The V4 countries non-governmental development organisations can help raise awareness about developing countries

Effects of typhoon in the Philippines, victims of Syrian war, an aircraft crashed in Mozambique – media usually cover developing countries only in case of catastrophes or tragedies. Humanitarian aid seems simply more attractive than long-term projects of development cooperation or global issues. Why did most of the world realise that Haiti was the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere only after thousands of people had died during the earthquake? Which arguments seem crucial when topics for the foreign affairs section in the media are chosen? And how can non-profit development organisations make their topics appear on the pages of newspapers or in the evening news more frequently?

German media theorist Stephane Ruß-Mohl defines the functions of journalism as the following: informing, formulation and publishing, agenda setting, criticism, control, entertainment, education, socialisation, and integration. A media organisation decides which of these functions will be prioritised on the basis of that media organisation’s targets, the owners’ political and economic interests, and the character of the organisation. Because of this, publishers and editors often choose both global issues in developing countries and continuing projects of development cooperation much less frequently than many other topics. In the V4 countries, non-governmental organisations mainly confirm this situation, but so do employed journalists or freelancers.

The aim of this article is to explore why development issues in the media are covered less than other issues. This will be based on media theory and the current situation in V4 countries. We are focusing on the news values that determine which topics are newsworthy and which have no chance to succeed (and not only in printed news reports). On the basis of trends in modern journalism and transitions in the media and scenes in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, we determine selected economic and political factors that have impact on how the public is being informed about developing countries.

Media scenes as well as the impact of non-governmental development organisations in both of these countries rise from similar historic roots. Linguistic affinity presupposes reciprocal cooperation of the media and NGOs between the two countries.

In conclusion, we are either describing current solutions or suggesting new ones, which might support coverage of developing countries and global issues in the Visegrad Four countries. This theoretical knowledge is based on professional literature and is supported by comments from Slovak and Czech journalists.

Theory of news values – topics of coverage from abroad

Media reality represents an image of the world that is created by recipients based on journalists’ choice of news. Schulz refers to constitution or even construction of a global reality based on mass media reporting. The criteria on which these constructions are based upon are called news values.

It is not accidental that only a certain kind of news breaks through to the audience. The way news is chosen relates to several influences on media production. Among them the factors determine whether an event will become newsworthy.

Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge, authors of the study entitled *The Structure of Foreign News*, researched how events from abroad became newsworthy enough to appear in the media. They defined twelve conditions that affect this decision:3

1. Frequency. (The time period needed for the event to develop must be similar to periodicity of the media.)
2. Threshold. (Media get attracted by the absolute intensity of the news.)
3. Unambiguity.
4. Meaningfulness. (To become significant, an event must be understandable for an audience.)
5. Consonance. (An event must fulfil the expectation of the audience.)
6. Unexpectedness.
7. Continuity. (An event continues to be newsworthy if it has crossed the threshold of media.)
8. Composition. (The more an event breaks the usual concept of informing, the more it becomes newsworthy.)
9. Reference to elite nations.
10. Reference to elite people.
11. Reference to persons. (People prefer personal stories, enabling them to identify with a character.)
12. Reference to something negative.

Furthermore, the authors formulated two hypotheses: an additive hypothesis and a hypothesis of complementarity. The first one claimed the more events satisfied the criteria mentioned, the more likely they would be registered as news. The hypothesis of complementarity supposed that if one or more criteria mentioned were missing, additional factors needed to be satisfied.4 This theory is somewhat applicable not only to news, but to other journalistic genres as well.

**News values in selected Slovak and Czech media**

The theory of news values partly explains why the EU events or decisions of the US President get more media space than events in developing countries. Furthermore, it answers the question of why the media covers humanitarian catastrophes for several days, but ignores issues about long-term development projects in those same countries.

Many publishers or journalists point to the disinterest of audiences. In fact, it might be caused by missing factors that would make an event newsworthy. Therefore we interviewed some Slovak and Czech journalists5 about the conditions that make an event interesting for their media organisations. Their answers proved the hypothesis.

All interviewees agreed that it is essential for the event to be up-to-date. Slovak editors from both the Economist Daily (*Hospodárske noviny*) and the Slovak Radio find reference to Slovakia important as well.

Pavel Novotný from *Hospodárske noviny*, explained: “Whether an event in this or that country would be interesting to Slovak readers is always the main argument in the newsroom,” and mentioned a few examples of issues related to Slovakia, such as the Chinese economic activities in Africa or developmental projects of Slovak organisations. A news value of significance largely means that the more understandable an event is (from a closer ethnocentric or cultural perspective) or the more it directly influences the life of the media recipient, the more readily it becomes news.6

In this regard, the situation is easier for journalists in former colonising countries (UK, France, Spain etc.) because the links to former colonies are not negligible.7 Eva Sládková from the Slovak Radio emphasises the news value of intelligibility: “It is not difficult to push through a development topic. But we have to cover it in an understandable and attractive way,” she says.

