

# Media and Us: Influencing the Public Opinion

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By Juraj Lajda

A very interesting and attractive lecture was organized by the Czech UPF chapter in Prague on the 24<sup>th</sup> January 2017. The topic was **Media and Us: Influencing the Public Opinion** presented by an Austrian journalist Barbara Grabner. The lecture was attended by some 30 people; among them were journalists, politicians and students. They appreciated the professionalism and knowledge of the lecturer based not only on the theory but also on her own experience.



The event was opened by Dr. Juraj Lajda, UPF secretary general who explained the importance of the topic especially in today's world and society.

Mrs. Grabner spoke about the *Spiral of Silence* theory developed by a German sociologist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. According to this theory people almost instinctively sense the opinions of those around them, and shape their behaviour to the prevailing attitude about what is acceptable and what is not. People are more willing to publicly express their opinions when they perceive their view

to be the dominant one, or that it is on the rise.

People are afraid of becoming socially isolated and thus try to avoid such situations as demonstrated by the psychologist Solomon Asch in his conformity experiments, continued the speaker. They showed how people yield to, or defy decisions and attitudes of the majority group. People feel more comfortable by agreeing with opinions that they *know* are wrong instead of telling others their viewpoint like in the fairy tale *The Emperor's New Clothes*.

Next question was if the Internet has the power to free people from the fear of **social isolation**. Research shows that people withdraw from discussion even in an online setting, when there is a dominant opinion that differs from their own. Internet users prefer to communicate with like-minded individuals who have similar values.

The press primarily gives coverage to people who are highly educated, or who have greater status (fame) or who do not fear isolation and are likely to speak out regardless of public opinion. The vocal minority is a major factor of change while the silent majority is a factor of stability. There is a vocal minority, which remains at the top of the spiral in defiance of threats of isolation. As an example, Mrs. Grabner used the abortion debate in Germany. STERN magazine featured famous women who did abortion even while prohibited by law. Afterwards law was changed.

The media defines our perception of what is right or wrong and influences our willingness to discuss controversial issues in public, pointed out the speaker. An opinion which is favoured by the journalists appears stronger than it is. The result is a spiral process which prompts readers/listeners/viewers to follow suit, until the journalists' opinion is established as the prevailing attitude and becomes the norm.

The media shapes public opinion by selecting sources and topics. An opinion or fact which is not published appears to be "non-existent"

People understand events and circumstances mainly by symbols and pictures produced by media reports said in her speech Mrs. Grabner. These **pictures in our heads** derive from the media using **stereotypes** as means to make complicated matters simple and easy to understand. But they also produce **prejudices** and lead to stigmatisation. Walter Lippmann said: "*We are all captives of the picture in our heads*".

As an example of the biased journalism Mrs. Grabner named reports on terror. In the year 2015 around **1000** terror suspects have been arrested in the European Union – among them were **667** jihadists, **168** nationalists/separatists, **67** leftist and **11** rightists. In contrast the media rarely reports about leftist violators but focus on acts of violence by the extreme right.

From the huge amount of news which are daily available,

journalists/publishers filter the news stories which *they want to be spread*. Personal preferences are the key factor of selection. Selective reporting shapes the preferences and decisions of the population. Bias may cause a credibility gap if the public detects grave forms of selective reporting.

Research shows that the majority of journalists prefer leftist or liberal views/sources. Television teams employ certain camera techniques to influence the opinion and decision of voters. The viewers often do not know about party affiliations or world view of the sources. The existence of numerous newspapers or TV channels does not guarantee a **diversity of opinions**, or freedom of choice claimed the speaker. Today the great conformity of media reports is not caused by force like in totalitarian systems but by **self-censorship**.

The lecturer tried to answer the question about the **motivation of the journalist**. She named explicit desire to change or reform society, to gain fame and feel gratification through publicity, the power to avenge personal grievances, to be an advocate for a just cause, the ability to shape politics or to make history.

In her speech Mrs. Grabner mentioned also the **advocacy journalism**. News reports are intended to be objective and unbiased. In contrast, advocacy journalists have a distinctive opinion about the story they are writing. They want to support a "just cause" (to expose political corruption, etc.). To create some balance, they may include other opinions under the motto: "*Don't give your opponents equal time, but don't ignore them either.*"

Journalists inform and educate the public but also function as **watch dogs**

of the political and social sphere. Politicians who failed can be voted out of office. But what about journalists who write the untruth causing damages? Who controls the controller? asked the lecturer. The German sociologist Helmut Schellsky called them „desk criminals“ said in conclusion the speaker.

Afterward the lecture there was a lively discussion. Among the debaters was also the chairman of the Czech Television Council, that supervises the television and radio broadcasting in the Czech Republic. This lecture launched a media project in our country.

In the end Dr. Lajda mentioned 5 ethical rules of the Washington Times newspaper: Media should be free and responsible, media should be moral, get the whole story, get it right, and be the first to get it.