

STRATEGIES FOR IMPOSING A CHARGE ON ONLINE NEWS CONTENT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic not only marked global events in 2020, but also left its marks on news media functioning. The Coronavirus has become a thematic agenda of the newscast of the last month in global, national, and regional media. While radio and TV stations came up with special programmes on the subject of the pandemic, in newspapers, on the Internet and in mobile applications there appeared specialized sections and columns, in which media published news items thematically related to the Coronavirus. Some TV stations made their archives and other usually paid services available free of charge, and mobile operators offered their customers unlimited data. However, the approach to charging a toll for Internet content has also changed. While some media made all content available to their readers, others unlocked, for instance, news items and various content devoted to the pandemic (comments, analyzes, information graphics, etc.). The purpose of the paper is to point out different approaches to the strategy of imposing a charge on the content of news websites during the COVID-19 pandemic, on the example of the most widely read Slovak news portals.

***Keywords:** Covid-19, newscast, news portal, online content charging, Slovak media*

INTRODUCTION: CORONAVIRUS AND THE MEDIA

The pandemic caused by the COVID-19 coronavirus, which spread from China to the rest of the world during the first months of 2020, affected every area of socio-political, economic, cultural and social life in countries and among individuals, and Slovakia was no exception. The first case of infection appeared in Slovakia on 6 March 2020. The government led by Igor Matovič then took numerous measures in response to the recommendations made by the crisis team that were intended to stop the spread of the virus. These included closing all types of schools and educational institutions, reintroducing border controls, prohibiting the entry of foreigners without residency or work in Slovakia from entering the country, the introduction of mandatory home quarantine for those returning from abroad, and the closure of international airports, social and cultural facilities, bars, ski areas and amusement parks. The government declared a state of emergency on 16 March 2020 and ordered the closure of all retail establishments, excepting grocery stores and pharmacies, and prohibited shared eating and dining. The state of emergency in Slovakia ended on 13 June 2020, but an emergency situation still exists. In the paper, the authors discuss robo-journalism, which represents the use

of automatic machines, artificial intelligence and specialized software that works with the natural language to produce news contents. The aim is to raise awareness of this fast-growing segment of the newspaper world, which is carried out by means of the web, mobile technologies, and social networks.

It may be said that the broad implementation of these restrictive measures intended to prevent the spread of the coronavirus had a significant impact on media operations, and on a variety of levels. Given these restrictions, everyday life slowed, and social contact was restricted, which ultimately pushed our social and communication activities into the online environment in particular. People were isolated at home and began spending more time interacting with media than before [1]. From the results of the global Digital News Report 2020 study on media created by Reuters, which covered 40 countries, including Slovakia, the pandemic-related crisis increased demand for news, in particular from credible sources, and especially television stations and established online portals. Social networks, with Instagram dominant among them, became tools for finding information about COVID-19. According to the outcomes of the study, the importance of offline sources, such as television and print media, has been gradually declining in Slovakia, while recipients are using smartphones more and more. Individual media outlets Slovaks trust most include the public broadcaster RTVS (67%), the *TA3* news channel (66%) and the *Hospodárske noviny* daily (58%). Conversely, the outlets with the greatest distrust were the *Nový Čas* tabloid (36%) and the portal *Topky.sk* (31%) [2]. Paradoxically, these are the Slovak news websites with the highest traffic.

The coronavirus crisis increased data usage by 24% compared to normal conditions [3]. All Slovak mobile operators increased data caps, increased data speeds or expanded the scope of free services during the coronavirus crisis under the “Let’s stay home” motto. The goal of the operators was to maintain connectivity and to ensure people had the greatest possible access to means of communication, especially as they had become the new norm given that people were studying and working from home.

The coronavirus also influenced the language used by media [4]. Neologisms and Anglicisms appeared in media language in connection with information about the coronavirus in various contexts. Many far less common words began to be used at a higher frequency during the pandemic. The term “*rúško*” (“mask”), as an example, is now commonplace, while previously it was typically restricted to the medical field. Various portmanteaus have also appeared with “corona” used in the first part and “virus” in the second, such as ‘*koronakríza*’ (“corona-crisis”), “*koronapandémia*” (“corona-pandemic”), “*koronavírusový*” test (“coronavirus test”) and the like.