Drahoslava Výžinkárová, deputy editor from *Plus7Dní*, a Slovak weekly, finds stories about locals and “the problems they have to deal with” interesting for Slovak readers. Nowadays personalisation (reference to persons) or real people centred stories are popular with the Slovak and Czech media. Editors-in-chief call for more.

3 More details about single factors, respectively on news values are available, e. g. here: KUNCZIK, M. *Základy masové komunikace*. 1995. Praha : Karolinum, p. 121 – 123
5 The aim of a questionnaire sent to selected Czech and Slovak journalists was to research their opinions for the purposes of this article. We have been interested in how much they can influence the choice of topics to be covered and what is the approach of their publisher or media management to these topics. We received the answers from one Czech journalist (Tomáš Nídr, freelancer, mostly publishing in Czech daily MF Dnes), three female (Eva Sládková from public broadcasting RTVS, Alžbeta Mafaťovská – foreign affairs reporter from a commercial television TV Markíza, Drahoslava Výžinkárová – deputy editor of popular weekly *Plus7Dní*) and one male journalist from Slovakia (Pavel Novotný from *Hospodárske noviny*). Although it is impossible to generalise, their answers offer an inner view to management of some newsrooms.
7 One of the examples of reporting on developing countries and development cooperation in the media of countries that had colonies, is an online vision of the daily Guardian: http://www.theguardian.com/global-development.
Negativity seems to be a news value used by media organisations far too often (why else would humanitarian catastrophes get so much coverage?). According to Galtung’s and Rutge’s study, media fascination with negative events relates to the fact that reporting a negative event is easier than covering positive events. Negative events mostly happen in more preferable news cycles and are easier to describe.\(^8\) Catastrophes, shocking information, visually attractive news (sometimes with no consideration of ethics when showing images) attract mainly commercial and sensational interests with the proverbial motto: “Bad news is good news.” A reporter from the foreign affairs department of the Slovak commercial television station TV Markíza, agrees.

In the Czech Republic, a media study called Developing Countries and Development Cooperation in the Czech Media was published in 2007 – 2008 by People in Need. It shows that most of the coverage during the observation phase in the print media was positive, meaning that print media covered a positive event or covered an event, a phenomenon or an initiative in a positive way. This finding contradicts with the expected results and the concept that the media only inform negatively.\(^9\)

Referring to elites

The authors of the above-mentioned study also found that 390 of the 455 articles on developing countries and development aid referred to elite nations (the USA, Russia, Western Europe, China and the Czech Republic). The connection was evident, especially in the coverage of development cooperation.\(^10\)

Independent journalist Tomáš Nídr, who works mostly for the Czech daily Mladá Fronta Dnes agrees: “Foreign affairs sections of all newspapers have gotten less and less space. Therefore Europe, the USA, Russia, Arabic countries and China are prioritised as regions that the media management finds more attractive to readers than the rest of the world,” he explains. “It is not only developing countries that remain on the periphery of interest – neither Australia nor Japan appears much in the Czech media. It is possible to push development topics through media only in cases of a huge event, something quite bizarre or a top reportage that might even cover a bit more complicated topic, such as land grabbing,” said the Czech journalist. “But the newspaper will never send you on business trip to produce such text. They won’t protest if you offer it as a freelancer, but they will wait to publish it on a day without big events when they have space for it,” the reporter explained. He referred to news values as well as the current economic situation in the Czech media.

Economic situation of the media and coverage of developing countries

Additionally, the work of a media organisation and the choice and coverage of foreign affairs (developing country’s issues, respectively) are influenced by the composition and inner social structure of media employees. The relationship of a media organisation with the outside world under different social and economic pressures also has an impact on it.\(^11\)

Media organisations are usually structured and hierarchal. Those journalists who work creatively are often under pressure. They must save time and money as well as use technologies efficiently and respect the deadlines.\(^12\) The economic situation of media organisations is an important factor, influencing the amount and approach of reporting on issues that take place in developing countries along with development cooperation and global context.

Czech researcher Václav Štětka\(^13\) explains, “The media space of Central and Eastern Europe has changed dramatically in the past five years. Economic crisis in this region resulted in much more serious consequences than anywhere else, such as radical decrease in the income from advertising. Therefore, media organisations in the entire region had to cut their activities, e.g. to reduce the number of their employees by 10 – 15%, or even close down their operations.” He explains, “The profit decrease and continual decrease of audience resulted in the outflow of foreign investors from the region. Western media companies who had established in the Central and Eastern European markets over the past 10 – 15 years, decided to either leave definitely, or sell the loss making or the Eastern European media.”\(^14\)


\(^12\) MCQUAIL, D. Úvod do teorie masové komunikace. 2007. Praha : Portál, p. 255 – 264

\(^13\) PhDr. Václav Štětka, PhD. is a researcher of the University of Oxford, who in 2009 – 2013 participated in an international project Media and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe


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The researcher describes a similar situation in the Czech Republic. The crisis influenced the Slovak media as well, and led to different kinds of changes – organisational (e.g. the closure of foreign affairs department in the Hospodárske noviny), content-wise (e.g. less space for foreign affairs) or format (e.g. fewer pages of dailies).

