

# IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON REGIONAL AND LOCAL MEDIA – CASE STUDY

**Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ján Višňovský, PhD.<sup>1</sup>**

**Mgr. Alexandra Mathiasová<sup>2</sup>**

**Mgr. Juliána Mináriková, PhD.<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1, 2, 3</sup> Faculty of Mass Media Communication, University of SS. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Slovakia

## ABSTRACT

COVID-19 pandemic, and its several waves with different intensity, and also stronger or weaker restrictions, has influenced the everyday life of people all around the world. Pandemic hit media indeed. People needed the newest information about the evolution of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which is the virus that causes COVID-19. Organisations, events and businesses were stopped or closed, so media content was directed to outbreak info. And if organisations, events and businesses were stopped, creators, event managers and business makers didn't even need advertising or other propagation of their activities. It wasn't happening on a global scale only, but also in the local. So the local and regional media, financially dependent on advertising, was hardly hit by the outage of this type of income. This paper explores how COVID-19 pandemic impacted the functioning of smaller local and regional media. The paper looks at the content of regional media, impacted by the pandemic, at the amount of advertising and covers the other changes, which the coronavirus outbreak made.

***Keywords:** advertising, business model, COVID-19 pandemic, local and regional media*

## INTRODUCTION

When in January 2020 the first information about the outbreak of a new coronavirus in China began to reach Slovakia, at that time official institutions reported only a few hundred cases of infection. Initial information was initially briefly reported by the Slovak national media, which, however, devoted more and more space to the topic day by day. The reasons for this were the increasing number of infected people and the spread of the virus beyond the borders of both China and Asia. February 2020 was the month when all Slovak national media were already reporting on the epidemic, later reclassified by the World Health Organisation as a pandemic. Regional media gradually began to cover the new coronavirus at a time when the first suspicions were being raised in the Slovak regions and laboratories were testing potentially infected people. Intensive coverage of the coronavirus began in early March 2020, due to the nationwide anti-pandemic measures, which, logically, affected the population of each region.

It is as if the world stopped and, from one day to the next, the topics that originally formed the content of the local periodical press or broadcasts simply disappeared.

The coronavirus pandemic has affected different media in different ways. While the recipients noticed it primarily on the thematic level, when it began to fill the front pages of newspapers and dominate radio and television coverage, not excluding online, as early as the end of March 2020, F. Struhárik, in his article, drew attention to other impacts of the pandemic on the print media and the print journalism industry. He reported that Penta Publishing would lay off roughly a quarter of the editorial staff of the weekly *Trend*, which switched to a bi-weekly frequency. The coronavirus also caused problems with the distribution of print titles. *Hospodárske noviny* had to change its format and move its printing from Olomouc, Czech Republic, to Bratislava in a short time. Similar, perhaps even more radical, interventions in the functioning of editorial offices came from abroad. In Ukraine, national daily newspapers temporarily ceased publication, and journalists in the US and the UK warned that many local media outlets would not survive, of these especially the free ones that depend on advertising [1]. On the other hand, television viewership and web traffic increased radically at the time of the pandemic, both nationally and globally, as declared by several studies [2].

## **REGIONAL AND LOCAL MEDIA, THEIR POSITION AND THEIR FUNCTIONS IN THE MEDIA SYSTEM**

The role of the periodical press and other news formats is primarily to report on current events in the context of the focus of the product. In particular, the periodical press is conceived in the form of a certain coexistence of journalistic and non-journalistic expressions, of which the journalistic ones make up the bulk of the content of a given medium. This is also true for the regional and local press, which, however, works with certain specificities. By default, the regional or local press covers all topics, i.e. it reports on all areas that are wholly or partially relevant to a given region, which is why the concept of such press is very diverse and varied. A. Tušer divides regional and local press in terms of the proximity of the event being reported. By local media he means municipal or city media, by regional media he means those that report on a district, region or specific area. He also says that the local media in particular, and only after that the regional media, has the ability to integrate, orient and specifically inform the recipient. With regional and local media, the integrative function of the media is strongly manifested, which is due to the philosophy of the regional and local area. This is because everyday life is felt by the citizen primarily on the regional and local area, while on the national level he can judge the results rather virtually [3]. The media, and thus also the periodical press in the Slovak Republic, is legally covered by the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic, which also maintains a publicly accessible register of the periodical press. According to its territorial jurisdiction, the Ministry divides the press into national, regional and outside the territory of the Slovak Republic. There are 642 titles registered in Slovakia, of which 561 are published in the Slovak language. Two regional daily newspapers are registered