While the coronavirus became topic number one in Slovak and foreign media and remains relevant in the media agenda today, it has affected media operations in a variety of ways. Many regional and local media are grappling with a

significant decrease in advertising revenues, and in response they have restructured their newsrooms and made employees redundant. Growing economic problems experienced by media in the USA has given rise to an initiative seeking to include local media into government relief measures, which has stoked fears due to potential conflicts of interest. Slovak digital and print media saw sales decrease by up to 40% during the pandemic and an enormous decrease in advertising. The Print and Digital Media Association (“Asociácia tlačných a digitálnych médií”) took the initiative at the beginning of April 2020 by requesting support from the Minister of Culture Natália Milanová and the Minister of Finance Eduard Heger. According to the association, a reduction in the value added tax on periodicals and electronic subscriptions from the current 20% to 10%, the exemption of print media from the recycling fund and the creation of a fund to support journalism would help stabilise the financial condition of Slovak media [5]. No decision has yet been made regarding definitive measures for Slovak media. The current economic situation experienced by some Slovak media is proof that the media sector is very fragile and responding rapidly to changing external conditions [6].

Another problem appeared within the context of providing information about the pandemic and covering related events, specifically the quality of the information being provided. There is a dearth of journalists specialising in medicine at Slovak media outlets, the result of this has been non-critical analysis of the opinions expressed by the contacted experts [7]. Other aspects include opinion plurality, the availability of relevant information, and combating disinformation and hoaxes concerning the coronavirus [8]. The Slovak Council for Broadcasting and Retransmission is leading a working group created by the European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services responsible for assessing how various platforms combat false information about the pandemic. It has been shown that society is now more dependent than ever on the work of serious media outlets, which are playing a major role in combating the spread of the disease. The pandemic has been accompanied by a broad wave of false and misleading information, and efforts made by foreign actors to influence domestic discussions within the EU. In response, the European Commission proposed specific measures concerning communications and information to be incorporated into the European Democracy Action Plan and the Digital Services Act.

CHARGING FOR WEBSITE NEWS CONTENT AND ITS FORMS: FROM CONCEPT TO IMPLEMENTATION

The concept of charging for website news content first appeared in the second half of the 1990s, shortly after print media newsrooms began publishing their content online. Originally, these efforts were simply texts that were published in their printed form, or entire newspapers (in PDF format for example), which newsrooms published online. Media houses were initially wary and distrustful of the Internet and did not consider it as a potential source of advertising revenue.

As such, a certain amount of time was needed before they decided to try and see how readers would respond to having to pay for access to select content.

One of the pioneers of paid content was the American financial daily *The Wall Street Journal*, which began charging for some of its website content in 1996. In response, the newspaper experienced a wave of criticisms from the journalism community. Despite the economic success of this project, the portal gave back access to its content in 2011. Various forms of paid content (either in selected sections, or by providing access to content for a limited period of time, providing access to different devices, etc.) were gradually adopted by the large American and British dailies, including *The Financial Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* [9]. The global economic crisis that began in 2008 was a true test for dailies. Newspaper revenues began to decrease due to a loss of advertising revenues. Some media wanted to respond to these economic problems by charging a symbolic amount for content, as was done by the British websites for *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* (one pound a month). Other news outlets stopped printing their print versions and only existed online.

One project for charging for online content in Slovakia, known as *Piano*, was launched by Media Piano, a. s. on 18 April 2011. Its goal was to educate readers to pay for content and to create new revenue streams for the participating media outlets. Tomáš Bella led this effort. A fee of €3.90 a month provided access to premium content on the websites *sme.sk*, *týždeň.sk*, *theslovak spectator.sk*, *pcrevue.sk*, *pluska.sk*, *korzar.sk* and others, and to the archive of the *TV Joj* station. Media outlet websites, for which users paid, received 40% of payments, an additional 30% was divided between all the connected media outlets based on the time the users spent on their sites, and the remaining 30% was retained by Piano to operate the system [10]. This was a relatively ambitious project at the beginning, but the unclear manner in which funds were redistributed and the non-uniform philosophy of charging for content caused media outlets to abandon it relatively quickly. *Hospodárske noviny's* website was the first to leave in 2013, followed shortly thereafter by *Trend.sk*, *Mediálne.sk* and *Pravda.sk*. The arguments they used included loss of website traffic and low revenues from the charged content. *Piano* terminated its activities in Slovakia at the end of 2014 and moved its headquarters to Vienna.