Changes in journalistic profession performance

Covering developing countries affairs and development cooperation is characterized by the fact that audiences show most interest if a journalist visited the country in person. Four out of five Slovak and Czech journalists interviewed agreed that their media houses do not support coverage of developing countries to such degree that they would pay for travel of their employees (except for the Hospodárske noviny).

One of the reasons is the poor financial situation in the media sector in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The costs of such a trip are even higher for the television staff, when both a reporter and a cameraman are needed. The reporter of foreign affairs department in TV Markíza explains: “In television, we always depend on visual materials and therefore on foreign press agencies – Reuters15 and the Associated Press16. We can transmit only what they offer,” she says.

As a result of financial cuts, the Slovak and Czech media have to use agency sources. These are external associates who are living abroad or traveling at their own expenses. In the V4 countries, foreign affairs correspondents are an exception.

Those journalists who were lucky enough to stay must now deal with both decreasing numbers of employees and an increasing amount of work connected with online services. If they write “at the desk” in a newsroom, journalists miss local information sources (in developing countries). The lack of time, needed to cover several global issues, is challenging, too. Therefore, they might decide to use simpler scenarios and produce an article on a topic that is closer geographically, culturally, economically, politically, etc. The fact that some important events from developing countries or important development projects never reach journalists is also caused by the lack of time. For example, they are just not able to read a press release or review the foreign media.

Simultaneously, the form of journalism has been changing as a result of technological development. This also occurs in the V4 countries. Instead of being printed, many events get covered online. Everybody can be a photographer or shoot a video now. The effects of the typhoon in the Philippines can nowadays be seen at YouTube thanks to the technology at the disposal of the local witnesses. The possibilities can increase the interest of journalists and the public in development issues.

Cooperation between non-profit organisations and journalists: what can we do?

Non-governmental organisations in the V4 countries must respond to media transformations and look for new ways to offer development and global topics to journalists. It is not enough just to send a press release and wait whether journalists will contact them with further questions. For example, Eva Sládková from the Slovak Radio finds it helpful if an NGO calls her to make sure she paid attention to their press release.

NGOs should also realise that not everything important to them seems interesting to journalists and the media. On the other hand, any topic might be covered in a way that will attract both sides and potentially the audience. The success depends on available information sources, skills and time possibilities of individual journalists, and also the creativity of an NGO and media editors, etc.

Personal relationships with journalists can partly guarantee that a development or global issue will be covered/broadcast. Nowadays, journalists are the gatekeepers who allow topics to get into a media organisation. It is very difficult to achieve media coverage if the NGO doesn’t get the attention of journalists who can present their topic in the newsroom. Tomáš Nídr agrees that the chance of certain topics to be covered depends on the issue itself and the way how individual journalists are able to push their topics through an editorial meeting. To attract reporters, it creates demands on NGOs’ PR departments (or employees taking care of PR).

There are several ways how to engage the attention of journalists or media organisations, as mentioned in the previous part on news values. Media organisations usually call for personal stories. One example could be the story of a popular Cuban blogger, critical of Castro’s regime, who has managed to travel abroad, including Prague. Or a story of a team of Slovak and Czech youngsters who decided to save tropical forests in Cameroon and build a school together with locals where children and adults can get educated about the negative effects of hewing.

15 British press agency
16 American press agency
On one side, there are interesting persons and personalities from developing countries who can be invited by NGOs to the V4 countries and let journalists do their job. One example is the disabled musicians who performed on the Development Day17 in Slovakia. On the other side, also personal stories of people working in NGOs might be interesting, specific or surprising.

The NGOs of the V4 countries also enable journalists to participate in field trips of journalists to developing countries, supporting them both financially and logistically. In Slovakia such field trips are actively organised, for example, by the Slovak NGDO Platform itself or its member organisations, for example, Partners for Democratic Change Slovakia (PDCS); in the Czech Republic e.g. by Rozvojovka which is the information section of the People in Need18.