in the Slovak language – *Prešovský večerník* and *Korzár*. There are 24 regional weekly newspapers, but these include privately-owned newspapers as well as newspapers published by local authorities and advertising newspapers. There are 19 bi-weeklies and 97 monthly magazines, but only 16 of these are either advertising titles or privately owned newspapers. Regional newspapers with a lower frequency are usually published by local governments, which do not sell the resulting periodicals but distribute them free of charge to the population. There are 42 bi-monthly newspapers under the territorial jurisdiction of the regional authorities, 120 quarterly newspapers, 56 titles published twice a year, and 201 titles registered as being published with a so-called other periodicity. There are 30 regional television broadcasters registered in the Slovak Republic that broadcast digitally. There are 83 registered local digital broadcasters. Four multi-regional broadcasters broadcast via satellite, 5 broadcast regionally via cable distribution systems and 22 broadcasts locally.

The regional press and broadcasters report on municipal politics, municipal issues, as well as local culture, social events and sport, which form an integral part of the resulting media products. The anti-pandemic measures, which radically reduced the functioning of most regional and local activities, closed schools, institutions, and sports venues, can also be seen as limiting the source of topics for local periodicals. H. Bakičová and S. Ruß-Mohl in their publication *Journalism* also outline the principle of functioning of regional editors and reporters, who do not just sit in a newsroom or office, but regularly go out among the people [4]. The reality is that, despite the age of social networking and the expansion of electronic media, the best source of local issues is interpersonal contact with the local people concerned, which is why many issues are outlined at receptions - the relaxed part of formal gatherings, or in cafes, pubs or other events. In this context, it is clear that if the population stays at home from one day to the next, there is not enough communication about the problems, which have not disappeared by depopulating the streets - they have just gone quiet for a while.

### **IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON LOCAL MEDIA – A CASE STUDY OF SELECTED SLOVAK LOCAL NEWSPAPERS**

The impact of the pandemic was felt in all areas of the world, not excluding the journalistic community. While large daily newspapers, which have a stable market position and also work with payment gateways and subscriptions for readers, have seen significant growth in subscription interest since the beginning of the pandemic, other media have rather faced problems of lack of funding. The director of Petit Press, a.s., which publishes Slovakia's most widely read opinion daily and dozens of other titles, says that the first spring wave of the 2020 pandemic threatened to wipe out up to 30% of sales and advertising revenues. But that trend lasted only a few weeks, he says, and then there was a reversal. The publisher's print and digital subscription sales grew, but newsstand sales were down 4%. He added, however, that revenues at *SME*, the largest opinion daily, were performing better than other parts of the publishing business, with *SME*

down only 5% year-on-year in print advertising revenues, but the regional part of the publishing business approached the 20% decline threshold. Petit Press publishes regional weeklies and in the east the daily *Korzar* [5]. On this basis, we can conclude that it is the smaller media, regional and local periodicals, which, although they have an established readership, have been much more affected by the pandemic, but they are dependent on advertising from smaller businesses, shops, restaurants, etc., which themselves struggled to survive during the pandemic. The national media are attractive to advertisers such as large supermarket chains, operators, etc., which did not have to cease operations after the onset of the coronavirus but, on the contrary, supermarket chains, for example, saw record sales.

The most affected media segment was, therefore, the smaller media, which, however, as we have already mentioned, play an irreplaceable role in the market, as they inform the population about activities, news and other important events that directly affect them and come into contact with them on a daily basis. However, various types of these smaller media entities have reacted in their own ways to the reduction in the amount of advertising, the reduction in 'non-controversial' content. If we look at municipal newspapers published by local governments, the reduction in the frequency of newspaper publication is evident. An example is the municipal bi-weekly *Hlas Vrbového* (*Voice of Vrbove*), which in normal years was published regularly every two weeks, but as a bi-weekly it was only published during the summer holiday months or during the Easter and Christmas holidays. Since the beginning of the pandemic, however, the periodical has been published only in the form of double issues, i.e. the frequency of publication is monthly in 2020 and monthly in 2021. In terms of content, the periodical has, from the beginning, provided information on regulations and recommendations concerning the coronavirus, but it has also alerted the population to the closure of establishments and institutions and, where appropriate, indicated the form of contact that is currently preferred. In the *Hlas Vrbového*, logically, there was no substantial information about the events that took place, and so the town hall publishes a double issue with the original number of pages for a single issue, i.e. on eight pages [6].

