerged within the interview. The research sample consisted of experienced domestic news editors, who were university-educated people with several years of experience in the media environment. Domestic news editors can influence other media production by prioritizing specific news, and, therefore, we considered them a qualified research sample.

As part of the methodology, we also formulated three research questions:

RQ1: What topics are given higher priority in TASR's domestic news and which topics are published as flash and brief?

RQ2: What factors influence editors in their decision-making process about what information to process and in what genre?

RQ3: Why do media workers evaluate certain topic with higher priority?

3 Results

In total, we analysed 1,373 articles in TASR's domestic news service. In the examined period, there were two reports of the journalistic flash genre, 21 reports of the brief type, 1,143 classic reports and 207 cases of review material. When evaluating individual days, we found that TASR editors publish more news during the days of the working week. A significant decrease in the number of news can be seen during the days over the weekend or between holidays. We know from media practice that during these days there are not so many briefings or events that are covered by the media. The working days of the week are at about the same level and exceed 100 reports per day. More news which are given a higher priority or a higher priority news types are also issued during the week.

RQ1: What topics are given higher priority in TASR's domestic news and which topics are published as flash and brief?

Graph 2 shows the number of reports divided according to the priority assigned to the news in TASR. Priority 2, i.e., extremely important information, occurred in two messages during the monitored period. Priority 3, which points to important information, was found at 70 reports. Priority 4 was expected for the largest number of contributions, at 1,128. We can see the mentioned priority for most of the reports in the TASR domestic news service. The second largest representation belongs to the news with priority 5, i.e., 173. These are reports that bring overview material, announcements or weather to service subscribers. Therefore, they do not provide information that is further published on other websites.
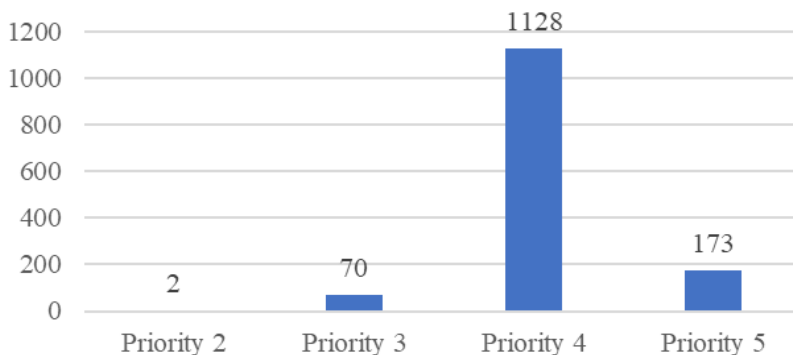

FIGURE 2: *Number of reports by priorities*
Source: own processing, 2024

The priority is partly linked to the type of message. When processing information, media workers choose from among the four types of report priority that we defined above. We found a flash message twice, as well as priority 2. Priority 3 is commonly connected to brief message, but the information with this priority does not have to be in a brief format. Important information can be processed as an extended report as well. This type of reports occurred most often in TASR's domestic news service, in total 1,144 times, while brief news only occured 21 times.
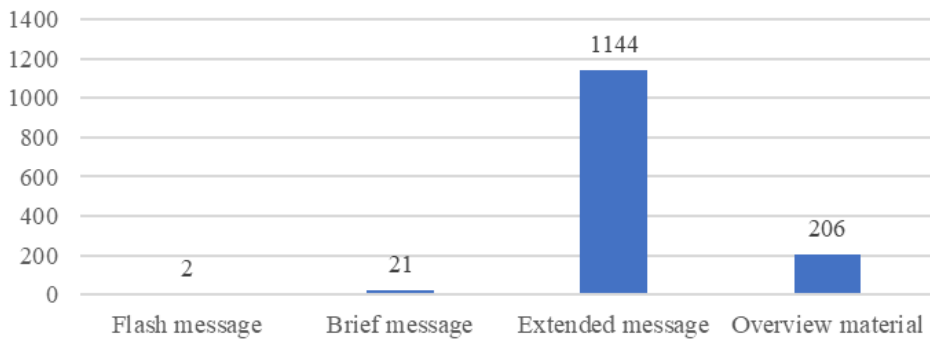
FIGURE 3: *Number of reports during each type of news*

