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Serbian students' perception of the contemporary media coverage of critical situations *

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Abstract. Since the very birth, the media has exerted a huge impact on masses, which only became more obvious in the contemporary information society, especially given the rapid development of technology and social networks. After a brief theoretical overview, the authors present the results of the sociological survey conducted in two public universities of the Republic of Srpska, which aimed at identifying student estimates of the mass media's manipulative potential in general and student opinions towards the media coverage of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in particular. The authors designed the survey sample in such a way as to represent students of social sciences and humanities (different educational profiles within these two professional fields) due to the very nature of their studies and to the better knowledge of issues under study by definition (content of courses and requirements to competences in the future professional field). The survey was conducted online, the questionnaire was posted on the Google platform, which allowed not only to share the link but also to receive feedback. The authors wanted to get empirical data proving the fact that the media has a significant influence on the formation of attitudes and value systems of the wider public, including the younger generation represented by the student youth. Given that the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has lasted for more than two years, it allows to get a deeper insight into the public perception of such critical issues as not just based on the media coverage or the first emotional reactions after the outbreak of the conflict. The authors wanted to know whether students feel/believe that the media (in general or specific media companies) tend to biased reporting, and what media channels students prefer to get much-needed information. The authors emphasize the need for objective reporting in crisis situations, including various conflicts. Crisis situations are always a great challenge for any media in the perspective of complying with ethical standards of reporting and the pressure of media owners and political forces. The article aims at revealing students' attitudes towards the causes of such biased reporting and topics that the media is likely to cover in an objective manner.

Key words: media; manipulation; coverage; attitudes; objectivity; students; sociological survey; Russian-Ukrainian conflict; Republic of Srpska

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There are multiple factors that affect our attitudes during the earliest period of socialization and throughout our entire life. Family, educational system and peer group are the most influential in this respect, but, with the development of the information society and social media, they become increasingly influential creators of our attitudes and value system. The role of the media has long been a subject of debate and critique for both the academy and public. Until the second half of the 20th century, the media was a major means of propaganda; but later the rapid development of the Internet has contributed to an increased doubt in the objective media coverage and has strengthened the belief that the media is the most powerful means of political manipulation. Such an impact of the media on social representations made scholars consider the strong media influence already in the period from the early 20th century to the end of WWII ('the hypodermic needle model' or 'the magic bullet theory'). After the end of WWII, some theories insisted on the restricted influence of the media on public attitudes and opinions [3. P. 120]. Today, the question is rather the ethics of the media coverage, including the established standards of their work, since there is a prevailing idea that the media only strengthens the already formed attitudes. However, some attitudes could have been formed under the long-lasting influence of the media. The role of media is the creation of the 'public sphere' (public opinion and public debate), although there is also an approach emphasizing that the media 'creates a new reality' which exists only in the media [10. P. 464–465]. Anyway, the special role of the media is providing control over the masses [7; 8]: the media is a powerful means for strengthening public and private interests through indoctrination, i.e., manipulation is a designed and controlled procedure (or a scope of procedures) with which the manipulator, applying symbolic tools, sends certain messages to the masses through the means of communication to influence beliefs, attitudes and behavior of the masses and make them focus on ambiguous issues in the perspective of the manipulator [19. P. 41]. Thus, manipulation is a way of the hidden persuasion of people (of which they are usually not aware due to manipulator's conduct) by the means of communication [19. P. 111].

In this paper, we argue that crisis situations are particularly interesting for the media, since such situations represent "potential threats to many people and their property, and reporting on any crisis implies the protection of the public interest and the right of the media content consumers to be accurately, timely and objectively informed in an ethically acceptable manner" [2. P. 119]. The paper is based on the three most influential media effect theories [18]: first, the agenda-setting theory [15] that focuses on the strength and influence of the media to impose on the public space several 'burning' issues that are thoroughly described, taking into account cognitive mechanisms that influence public attitudes. This sort of influence directs public attention to such contents for which general or political consensus is crucial; thereby, in most cases, social issues turn into political ones and vice versa. Contents that are of no interest for the authorities (or it is necessary to shift attention from major issues to minor ones) do not get sufficient media coverage

in order not to affect social consciousness [18. P. 8]. Thus, the agenda-setting theory shifts the role of the media from the information provider to the coverage master, which makes individuals believe that current topics discussed in the media are socially important [3. P. 126; 28].