A similar situation can be observed with the periodical *Novinky spod Bradla* (*News from under Bradlo*). This monthly newsletter of the town of Brezová pod Bradlom is published by the local town hall on eight or twelve pages. Since the beginning of the coronary crisis, however, the newspaper has been published as a bi-monthly issue, i.e. once every two months, mostly on twelve pages, rarely on eight. In the case of *Novinky spod Bradla*, however, it was not the case that all the previous content was replaced by information about the coronavirus and the measures taken, but even though the pandemic situation was referred to several times in the texts, the periodical continued to stick to the line of reporting on other activities related to life in the city. The content of the newspaper did not consist of information about closed institutions or other restrictions, but continued to

cover municipal issues of all kinds, and the social section and other sections were also part of the content [7].

The weekly newspaper published by the municipal government, Banská Štiavnica, which bore the name *Štiavnické noviny*, reacted to the coronacrisis by increasing the price of the issue. The previous 40 cents was changed to 50 cents from April 2020, while the number of pages was maintained. The content of the *Štiavnické noviny* has also changed, because since the pandemic, the editorial board has tried to inform via the newspaper about the latest measures, restrictions, as well as the disease itself and the possible consequences with the content of the newspaper. Such content was the main focus of the newspaper, especially in the first weeks after the pandemic, but after some time the editorial board returned to reporting on all topics, not least coronavirus. The weekly continues to be published regularly, once a week, on 12 pages. However, the changed price of the periodical has become established and has remained at the now increased 50 cents [8].

In the Slovak Republic, not only municipalities and towns are publishers of periodicals, but also private individuals can be owners of publishing houses. In the regional sphere, there are fewer periodicals published by private owners because, especially due to the emergence of new media, the spread of the internet and internet news, regional print periodicals have become a product that does not make a profit or makes only a minimal profit, but on the contrary, it is often necessary to subsidise such an entity. Therefore, not many entrepreneurs are interested in owning smaller media outlets, which bring with them a number of problems, such as accountability, direct confrontation with the objects of journalistic output, and others. One of the regional weeklies that have emerged since the fall of the socialist regime back in the former Czechoslovak Republic, and after the possibility of private ownership of the media emerged, is the weekly *Piešťanský týždeň* (*Piešťanský Weekly*). Published since 1991, it has changed format several times and is currently published in A3 format. While before March 2020 this privately owned regional weekly *Piešťanský týždeň* was published on 24 pages at a price of 80 cents, the pandemic changed this. As of February 2021, in an effort to reduce printing costs and staffing, the publishing house reduced the number of pages by 4. The size of the periodical dropped to twenty newspaper pages, while its price remained the same. Shortly thereafter, just one month later, the publishing house also proceeded to change the price, with the amount per copy, 80 cents, remaining the same for subscribers, but the on-sale price increasing to 99 cents. Another reason is the content of the newspaper, as social events and the activities of many local authorities have ceased due to the pandemic, filling the periodical with quality content every week and not slipping into repetition or the use of more non-newspeak seems to be a difficult task in this case. The volume of advertising and publicity has also been considerably reduced [9]. Whereas in April 2019, on average, display advertising took up three pages plus one or two small ads on the front page of the edition, in April 2020, after the onset of the pandemic, it was only two pages and rarely one small ad on the front

page. However, of those two pages, one and a half pages were just cross-advertising for the publisher's other products, which meant that the standard advertisement only averaged half a page. Nor did the big increase come year-on-year, i.e., as of April 2021. At that time, flat advertising covered an average of two-and-a-half newspaper pages, but still one-and-a-half newspaper pages were taken up by cross-page advertising. At this time, Slovakia was experiencing the second wave of the pandemic.

