

Misleading Through Images: Television News as Simulacrum

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Abstract

The aim of the presented theoretical-empirical study, which is based on theoretical reflection on the issue in question, case study and application of quantitative content analysis, is to discuss the occurrence of simulations in contemporary television newscasting in the context of the construction of media reality. Due to the specificity of the topic and the complexity of the research, we focus on informing about foreign affair events portrayed by the Slovak news television channel *TA3*. Drawing from current studies and acquired data sets, the research material consists of 712 television news items by *TA3* and 4208 audio-visual agency materials by *Reuters* published over a two-month period, more specifically in January 2019 and May 2019. We conducted quantitative content analysis in order to point out the degree of occurrence of simulations in television news. Considering the results of the inquiry, we can confirm the unclear labelling of stock and archive images in every eighth television news item, which can lead to distortion of recipients' imagination, i.e., towards misrepresentation or 'bending' objective reality in their minds caused by television broadcasting.

Keywords: audio-visual materials, media reality, news, simulacrum, social constructivism, television

1. Introduction

Problems and concepts such as television news, agenda-setting, media reality or the relationship between images (signs) and objective reality belong among the traditional research topics of media and communication studies. Talking about and pointing to current journalistic practice and its trends, especially in the era of hypermodern society, which is marked by a significant increase in spreading disinformation, fake news and deepfakes, is very important for the development of civil society. Following the framework of the presented study, we focus on media reality and the ways it comes into existence – specifically on processing foreign news reports which are present in television broadcasting. In our opinion, insufficient attention is paid to one of the strongest aspects of media communication – the use of audio-visual material, which evokes in viewers a sense of credibility and direct contact with objective reality outside their empirical experience. Therefore, we pay attention to the labelling of accompanying illustrations, stock images or archive materials. Given the nature of audio-visual media and their potential influence on the creation of social discourses and worldviews, it is important to clearly identify the origin of such audio-visual materials and, if necessary, to mark them (as stock images, archive images, etc.). Offering a case study of *TA3*, the only TV broadcaster (at the time of the research) in the Slovak Republic providing a monotype news program service to the public, we point out the media practice of this specific news channel and the character of its news content. With regard to this issue, the theoretical part of the study pays attention to key concepts – social constructivism and the creation of media reality, the concept of “simulacrum” in the context of television news and, of course, news agencies, which are an irreplaceable source of information and audio-visual media materials on the global scale.

2. Theoretical Background

The research on media effects and the influence of media content on cognitive mechanisms, social behavior and individual decision-making is an important part of media and communication studies. These communication patterns manifest themselves through voting decisions, parental upbringing, media consumption, etc. The impact of the media on society is vivid and undoubted, although the media effects inquiry is often hard to define or even conduct. Many theorists talk about ambiguity of media reality and the media's inability (or rather impossibility) to generate and disseminate clear, objective information. The reason is that the media present only their own interpretations of specific events, facts or people processed by particular employees (Pereira & Correia, 2007; Vojtek, 2012; Lapčík, 2012;

Osvaldová et al., 2020). Journalists, editors, screenwriters or cameramen can all be considered as such media professionals. Their interpretations of reality are closely related to the meaning of the term “social constructivism”. McQuail says that “social constructivism” is a broad and significant branch of social sciences. In the context of media, it is necessary to focus on their society-wide influence. Much research has been aimed at defining social constructs formed within the relationships between news, entertainment, consumer culture and public opinion. As further noted by McQuail (2009), the representation of “reality”, as it is produced and disseminated by news stories, is just a fragment of information and observations put together. He states that *“the term ‘social construct’ is related to the process, through which events, persons, values and ideas are identified and interpreted, and then labelled by certain value or priority”* (McQuail, 2009, p. 113-114). And this is the role mass media fulfil so profoundly; the process results in representations of broader reality (McQuail, 2009, p. 114). Let us consider a simple example – television news about a traffic accident. If a widely known person (a politician or celebrity) was involved or many people were injured or killed, the media would pay attention to the situation. Such information gains multiple news values, and therefore the media send their reporters to the scene. However, individual news reports about the same accident will necessarily differ. The reason is that every reporter talks to different witnesses, cameramen take different shots from different angles, during postproduction each journalist uses different editing procedures, as well as their own commentary, etc. It is more than certain that particular pieces of news will differ from each other – more or less, although all of them present key facts, answering all basic questions. This is the way specific versions of reality are built and we can denote them as “media reality”.