Source: own processing, 2024

For a better overview, we have also created a comparison of all reports in individual topics during the monitored period. It shows which topics appeared most often in TASR's domestic news service. In the total number of reports, the most frequent topic was local government (257 messages), closely followed by politics (223 messages). Topics of police reports and healthcare exceeded the 100-report line. Even though the topic "plans and daily overviews" also crossed this borderline, as we mentioned above, these are reports that supplement the domestic service and are not made by the editors. Conversely, the least represented topics are science and research (5), interests and curiosities (6), and media (16). Not even 20 reports covered topics related to church and religious groups or military and civil defence.
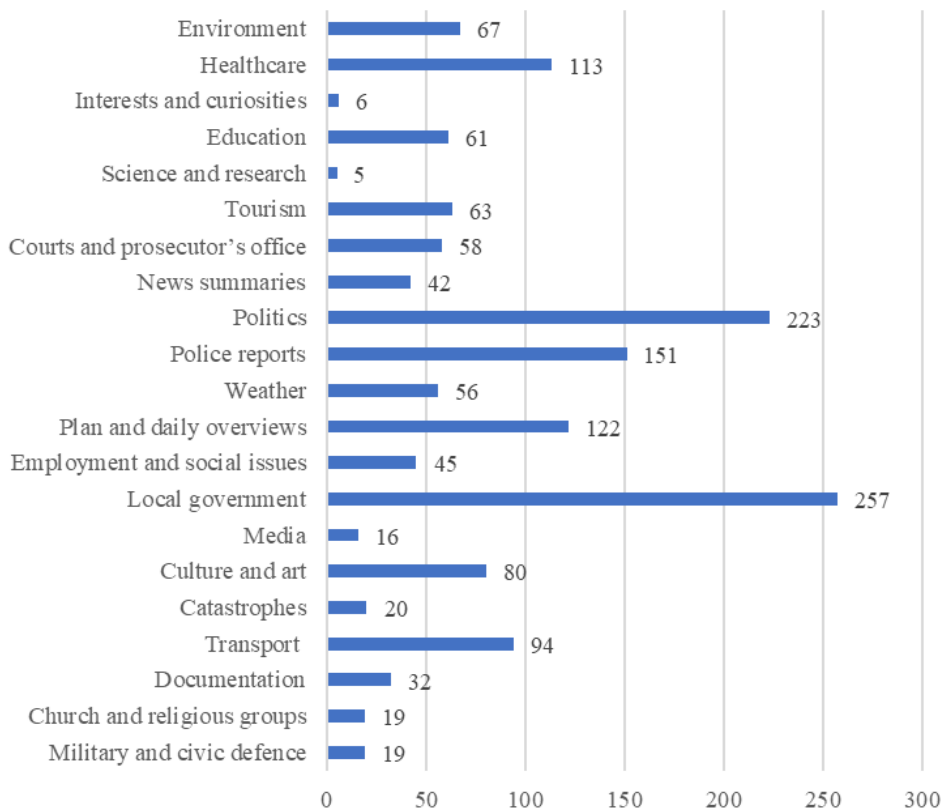