The concept of charging for content did not disappear after the end of the *Piano* project's activities in Slovakia. Every medium has its own strategy of charging for content provided online. Readers access content using various devices, ranging from personal and laptop computers to tablets, smartphones, and smart TVs.

Various strategies and philosophies currently exist for imposing charges for online content, which vary among the media houses. Voluntary and involuntary payment exist in practice. Voluntary payment is a way for media to generate revenues without forcing its readership to pay to access its journalistic content.

Recipients instead pay through voluntary contributions and gifts. M. Švecová mentions crowdfunding and micropayments within this context [11]. Crowdfunding is a method for sourcing seed capital directly from individuals. It may be defined as public co-funding and typically supports receive a service in kind, such as unlimited subscriptions or premium access to different sections.

Involuntary payment for content includes hard, soft, advertising and national paywalls [12]. This includes the model of charging for premium content and mobile apps. The use of a paywall allows only paying readers to read the content. Some media allow for the beginning portion of an article to be read without purchasing in advance. The reason is to build interest in readers, which may then push them to buy access to subscription content. This is one of the most frequent models found in current newsroom practice. The premium model is another way to charge for content. This is payment for premium content, which is unique thanks to exclusivity. Such content may include commentary and analysis from experts and other content that typically requires significant time and expense to produce. Mobile apps are currently enjoying tremendous popularity. They are free to download, but access to all or select parts of the content in them are subject to a charge.

Various types of subscriptions are connected to the strategy of charging for online content. These include weekly, monthly, quarterly, biannual and annual subscriptions, which typically offer the best pricing. Readers can choose from various bundles that reflect their preferred topics or the way they prefer to access content. Some media provide traditional subscriptions to print editions, digital subscriptions and a mobile phone app in a single bundle.

ACCESSING NEWS CONTENT ON SLOVAK PORTALS DURING THE PANDEMIC

The speed with which the Slovak government implemented restrictions and quarantine measures intended to prevent the spread of coronavirus resulted in foreign media taking note of Slovakia. The renowned American website *Bloomberg* reported on the country as a leader in combating the coronavirus in Europe, highlighting promptness as a key attribute of success [13]. The British daily *The Guardian* reported on Slovakia in the same light. As stated, the coronavirus and information about the virus in various aspects and contexts is a key media topic. The following part focuses on the five most popular Slovak news portals, while our focus is on how these media responded to the new situation within the context of providing access to information content concerning the coronavirus. The most read Slovak news websites based on results from *AIM Monitor* during April, May, June and July 2020 included *Aktuality.sk*, *Čas.sk*, *Pluska.sk*, *Sme.sk* and *Topky.sk* [14].

The *Aktuality.sk* portal is owned by the Ringier Axel Springer media house and it is visited by more than 600,000 readers a day. Peter Bárty is editor-in-chief.

The website's investigative team included journalist Ján Kuciak, who was murdered along with his fiancée Martina Kušnírová on 21 February 2018. The portal created a special section on the website for information about the coronavirus, and all content was made available to readers at no charge. It contained statistical data, graphs and maps in addition to the latest information from Slovakia and abroad. Most of the website's content is accessible to readers at no charge, with the exception of the "Premium" section, which requires a subscription to access any of its content. The newsroom offers various forms of access to premium digital content and engages with the community on this portal by offering weekly, monthly, biannual or annual subscriptions with various benefits.

The Ringier Axel Springer, a. s. media house also owns the *Čas.sk* portal, which is visited by more than 500,000 readers a day. The website created a section named "Coronavirus" in the portal's top menu bar, where it publishes reports on the pandemic, from home and abroad, in chronological order. All of the content on the site, which is also the website of the most read Slovak daily *Nový Čas*, is accessible to readers at no charge and without restriction. However, the news is primarily focused on tabloid topics, including information on the lives of celebrities and other salacious topics.