“Media reality” is a well-established and widely discussed concept of media and communication studies. Many theorists have addressed the topic and are interested in it even nowadays (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 2004; Enli, 2015; Mylonas, 2018; Greguš, 2018; Labutina & Topchii, 2019; Volokhova, 2020; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020; etc.). One of the pioneering theorists was Lippman (1922) who thought of and described the concept of the so-called pseudo-environment – it is a perception of the world which is created within our own minds. According to him, we can imagine it as a repertoire of ‘pictures’ which often do not coincide with the real state of objective reality. These ‘pictures’ are strongly determined by media content. That is why the pseudo-environment can influence our behavior – e.g., media-presented stereotypes about specific ethnic groups can cause fear or hatred expressed toward them although those fearing and hating them have never met any person with such ethnic background. Media images can change our thinking about everyday life, social problems and criminality in developing countries as well as in highly developed Western democracies. Impacts and effects of media content on the public opinion are continually reflected on by Shaw & McCombs, who are renowned thanks to their widely known concept of “agenda-setting”. Their research carried out in 1968 confirmed a correlation between topics present within public discourse and topics presented by the media. As a result, the authors proposed a well-known thesis which was later modified by McCombs: *“Not only the media can tell us what to think about, they can also influence how we think about it”* (A First Look at Communication Theory, 2014). There is no doubt that *“the pictures in people’s minds about the outside world are significantly influenced by the mass media, both what those pictures are about and what those pictures are”* (McCombs, 2011, p. 17).

In journalistic practice, information sources have a dominant influence on what will and will not be presented in the media. In the context of our study, it is necessary to highlight the position of news agencies. Cambridge Dictionary defines a “news agency” as *“an organization that supplies reports to newspapers, magazines, and television and radio companies”* (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Besides the term “news agencies”, it is also common to use synonymic expressions such as “news service”, “press agency”, “press association”, or “wire service”. Authors affiliated with APA News characterize news agencies as *“the heart of the journalism industry”* because their content *“can be from news photographs, news interpretation, special columns related to a subject, audio recording for radio broadcast, and video for television broadcast”* (APA News, 2019). Since their production consists of many contents in different forms and volumes, news agencies are the most frequent, clear, simply and quickly processable information sources offering information on current domestic and foreign society-wide events from various areas of social life such as politics, economy, culture, sports, science and technology, health care, etc. Paying attention to news agency content, the Press Agency of the Slovak Republic (TASR) defines it as concise, clear information about current, socially important or interesting events or phenomena which announce new, as yet unknown facts or, alternatively, known facts presented from different points of view. Nevertheless, this information captures just a certain part of objective reality (TASR, n.d.). That is why we consider news agencies to be a crucial part of the process of creating media reality. In general, we can state that the dominance of news agencies in the news environment is vivid – this information source offers substantial facts which affect and shape news production in all types of media – television, radio, the press and also the Internet (see Lewis, Williams & Franklin, 2008; Johnston & Forde, 2011; Schulten-Jaspers, 2013; Boumans et al., 2018; Nicholls, 2019; Cattamatta, 2020; Rantanen, 2021; etc.). News services do not possess a ‘strong resonance’ within recipients’ minds – nevertheless, they allow the media audiences to notice their favorite journalists, columnists, presenters, etc. Even though we do not always realize the extent to which news agencies participate in the production of news, they play an important role in creating media reality and directly influence it (Greguš & Višňovský, 2020), specifying the topics which the public talks about. Johnston and Forde (2011, p. 196) point

out the ever-increasing role and position of news services on the media market. They consider them as rather invisible, but very influential parts of the media environment.