FIGURE 4: *Number of reports in individual topics*

Source: own processing, 2024

In Figure 5, we can see the number of reports in individual topics based on priority. Editors have a choice of 21 topics when adding information to the editorial system. We have defined them above. It is important to mention that some messages can be included in several topics at the same time. Priority 2 is seen twice for politics and once for healthcare. Based on this point of view, these topics were given the highest priority during the days under examination. News with priority 3 were found in politics again, occurring 17 times, followed by transport with 14 occurrences and police reports with 13 occurrences. A significantly higher number of reports in priority 4 covered topics related to local government (248 reports) and politics (204 reports), followed by police reports (138), healthcare (103), then transport, and culture and art (each had 80 reports). News with a political theme dominated in priorities 2 and 3 and. at the same time, it is the second most frequent topic in priority 4. Priority 5 occurred in three topics, namely in plans and daily overviews, weather and news summaries. These are materials that provide information to the service subscribers, even though they do not publish it further. Based on media practice, we know that most often they are not even made by individual editors.
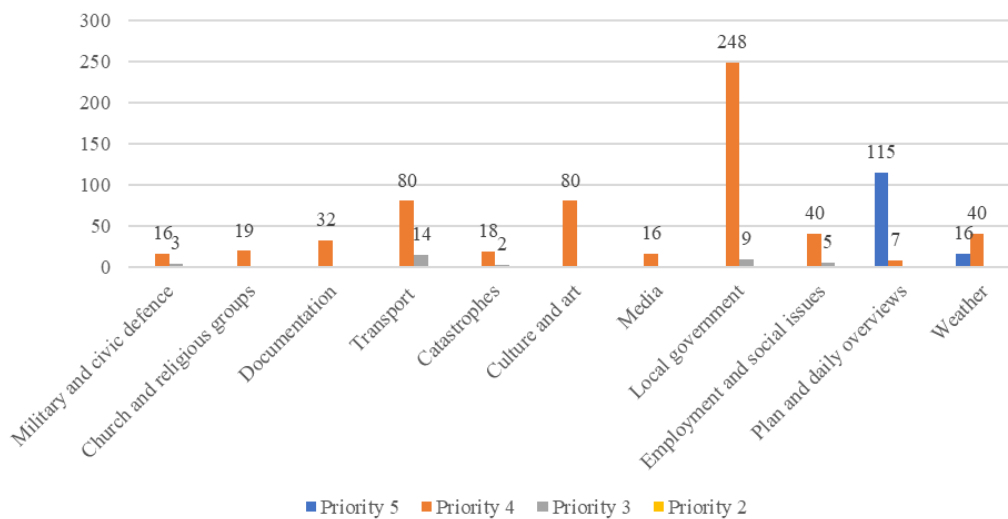

FIGURE 5: *Number of posts in individual topics based on priority – part 1*
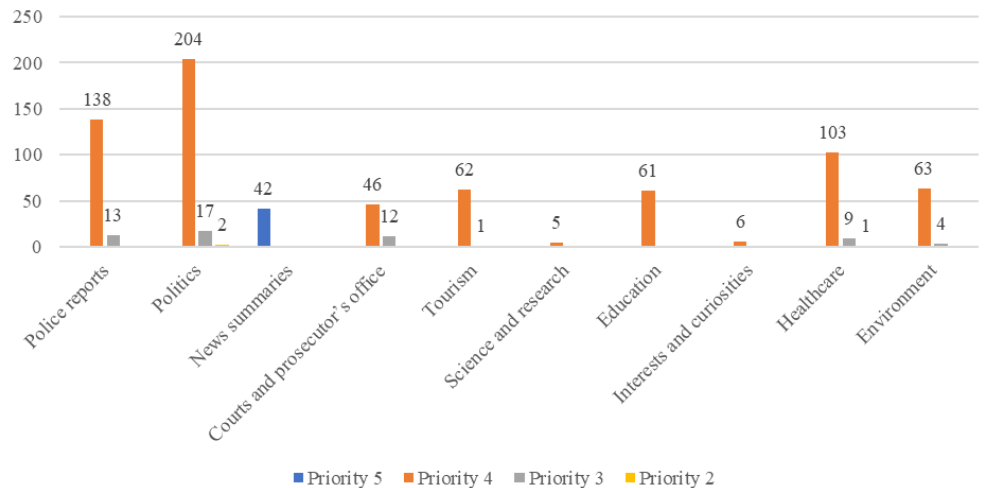Source: own processing, 2024

FIGURE 6: *Number of posts in individual topics based on priority – part 2*
Source: own processing, 2024

At the same time, we found out that the method of processing news in the form of flash message occurred twice as a report with a political theme and once within the topic of healthcare. Brief news was most used within politics (5 times) and we found the same number of occurrences for the topic "courts and prosecutor's office". Three reports in the form of brief news also covered the topics of transport and police reports. Extended messages were most often recorded in local government. At the same time, they were found in all topics except documentation and plans and daily overviews. Overview material is found within the topics of "documentation", "plans and daily overviews", "weather", and "news summaries".