The website *Pluska.sk*, which is the digital presence of the daily *Plus jeden deň*, has traffic figures of more than 550,000 unique visitors per day. Its owner is News and Media Holding, and its portfolio includes a broad variety of print and online titles (*Plus 7 dní*, *Šarm*, *Eva*, *Zdravie*, *Záhradkár* and others). News reports concerning the coronavirus are summarised in the section named "Corona", while all text and audio-visual content are accessible to readers at no charge. Compared to other news portals, it does not provide infographics, maps or other visualisations focused on the pandemic. This is given by the tabloid focus of this media outlet.

The portal *Sme.sk*, which was long the most popular news website in Slovakia, has an average of 530,000 website visitors a day. Its owner is the media house Petit Press, a.s., which also publishes the *Sme* daily. All website content is only accessible to readers with a subscription, but news reports from the "Coronavirus in Slovakia" section are accessible at no charge. It may be said that the website provides comprehensive information on the development of the pandemic in Slovakia, maps, infographics and other important information concerning protecting against infection, quarantine measures, travel, risky countries and the like. The portal offers various types of subscriptions, which readers use to gain access to more than 10,000 premium articles on *Sme.sk*, *Korzar.sk*, the financial news website *Index*, and *Spectator.sk*. Every subscriber may read *Sme.sk* on three separate browsers, while gaining access to exclusive local news content from the 27 most read regional websites and the 20-year archive of *Sme.sk*. The portal guarantees to refund any unused subscription if cancelled. Beginning on 20 July 2020, the portal has offered a special service,

which includes providing access to all premium articles during the first hour after their publication. This service is intended for those readers who have not yet chosen a digital subscription, but who are registered on the *Sme.sk* website.

The *Topky.sk* website, which falls under the umbrella of *Zoznam.sk*, owned by the telecommunications company Slovak Telekom, has monthly traffic of more than 600,000 readers. The portal created two sections to summarise news reports about the coronavirus titled “Coronavirus in Slovakia” and “Coronavirus in the world”. Website content is free to readers. The overview includes an infographic showing the current number of COVID-19 infections, recoveries and deaths in Slovakia and around the world. The newsroom labels the latest news reports with the tag “important news”.

With respect to a strategy of charging for content on the most popular Slovak news portals, it may be said that they largely reflect the philosophy of the media themselves with respect to access to their digital content. While *Sme.sk* provided free access to all news reports and visualisations focused on the coronavirus, the *Aktuality.sk* portal also made this content available to readers, but used this aspect to consistently remind the reader of the voluntary option to provide financial support for its journalism. Other portals, including *Čas.sk*, *Topky.sk* and *Pluska.sk*, do not charge for their content and are unlikely to take such step in the future in the interests of maintaining their readership. Content from other news media, including television, is accessible online and social networks without restriction. Many television stations are currently broadcasting their main news programs live on social networks to ensure they remain as close as possible to recipients.

CONCLUSION

There can be no doubt at present that the pandemic caused by the coronavirus is the first large media pandemic of the 21st century, which has been determined by the media themselves to a large extent. A Dutch media theorist M. Deuze in the study *The Role of Media and Mass Communication Theory in the Global Pandemic* stated: “It is perhaps also not surprising, from this point of view, that most of the debates and discussions about the pandemic do not just concern the virus and its impact, but focus especially on the roles of expert information provision, news coverage, government communications, and social media. It is clear that the coronavirus pandemic is a mediatized event as much as it is a virus that infects millions of people around the world” [15]. During the pandemic, interest in online and television news grew, which also exposed the weaknesses of media organisations at the same time. These include incompetence and a lack of preparedness with respect to providing information from the field of medicine given a lack of specialised reporters in their area, and the publication of disinformation and hoaxes, which undermines the credibility of the news media as a whole. While there are costs to creating news content, publishing houses have been accommodating with respect to readers and provided access to content

related to this pressing topic free of charge. Understandably, their intent has been to maintain their existing audience and attract new readers. Telecommunications operators responded in much the same way when they increased mobile data limits, together with other companies who provided their products for free, such as for educational purposes. Time will tell what developments are to follow in the coming months.

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