This dominant position of news agencies is actually quite logical. Today's journalism co-exists with the world of strong, competitive online media. Thus, journalists have to create a plethora of information very quickly and dynamically. Since newsrooms do not possess enough means to gather as many facts as news services, they use the services provided by news agencies from which they obtain information and content either in unchanged form, or they add something to it, or they use it as a basis for their own authors' content (Kvetanová, Kačincová Predmerská & Švecová, 2020). Therefore, much information included in news stories actually originates from such agencies.

In the context of media reality, we find it important to mention the concept of "simulacrum". The publication *The System of Objects* by Baudrillard (see Baudrillard, 2005), was first published roughly at the same time as the idea of agenda-setting appeared (in 1968). According to Merrin (2005), it referred to "*the existence and operation of the immense signifying system that constitutes our contemporary western cultural experience. This is a system in which all objects, messages and products, and all history, culture, meaning, relations and experience, become transformed into signs that replace and mediate experience, communicating, in their structural interrelations, a variety of meanings and messages*" (Merrin, 2005, p. 10). Baudrillard claimed that all things (subjects) have so-called symbolic value. Later, he defined the concept of "postmodern society" "*in which consumer and electronic images have become more real (hyperreal) than physical reality and in which simulations of reality (simulacra) have displaced their originals*" (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2021). In his opinion, "hyperreality" is an artificial reality which has greater influence on the audience than any objective reality (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 1-5). Šebeš (2003) reminds us that the nature of simulation is to reach a state in which a simulacrum cannot be distinguished from reality even though it is a false reality – therefore, it becomes hyperreality. According to the author, the best example is associated with media images, "*a representation of things and events through mass media*" (Šebeš, 2003, p. 75). Another practical example of hyperreal media images refers to archive or stock footage appearing in television news. Kačincová Predmerská states that a "newscast" "*is a public type of communication offering the reflection on current events – informing the general public about important, beneficial, interesting, unsuccessful, tragic, engaging and other facts, while it includes events that are important or interesting for recipients*" (Kačincová Predmerská, 2017, p. 23).

Combining images and sounds is the main advantage of television news. Visual, auditory or audio-visual material included in television news content seemingly offers a more authentic and more trustworthy story to the audience. However, in many cases, unclear parallels or rather discrepancies between broadcast images and objective reality can be problematic. This issue becomes especially serious when journalists do not properly identify supplementary visual or audio-visual materials – e.g., if journalists use news footage that is several months old to visualize the present place, person or event on which the news story is centered, in current broadcasting. In these cases, an announcement such as 'Stock Footage' should be displayed, or other communication means should be used to unambiguously inform the viewers that the footage is not directly associated with the portrayed event. The reason is simple – if the displayed location/person/event has changed since the footage was taken, the recipient may be convinced that the depicted item still looks like that, while objective reality may be diametrically different. So, misrepresentation or 'bending' of objective reality through media reality might occur, which confirms the idea that television news is, in its nature, largely formed by simulacra. The question is to what extent and in what thematic and geographical context such situations occur in journalistic practice. Since we have not found any research of such kind, at least not in relation to the Slovak media environment, the main goal of this study is to reveal the current state of misrepresentation and representation of reality in contemporary television newscasting in Slovakia.