The framing theory [4], or the second level of agenda-setting [1. P. 297], emphasizes the role of the media in the information transfer and analyzes how a certain part of news is presented and, more importantly, interpreted. For instance, if a certain topic is overrepresented, it certainly affects public opinions and attitudes towards it according to the provided media interpretation. Thus, the media coverage of the main topic creates a framework within which the presented contents are interpreted [27]. The theory of the two-step flow model of communication [9] is quite similar to this one, but it further highlights that the media contents do not affect the entire public, in particular individuals that are not familiar with the topic. In such cases, the media is to a certain degree assisted by those individuals that are well-informed and make the public discuss the topic in a certain perspective. For instance, politicians, depending on the significance of some contents, may focus on its analysis and interpretation. It is through their public agency that even those individuals that are ignorant of the current media contents get an opinion on them, but through the prism of its interpreters. Essentially, the role of the media remains irrefutable, and there is a possibility of shaping one's attitudes through highlighting certain elements, but the course of communication can be a two-step one (from the media to mediating interpreters and then to less-informed individuals), which can alter the final goal of the coverage [3. P. 122]. The students attitudes towards the conflict between Russia and Ukraine reveal that they are aware of the media influence on the presentation of a certain topic: the Western media interpretation contributes to the public acceptance of the Western countries anti-Russian ideas. In the Republic of Srpska, students believe that the Western media is manipulative in reporting and provides biased information in interests of various groups (mainly global political organisations). The framing theory is particularly heuristic for the analysis of political reporting, given that the majority of population have neither political experience nor education in the field of global political relations.

The priming theory also emphasizes the media influence on public attitudes but through affecting the cognitive part of consciousness: the media report/coverage leaves such an impression on the audience that their following reaction is predictable. This theory argues that the role of the media is to bring to life re-experienced stimuli, thus inspiring and justifying a certain type of behavior. For instance, reporting on violence may be approved if a part of the audience identify themselves with the situation reported [17; 18. P. 13]. Various theoretical research of the media effects on attitudes confirm that the role of the media is no longer to inform but to shape public opinion and social behavior [12. P. 133] by shifting attention from more to less important topics in order to create room for manipulation [16; 23; 24; 25].

The paper is based on the online survey of students at two public universities (the only ones) of the Republic of Srpska: the questionnaire combined closed and partly open questions; the sample consisted of 247 students of social sciences and humanities (57 % live in cities, 34 % — in suburban communities, 9 % — in rural areas; mainly women — 75 %; mainly from the first two years of undergraduate studies — 58 %, while only every tenth respondent was a Master's student); the survey was conducted in December 2023 — January 2024; 69 % of respondents were from the Faculty of Political Sciences and the Faculty of Security Sciences of the University of Banja Luka (established in 1975), the rest — from the Faculty of Philosophy and the Faculty of Law of the University of Eastern Sarajevo (established during the 1992–1995 civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina). The methodologically same survey was conducted at universities of the Republic of Croatia in 2022 (N=175) and showed quite the same results, for instance, that students use Internet as their main source of information, showing little trust in the media as not objective and a powerful means of manipulation under the huge ideological influence [11. P. 27–37; 22].

When asked about the media they prefer to get information, 58 % named the social media as a source they trust the most (32 % prefer Internet portals) (Fig. 1).