To answer our research question more precisely, we set an average priority value for individual topics, rounded to 6 decimal places. The topic with the lowest priority, i.e., in this sense, the most important topic is courts and prosecutor's office. With priority 3, it occurred in the research material 12 times, and in priority 4, we noted it 46 times. As a type of brief news, this topic occurred 5 times and as an extended news 53 times. The second topic with the lowest average priority value is military and civil defence, and the third is transport.

However, it is important to draw attention to the position of politics in domestic news service. With the average priority, this topic ended up in sixth place, however, if we were to look at the individual numbers within priorities 2 and 3, we would see its primacy in these areas. Table 1 below offers a better overview of the number of reports in individual topics and priorities. If we look at the individual numbers of reports in priorities, we can say that priority 2 occurred most often in politics, followed by healthcare. For priority 3, we confirmed that editors consider politics to be the most important topic, with 17 reports. The second one is transport, with the 14 reports, and the third are police reports with 13 reports. However, the average value of the priority of politics is significantly influenced by its frequency within the published reports in priority 4.

	Priority 2	Priority 3	Priority 4	Priority 5	Average
Military and civic defence		3	16		3.842105
Church and religious groups			19		4
Documentation			32		4
Transport		14	80		3.851064
Catastrophes		2	18		3.9
Culture and art			80		4
Media			16		4
Local government		9	248		3.964981
Employment and social issues		5	40		3.888889
Plan and daily overviews			7	115	4.942623
Weather			40	16	4.285714
Police reports		13	138		3.913907
Politics	2	17	204		3.90583
News summaries				42	5
Courts and prosecutor's office		12	46		3.793103
Tourism		1	62		3.984127
Science and research			5		4
Education			61		4
Interests and curiosities			6		4
Healthcare	1	9	103		3.902655
Environment		4	63		3.940299

TABLE 1: *Average priority value in individual topics*
Source: own processing, 2024

Via the content analysis, we found out which topics are treated as a priority in the editorial office, and we followed up on the results with in-depth interviews. They focused on the criteria for selecting news for domestic news coverage and the decision-making processes of TASR media workers. The research sample consisted of five editors who actively worked in the domestic news service of TASR during the examined period. We know from media practice that each editor is primarily in charge of a specific topic. However, at the same time, during the month, everyone works on the so-called "booth", where they process and follow the most current events and information across various topics. For the diversity of responses, we have chosen editors from a variety of topics and covered the topics that occur most often in domestic news service and are treated with the highest priority based on the quantitative part of our research. Questioned editors were from the field of healthcare, courts and prosecutor's office, local government, and politics. Respondents wished to be anonymized for research purposes.

RQ2: What factors influence editors in their decision-making process about what information to process and in what genre?

Based on the research results, we can divide the factors into subjective and objective. Among the objective ones we can include public interest in the topic, currentness, and the public nature of TASR. Currentness was mainly perceived by the editors as the freshness and newness of the information. An important factor for a publication of information is, for example, that the news captures an event that is currently happening and must reach wider population as soon as possible. As an example they mentioned a disaster or a traffic restriction or an important political statement. They also pointed out that information about the three highest constitutional officials of the Slovak Republic is processed with higher priority than some news about an unclassified member of the National Council of the Slovak Republic. Therefore, information that is timeless does not have to be processed immediately and can be published later. The factor "nature of the media" can be understood as the position of TASR in the Slovak media system that is perceived by the editors and thus, they feel the importance and a certain responsibility in their work, as the agency's news reaches the public and is processed by other clients and national or local media. At the same time, they must maintain all the rules of agency reporting during their work, such as truthfulness of information, impartiality, provision of the same space to affected parties, relevance of information, non-promotion of political or private entities, etc. The respondents also stated that it is important that basic and complete information is provided in a timely and concise manner in reports. In this part of interviews, the editors also completely ruled out any influence from the external environment in the process of selecting news. This process is purely in the hands of the editors and the editorial team itself, and the authorization process for interviews, for example, is also part of it.

Among the subjective factors, based on the results of the interviews, we can mention past work experience, thanks to which the editors better evaluate the priority of some information as well as its importance for publication. The general overview and inner feeling for what is happening in society also influence the editors in deciding whether to process the information or not. Next subjective factor is the personal interest of the editors in the processed topic, or their orientation and outlook in the issue they are solving. We find this factor of quite significant nature in the gatekeeping process. All respondents agreed on this factor when choosing topics. One of the respondents even gave an example that was directly related to his private life. He stated that he had had a problem with an eating disorder in the past and was therefore trying to give it space and raise awareness in this direction. On the other hand, he immediately pointed out that even in such cases, the editors must maintain relevance of facts and the processed topic must have an impact and benefit for a society.