3. Research Methodology

Following the aim of our study, we use quantitative content analysis. We presume that this particular research tool provides us with the opportunity to acquire relevant data. Quantitative content analysis is a traditional method of inquiry utilized to explore and understand television production, in our case television news, since it enables systematic and verifiable description of examined phenomena. Trampota & Vojtěchovská (2010, p. 103) state that its main advantages are portability, objectivity and clarity (the possibility to transfer obtained data into figures and tables). Furthermore, content analysis allows us to define the general structures related to selection and production of foreign news and thus to gather hard data we can process via statistical methods to identify relations between variables. This is confirmed by several academics specializing in media and communication studies (see, for example, Scherer, 2004, p. 29-34; Hendl, 2008; Greguš & Mináriková, 2016; Greguš & Kačincová Predmerská, 2020). On the other hand, we also use various components of structural image analysis. This inquiry technique focuses on interpretation of visual content presented by the media. According to Trampota & Vojtěchovská (2010), such image analysis usually oscillates between quantitative and qualitative methods; therefore, it is often conducted in terms of television broadcasting research as well as in the context of research on photographs published in the press or other types of media content which are created via technological means. The

reason why there is so much research aimed at television is the prevailing belief that, when compared with texts, “*visual footage is a relatively true reflection of reality*” (Trampota & Vojtěchovská, 2010, p. 155-157).

3.1 Research Material

The aim of our study is to identify the ways in which television news utilizes simulacra and the extent of visual hyperreality included in broadcast news. We focus on correctly acknowledging and labelling stock or archive footage, thanks to which we can avoid misrepresentations of objective reality in recipients’ minds. Following our research goal, we conduct a case study of the only TV news channel (to date) in the Slovak Republic providing a monotype news program service to the public – *TA3* television. By doing so, we follow up on previous research aimed at information sources and the ways information is processed into news by *TA3* (Greguš & Višňovský, 2020), as well as on a research inquiry on *TA3*’s thematic and geographic agenda in connection to foreign news (Greguš & Kačincová Predmerská, 2020). We have not found such data associated with other broadcasters in Slovakia or elsewhere. Research samples of the mentioned research consist of all foreign news stories broadcast by *TA3* (n=1621) and all foreign news released by the news channel’s main information sources – the news agencies *TASR*, *ČTK* and *Reuters* (Note 1) (n=13 792) published throughout two months – more specifically, in January 2019 and May 2019 (Greguš & Višňovský, 2020). It can be considered as an optimal sample since during January and May television broadcasting is not influenced by any significant holidays (such as Easter, Christmas), parliamentary vacation or other important events. Moreover, in 2019 there was no worldwide pandemic of COVID-19 or war in Ukraine which now significantly affect both territorial and thematic interfaces of television news. That is why we focus on the earlier situation, which can be labelled as ‘representative’, meaning standard in relation to both broadcast and worldwide events. Since news is able to eliminate influences of particular extraordinary events causing its temporary change, we see the era of the pandemic of COVID-19 and the armed conflict in Ukraine as a specific period of journalism and, therefore, in the context of our study, we focus on 2019 and the most suitable conditions for conducting quantitative research on television news. Of course, we do not deny a possibly permanent influence of the pandemic or the war on future news making but since these unprecedented events are still far from over, we want to point out the ‘standard’ state of television news broadcasting in Slovakia. Scholarly examinations of post-COVID news should be conducted in the future, when we will be able to assess the impact of the pandemic more objectively and from a wider perspective.

As we have access to data sets associated with the above-mentioned research (Greguš & Višňovský, 2020; Greguš & Kačincová Predmerská, 2020), we further work with the database (n=15 413 items, both those broadcast by *TA3* and those serving as their information sources about foreign news events during January 2019 and May 2019), using it as a baseline for our research. We selected 712 television news items about foreign events based on these items’ format. This was audio-visual news that was broadcast within foreign blocks – it is a permanent part of the broadcasting structure of the examined news television. Within the 62 monitored days (January 2019 and May 2019), these news reports occurred on every single day (minimum: 3; maximum: 18).