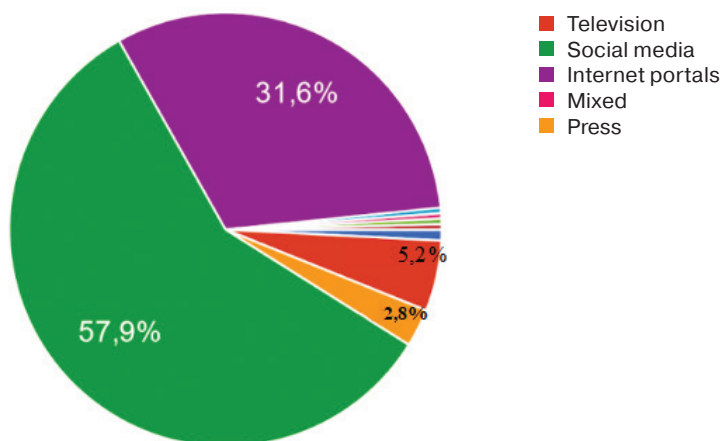


Figure 1. The media used by respondents

Students' answers to the hypothetical question what media they would use to get information about such a critical situation as an earthquake, a terrorist attack or a war conflict are as follows: 42 % would search for information on Internet portals, 26 % — on the social media, 25 % — on TV (Fig. 2).

When asked the same question about Internet portals in case of emergency, students preferred the Srpskainfo portal (60 %), then comes the Buka portal (11 %) and the Katera portal (7 %), while all other (Faktor, BBC, Nezavisne novine, Novi

standard, RT (Russia Today), CNN, RTRS (Public Broadcast System of the Republic of Srpska) and so on) were chosen by less than one respondent each (Fig. 3).

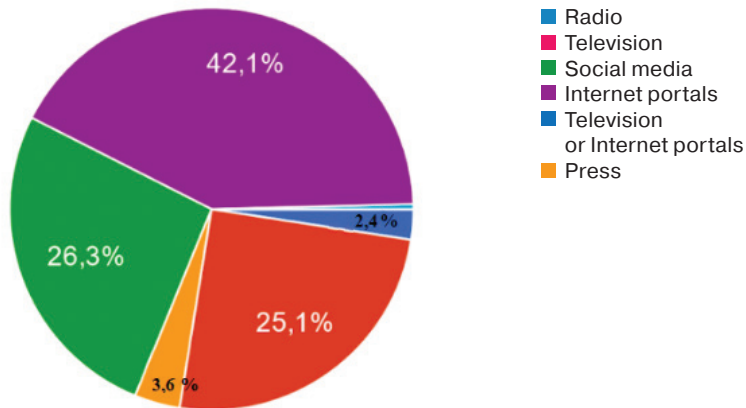


Figure 2. Preferred media in a critical situation

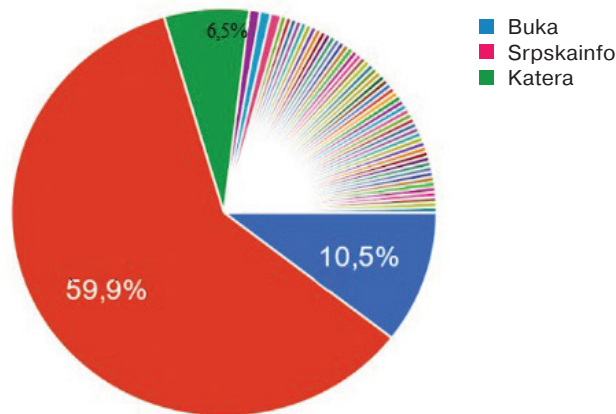


Figure 3. Preferred Internet portals in case of emergency

69 % of respondents believe that the most manipulated media contents are current social-political events, followed by the causes of war conflicts (56 %) and such conflicts in general (51 %), economic problems and crises determined by war conflicts (35 %), then come topical issues in the field of culture, education and healthcare (mentioned by every fourth respondent as prone to the media manipulation — 25 %, and, finally, reports on emergency situations caused by natural disasters (15 %).

What interested us the most was the quality of the media coverage of the war conflict between Russia and Ukraine as assessed by the university students. They believe that the media of the Republic of Srpska provides a more objective picture than the Western media (58 % + 17 % assessing this

coverage as objective and unbiased in general), while 29 % of respondents hold the opposite position about the completely biased coverage of this war conflict the media of the Republic of Srpska (Fig. 4).