RQ3: Why do media workers evaluate certain topics with higher priority?

We also confronted the respondents with the results of the quantitative part of our research. According to the interviewees, the most important criterion for prioritizing reports from politics or courts and the prosecutor's office is the currentness of the information and its impact on the entire society. If an important event happens, it is logically necessary to cover it immediately and other topics take a back seat. That is why the mentioned topics are treated with higher priority, since they affect the entire population in Slovakia, not just a certain group or class of the population. The information in the topic of courts and the prosecutor's office was evaluated as a priority in view of the political and social situation at the time of our research, since it was connected to high-ranking political officials and several cases that were being resolved or are currently undergoing legal proceedings. The editors therefore assumed that society would also be interested in them. At the same time, some of the political cases also concern public finances, which ultimately affects the entire society. Politics as a topic is one of the basic topics to be covered by the media, and the decision-making of political elites has an impact on everyday life of ordinary citizens and the overall direction of the country. Even more emphasis is therefore placed on the topic.

4 Discussion

As part of our research, we came to several important findings. As we assumed, the most frequent topics that are processed by the agency are topics belonging to the field of political life, more precisely, local government and politics in general. These areas of interest belong to popular topics across all media (Greguš & Predmerská Kačincová, 2020; Greguš & Višňovský, 2020; Greguš & Šulková, 2022). When processing information and determining its individual priority, TASR editors highlight some news in the news service. In this way, they alert subscribers to the importance of a specific topic. At the same time, by pointing out its importance, other media take it up as a priority one, and thus this information reaches the public earlier than other news. It is precisely in this that we can see the influence of agency reporting on current media practice – this is how an agency influences the decision-making processes in the news-selection of other media (see, Greguš & Višňovský, 2020). Based on our research, we can also claim that the workers of the agency are aware of this position and therefore try to reflect the requirements of agency journalism in their daily work. The question remains whether, if the agency does not come with certain information, would it reach the Slovak media environment (which in many cases is dependent only on agency reporting due to personnel and financial possibilities of the media) in another way? The question is how strong the agency is in creating media agenda in the context of the Slovak media environment. Even though political life is a dominant topic in TASR's domestic news service, in terms of average priority it was only ranked sixth. The average value of this variable was mainly influenced by the high representation of reports included in priority 4. However, the editors of TASR confirmed that, despite this, the topic is considered a priority compared to the others, as it is mostly connected to the whole society.

Based on the results of our research, the topic "courts and prosecutor's office" became the most prioritized topic. From the conducted interviews, we found that these results were a bit flawed by the social situation at the time of the research. We implemented it over the period of four months, from the end of 2022 to the beginning of March 2023. In April 2023, the editors pointed out the parallel that in "recent times" high-ranking state officials had been convicted or arrested and several accusations or trials had been launched. These were cases that, in several instances, concerned public finances, and their importance was therefore valid for the whole society. From the statements of the editors, we can conclude that the most priority topics are those that affect all citizens of Slovakia. If a specific case is being dealt with in society, the media also give priority to informing about it. We know from theory that TASR's

domestic news service covers the entire territory of the Slovak Republic (TASR, n.d.) and the agency provides its service across all media. For this reason, news and information intended for general public are preferred.

Another important factor influencing the selection of topics for the service is, of course, currentness. This was emphasized several times by the editors we asked. According to them, they can work on interesting topics that are timeless, but current topics always take precedence, which also confirms the theoretical knowledge in this area so far.

The above-mentioned factors influencing decision-making processes could be included among the so-called objective factors. As part of the theoretical background, we are also aware of other aspects of agency reporting, such as the relevance of information, working with facts or the impartiality of the author. The presence of these aspects in agency reports is a matter of everyday routine, according to the editors, and based on these aspects they create reports and inform the public.