Recently, NGOs have financed a couple of journalistic travels that led to media coverage in print as well as in audiovisual media.19 As a result of decreasing financial sources of media organisations, the journalists evaluated this option positively. The reporter from TV Markíza says, “On TV, we rarely cover developing issues. Only in the case that somebody gets an invitation on a business trip.” Tomáš Nídr, publishing mainly in MF Dnes, stresses that these kinds of invitations might get a journalist in trouble if the organisation expects them to cover the topic from their own point of view. He recommends that the journalists should be aware of one-sided propaganda, “The journalists themselves should look for other information sources than just those that are offered by the travel organiser. I have travelled with NGOs twice this year and warned them in advance. There was no problem about it,” he says and adds: “In a nutshell, journalists mustn’t be lazy.”

According to journalists interviewed, business trips are used not only to gather information, but also as a long-term source of local contacts that might be used in the future. Therefore non-governmental organisations can provide relevant information sources to journalists in several different ways:

• their own employees working in offices in the V4 countries,
• NGO field workers in the area where they operate,
• employees of cooperating organisations in the area where they operate, or
• contacts gained during the field trip.

On the Development Day 2013 in Bratislava, Matúš Krčmárik from the Slovak Daily SME called on NGOs to further cooperate with field workers as their blogs might be an interesting information source for journalists and the public itself. Not all the information from developing countries must flow through traditional media. There is enough space for everybody to write online; if the field worker is smart enough, the NGO only needs to widely promote their blog via social media, website, etc. Acquiring basic journalism knowledge through workshops and seminars with journalists or e-learning courses might help NGO employees or field workers.

Last but not least, development issues get covered also by special supplements such as those used by the Slovak NGDO Platform, PDCS20, or Rozvojovka of the Czech organisation People in Need. They asked journalists and field workers to write articles and published them in selected newspapers in the form of a special supplement. This was paid for as advertising (with a different layout from the rest of the newspaper). The disadvantage of this way of informing about developing countries is the high price tag. Furthermore, the question of the content rises whether it is better to communicate a current situation in developing countries or to supplement. This was paid for as advertising (with a different layout from the rest of the newspaper). The disadvantage of this way of informing about developing countries is the high price tag. Furthermore, the question of the content rises whether it is better to communicate a current situation in developing countries or to cover the topic from their own point of view. He recommends that the journalists should be aware of one-sided propaganda, “The journalists themselves should look for other information sources than just those that are offered by the travel organiser. I have travelled with NGOs twice this year and warned them in advance. There was no problem about it,” he says and adds: “In a nutshell, journalists mustn’t be lazy.”

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According to the German media theorist Stephan Ruß-Mohl, mass media draws our attention to just a few topics and events that they put on the spotlight of public interest.21 This theory of media impact is called agenda setting and has been formulated by McCombs and Shaw at the beginning of the 1970’s. According to their hypothesis, if a problem or current event is emphasised by the media, the audience will regard the issue as more important.22

17 The Development Day 2013 took place in Bratislava, Slovakia, on 18 October 2013, organised at the occasion of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty and tenth anniversary of the Slovak NGDO Platform, as well as the SlovakAid programme. More information here: http://rozvojovyden.mvro.sk.

18 Besides organisations mentioned, journalistic travels have been recently supported also by other NGOs, such as eRko-HKSD in Slovakia, Světlo pro svět, SIRIRI and Glopolis in the Czech Republic, Polish Humanitarian Organisation Foundation (PAH) in Poland and Foundation of Development of Democratic Rights (DemNet) in Hungary.

19 Detailed information about Slovak journalistic travels to developing countries, supported by the Slovak NGDO Platform, might be found in a bulletin Rozvojová spolupráca (http://www.mvro.sk/sk/bulletin) and brochure From Aid to Policy Coherence for Development. 10 years of the Slovak NGDO Platform (http://www.mvro.sk/sk/e-knižnica/category/2-publikacie#). Examples of Czech journalists’ outcomes have been published for example here: www.rozvojovka.cz.

20 The Slovak NGDO Platform and PDCS have arranged two special supplements of a Daily SME (in December 2011 and May 2013: http://v4aid.eu/sk/publikacie/prilohy)


Simply, the media are involved in what the public thinks about. The level of agenda setting depends on several factors: the current situation in the society (e.g. pre-election campaigns, economic crises, or periods of growth), the media itself (credibility and size of the audience), and mostly on the recipients (e.g. whether an issue has already become part of the personal agenda of a larger number of recipients).23

Rogers and Dearing distinguish three kinds of agendas: media priorities, public priorities and priorities of politicians. All three influence one another.24

Edelstein challenged the agenda setting theory by stating that agenda setting as a media function was less convincing in the case of social problems than of political topics. Who decides which issues are discussed publicly – people or the media?25

Journalists were asking this question themselves several times during the Media and development discussion on Development Day 2013 in Slovakia. Who is less interested in development issues – the media (publishers and journalists) or the audience?

Looking for the answer seems like a chicken-egg problem. Instead, let’s ask who is in the position to change the disinterest in development and global issues. Should the public be more interested and make the media cover these issues more? Or could change be initiated by the media?

Bibliography