Other publishers describe a similar situation, including Reed Anfinson, a publisher and actively writing editor. “While there's more news to fill the pages of Anfinson's papers this year, his publications have had to shrink to survive as cash-strapped businesses have pulled ads, forcing the papers to shed pages and cut staff positions and hours.” [10]

Local and regional newspapers have also changed in terms of content, as they have mostly reported on pandemic-related issues. The first edition of the newspaper *Piešťanský týždeň*, which was published after the declaration of the state of emergency, already reflected society-wide events. Not only the cover photo, but also the introductory text and almost the entire front pages were concerned with the coronavirus outbreak and the impact on local institutions. The pages devoted to social events were still processing the latest cultural and social events, but they were already talking about the possibilities of visitors planning to return tickets and dealing with missed events. What developed over the following weeks of the pandemic was the reduced participation of the region's residents in content creation. While during the open editorial period recipients would come to the editorial office with suggestions, small advertisements, memories of deceased relatives and congratulations to jubilarians, also mothers after giving birth at the local hospital would have their photographs taken for the periodical, the measures have radically reduced or altered altogether.

However, there has also been a change in social media traffic. Several hundred percent increases in reach and recipient interactions spoke to a strong interest in the freshest information, but because of the low need for businesses to advertise new products or event invitations, social traffic numbers did not translate into financial revenue. *Piešťanský Týždeň's Facebook* page recorded a reach of 318 thousand users in March 2020, which represented a 100% increase from February 2020. The increase in traffic or readership of media is also confirmed by Rachael Jolley at The Conversation. “Hundreds of thousands of people have turned to their local newspaper websites during the pandemic for a clearer understanding of the local implications of this national crisis,” the author reports, adding that, for example, the Bishop's Stortford Independent, a weekly newspaper in Hertfordshire, has seen an increase in readership from 260,000 in January to 360,000 in October (2020) [11]. He explains this by the fact that people who stayed at home from one day to the next needed information about changes, precautions, where they could get tested for COVID-19, or where they could still buy toilet paper, which was one of the scarce commodities of the first

wave of the pandemic. The Welsh Parliament reports, for example, talk about the huge interest of recipients in journalistic content, but also mentions the issue of keeping the periodical financially fit, due to the challenging business environment during the pandemic [12].

From this perspective, the most important observation is that although the first and second waves of the pandemic have passed and the republic has almost returned to normal, the changes it caused in the segment of small regional and local media still remain in force and have not returned to their original form. Just as the *Štiavnické noviny* remains with its new price of 0.80 cents, the *Piešťanský týždeň* is still published in twenty pages. The *Hlas Vrbového* and *Novinky spod Bradla* are still published as double issues at a lower frequency.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that while some business areas benefited during the coronavirus pandemic, the payment gateway systems of the large media outlets were more widely accepted by people and subscriptions were bought much more readily, smaller media outlets, due to the lack of need for small businesses to advertise, suffered significant losses. Even after more than a year and a half, they have not been able to recover from these losses, but it is evident that most media still see their mission to inform as important and are not giving up the fight. Regional journalism is important and forms an essential part not only of the mass media world, but is also an indispensable source of information for the people who inhabit a given locality [13]. Despite the wide range of media products available, it continues to be popular with recipients, precisely because of its concreteness and high degree of specificity. With central media and central themes, recipients often cope with abstraction - they have never seen the people described, they have never been to the places, and they have never visited the institutions. In contrast, regional or local press and broadcasting contain content that recipients know well and can thus more easily identify with, understand and possibly identify with the issue. It is therefore in the interest of the recipients themselves that regional journalism is preserved and 'survives' the coronavirus crisis. In particular, those that are privately run and do more than just PR for the local authority that publishes them are important for maintaining objectivity in the local area. This is because it can create a control mechanism for the activities of local government, it helps to solve civic problems, and it uses the power of the media to speed up the resolution of long-standing problems.

On the other hand, the pandemic has also highlighted the shortcomings of the journalistic profession when it comes to covering the issue of the coronavirus, both globally and at a regional and local level. Increasingly, not only the pandemic but also the infodemic of fake news, half-news and hoaxes [14] are being discussed, but they have a rather large impact on society and individuals. Examples include the proliferation of myths about the coronavirus and its cure or the strong anti-vaxxer campaign spread primarily through social media [15]. It is

therefore important for media and content creators to be aware of their influence and to be guided by the principles of professional journalism and journalistic ethics.

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