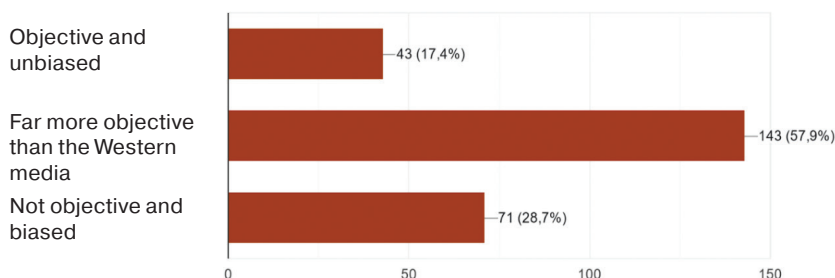


Figure 4. Students' perception of the coverage of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine by the media of the Republic of Srpska

Students argue that the Western media manipulates the contents when presenting the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in principle (63 %) or to a certain degree (24 %) (Fig. 5).

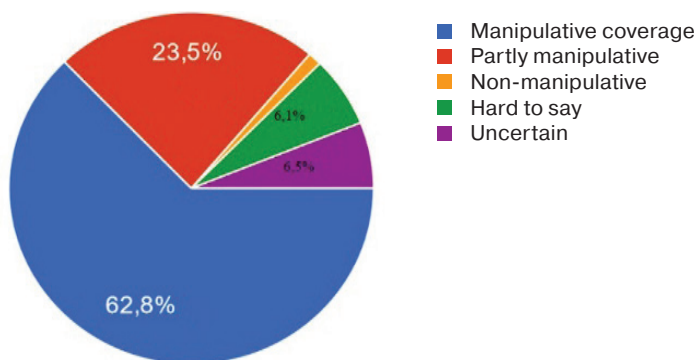


Figure 4. Students' perception of the coverage of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine by the Western media

Most respondents believe that the media does use some manipulative techniques to influence public perception, attitudes and opinions (93 %). However, respondents are less certain about the type and extent of this manipulative influence: almost every second student (46 %) this influence as negative, only 5 % — as positive, and 37 % — as rather partial. Moreover, the situation changes, when students are asked not about the media in general but about the Western media: 83 % believe that the Western media is under the strong political-ideological influence, 9 % are rather uncertain, while only 3 % completely disagree with such an estimate (Fig. 5).

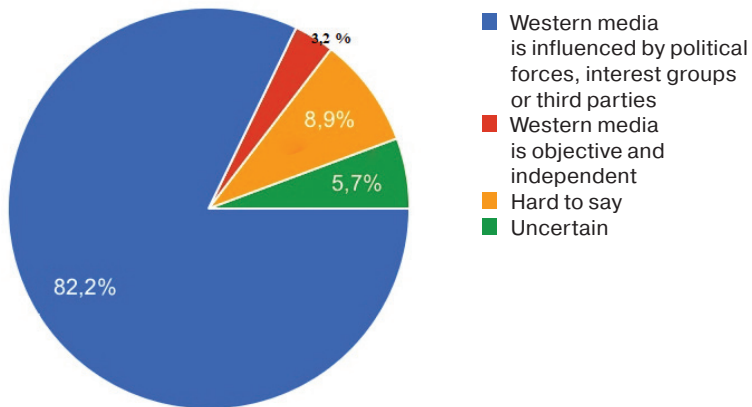
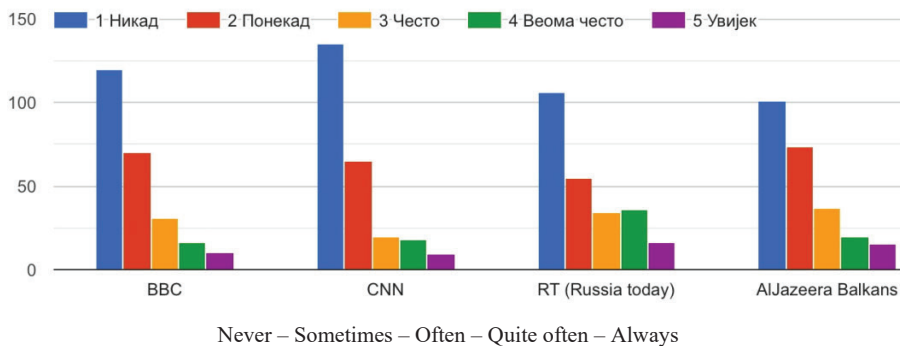