Subscribers of the agency service can take any news from TASR and edit them or release them in the same form as they were published by TASR. However, prioritizing and graphically differentiating higher priority messages has an impact on gatekeeping in ordinary media. Still, it is not a purely subconscious thing. TASR employees themselves agreed that by determining the priority or type of news – flash message and brief report, they can influence the media environment, because in such a case the subscriber will notice the information earlier. One of the interviewee's observation even showed a better media impact with a brief news compared to a regular extended news. Flash messages and brief reports are used for extremely important information that needs to be delivered to the public as soon as possible. Editors usually set priority 2 for flash messages and priority 3 for brief reports. However, we found that flash messages are used very rarely, and some experienced editors have never written them during their lifetime.

In addition to the objective factors affecting the selection of news for processing and determining their priority, in our research we also noted subjective factors affecting this process. Priority determination is mostly based on the subjective feeling of a particular editor. According to the theory, journalists should be professionals and should write impartially and truthfully, thus they should be able to competently decide on the priority and importance of specific information. In this decision-making process, in addition to objective factors, decisions are influenced by the journalist's previous experience as well as their personal interest in the topic. All requested editors have the space to process their own topics within the time available. They can thus choose and determine the information that will be part of the domestic news service. They confirmed that they have their preferred areas of interest. It is with this kind of personal "intervention" that they can influence whether the entire society learns about the message, or whether the message will only appear in the service without further publishing. It makes a difference whether we assign priority 2 or 4 to the information, or whether we publish it as a brief news with priority 3 or as an extended report with priority 4. It also depends on which editor is on duty at given time and how they prioritise information over others. In this case, the question is whether this method of marking messages based on priority can be considered objective and relevant (which requires not only practice from the agency, but also its media nature) or whether it is subjective and ultimately significant interference with the objectivity of the agency news.

Nevertheless, the results of our research confirmed that the discussion on the news-selection or priorities is purely within the competence of the editors and there is no external influence from other influential groups. Editors edit reports only if, for example, they send an article for authorization, to avoid possible misunderstandings. For the same reason, they can consult with different spokespersons or institutions when processing some information, so that there is no shift or bad interpretation. The fact that TASR is a public media institution is also reflected in the processing of information. According to the words of TASR employees,

editors must inform truthfully and without stating their own opinions and provide equal space to both affected parties in the conflict. For this reason, editors feel a certain responsibility when writing agency messages.

5 Conclusion

It is well known that, in addition to objective factors, subjective factors also influence the selection of news for news coverage in regular news production. After all, we know that some media cover certain topics or prioritize some of them. Due to that, new media institutions can arise – some therefore only focus on specific areas of everyday life. However, the significant influence of subjective factors on agency news services is, in the context of such a small market as the Slovak one, a fact that must also be reflected in scientific research and journalistic practice. Especially when choosing a topic, there is an editor´s subjective view of the topic's importance and its prioritization in the news service. Of course, the gatekeeping process is also related to objective factors – public interest in the topic, currentness or nature of TASR media. However, there is still a personal interest of an editor in the topic, which can eventually lead to situations where a message is published that would otherwise not even get into the consideration for publishing by another editor, or that information is given a lower priority than it might deserve from a social point of view. These factors influence media discourse, and it is necessary for people to be aware of thisfact from the perspective of media literacy and to approach the information they receive from the media based on this awareness.

Of course, we cannot omit the research limits. The results of our research cannot be generalized out of the examined news agency, and we cannot consider it as something that occurs in all mainstream media. The limit is therefore not covering the gatekeeping process of all media on the Slovak market. It is also important to mention the number of editors who participated in the interviews. If we had carried out research on a larger research sample, it is possible that we would have come up with not only more detailed, but also slightly different data.

TASR has an irreplaceable function and position in the Slovak media environment, as it collects many texts that other media can use in their news production. It opens public discourse and assigns a specific level of priority to information. The gatekeeping process is closely connected to the editors, who can therefore influence public and media discourse by their decisions, and they are fully aware of their position. According to them, they follow the procedures of agency reporting and creation of journalistic messages. They also fulfil the mission of TASR and inform the public truthfully and impartially, without their own opinions. However, they enrich the service with their own topics, which they process based on their personal interests, but still within the mentioned limits of the TASR rules.

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