Figure 5. Students' perception of the Western media as autonomous or dependent

When asked about the leading media source of information on the events in Ukraine, students name mainly and with equal frequency the RTRS (Public Broadcast System of the Republic of Srpska), the BN, and the RTS (Public Broadcast System of Serbia). Among the foreign media companies covering the events in Ukraine, respondents seem to trust the RT (Russia Today) and the Aljazeera Balkans the most, then come the BBC and the CNN (Fig. 6).



Never — Sometimes — Often — Quite often — Always

Figure 6. The students' choice of the foreign media to get information about the events in Ukraine

Students' representations about the causes of the Russian-Ukrainian war conflict are as follows: 66 %t think that the escalation of this conflict was determined by the Western influence and the NATO's action. Moreover, 60 % of respondents specify the Ukraine is a victim of the policy of Western countries, and 45 % that the war in Ukraine is not over yet only due to the ongoing Western supplies of arms and ammunition to Ukraine. However, students do not think that the general perception of this conflict is determined by the media coverage (57 % vs 20 %), and argue that their opinions are

quite typical for the population of the Republic of Srpska as they do not need to defend their views/position when in a company of other people (52 %) or do need quite rarely (29 %).

Thus, the survey results show that the students from two public universities of the Republic of Srpska have quite similar attitudes towards the Western media coverage of the news in general and of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in particular, emphasizing the malignant intentions of the media in its efforts to impose a very certain anti-Russian position. However, most respondents agree that Russia is not responsible for the current situation as an aggressor, which confirms the consistency in the youth's worldview and their mature ability to consider events critically and objectively even being exposed to media manipulations.

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Восприятие сербскими студентами современного медийного освещения критических ситуаций*

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Аннотация. С момента своего рождения СМИ оказывали огромное воздействие на массы, и это воздействие лишь стало более видимым в современном информационном обществе, особенно учитывая быстрое развитие технологий и социальных сетей. После короткого теоретического обзора концептуальных оснований своего исследования авторы приводят результаты разведывательного социологического опроса, проведенного в двух государственных университетах Республики Сербской. Опрос был призван выявить студенческие оценки манипулятивного потенциала СМИ в целом и применительно к медийной репрезентации российско-украинского конфликта в частности. В выборку были отобраны только студенты социальных и гуманитарных специальностей (представляющие самые разные профили в этих двух профессиональных областях), поскольку содержание обучения и по определению наличие специализированных знаний по рассматриваемой проблематике (благодаря программе курсов и требованиям к будущим профессиональным компетенциям) делают их «экспертами» в оценке медийных практик. Опрос был проведен в онлайн-формате, что позволило не только

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широко распространить ссылку на анкету, но и получить обратную связь от респондентов. Эмпирические данные подтвердили, что СМИ оказывают значительное воздействие на установки и ценности аудитории, включая самые молодые поколения, представленные в данном случае студенческой молодежью. Поскольку российско-украинский конфликт длится уже более двух лет, опрос выявил устойчивые социальные представления о нем, а не мнения, основанные исключительно на медийных оценках, или спонтанные эмоциональные реакции, неизбежные сразу после начала конфликта. Авторы сосредоточились на вопросах, считают ли студенты, что СМИ (в целом или конкретные компании) склонны к искаженным репрезентациям событий, и какие медийные каналы студенты предпочитают использовать для получения искомой информации. Авторы подчеркивают необходимость объективных репортажей о кризисных ситуациях, в число которых входят и различные конфликты. Любая кризисная ситуация — вызов для СМИ с той точки зрения, что ему необходимо соблюдать этические стандарты под давлением своих владельцев и политических сил. В статье представлены студенческие оценки причин искаженных медийных репрезентаций, включая темы, которые СМИ склонны описывать достаточно объективно.

Key words: СМИ; манипуляция; освещение; установки; объективность; студенты; социологический опрос; российско-украинский конфликт; Республика Сербская