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics

All Broadcast Foreign News		News Broadcast as Part of Foreign Blocks	
Mean	26.145161	Mean	11.48387
Standard Error	0.488821	Standard Error	0.422617
Median	26	Median	12
Mode	26	Mode	9
Standard Deviation	3.8489802	Standard Deviation	3.327688
Sample Variance	14.814648	Sample Variance	11.07351
Kurtosis	0.105337	Kurtosis	-0.01884
Skewness	-0.123209	Skewness	-0.25264
Range	19	Range	15
Minimum	16	Minimum	3
Maximum	35	Maximum	18
Sum	1621	Sum	712
Count	62	Count	62

Note. Own processing

In Table 1, we offer a closer statistic description based on comparison with the total number of foreign news reports broadcast over the monitored period and the news selected for our research. The continuous and regular occurrence of these items in *TA3*'s broadcasting and the possibility to conduct their further content analysis were the reasons for selecting this research material. In this sample we were able to uncover identifiers of simulacra and hyperreality. The research material also consisted of all audio-visual news items published by *Reuters* over the same time period ($n=4208$) that we obtained from the database mentioned above. As we emphasized in the theoretical background, news agencies are co-creators of media reality. The news agency *Reuters* is used by *TA3*'s newsroom mainly to obtain audio-visual materials rather than just textual content as is the case, in comparison, with *ČTK* or *TASR* (Greguš & Višňovský, 2020). Since during the researched period (January 2019 and May 2019) *Reuters* was the only contracted news agency offering audio-visual content, which did not have to be marked with a label of the source in *TA3*'s newscasting, we consider it as *TA3*'s primary source of visual footage. *Reuters*'s role as a significant source of information which the examined *TA3*'s newsroom works with extensively is based not only on theoretical knowledge, but also on statistical evaluation of the significant relationship between the number of news items released by *Reuters* and the number of news items broadcast by *TA3* television – $r = .344$, $p < 0.001$ (Greguš & Višňovský, 2020).

We are aware of possible limits associated with the research we present. First, the obtained information and results of this case study cannot be generalized to all TV news since we examine just one nationwide television broadcaster; even though during the research period it was the only specialized broadcaster providing just news operating in the Slovak media environment. However, we think our choice is optimal because *TA3* is continuously considered by the audience as the most trustworthy TV news broadcaster in Slovakia (Newman et al., 2021). Its viewership is also permanently rising (Maxa, 2021; *TA3*, 2021). While interpreting the findings, we focus on our primary goal – to identify the current state and occurrence of simulacra in television news. Second, we also have to mention the fact that we have not found any other research on TV news with such an aim which could help us to compare our results. Nevertheless, the results we offer should be further re-examined and confirmed or rejected by more extensive studies taking into account several broadcasters from various countries.

3.2 Research Questions and Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical background and the research material, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1: Which sources of audio-visual material are declared by the *TA3* newsroom in relation to events that are not audio-visually covered by *Reuters*?

RQ1.1: On which geographical parts of the world and to what extent did *TA3* news stories not have any actual audio-visual material from *Reuters*, but the newsroom still did not specify any other source?

RQ1.2: On what topics and to what extent did *TA3* news stories not have any actual audio-visual material from *Reuters*, but the newsroom still did not specify any other source?

4. Results

Based on the data set related to quantitative content analysis, we were able to identify the amount of audio-visual material that was provided to *TA3*'s newsroom by *Reuters* within the monitored period, as well as whether the newsroom could or could not use this material while producing broadcast news coverage. This audio-visual material, the way it is processed and its contextual framework – an accompanying commentary describing the events and specific places – are, as we believe, closely related to the hyperreal nature of television news, influencing its forms.

During the inquired period, *Reuters* published 4208 audio-visual materials with textual elements. These videos may be downloaded by newsrooms via digital storages, processed by them in terms of editing and used while creating individual news items. The textual element consists of two aspects. The first part comprises a detailed description of the given audio-visual recording. It also includes data on the location where the recorded material was taken; individual shots with their descriptions (what they depict, audio, ambient sounds, etc.) are divided into specific sections. In cases where the audio-visual material also involves synchronous statements of respondents or witnesses, these expressions are written in English – either as direct transcripts or as translations from foreign languages. Identification data associated with the speaking persons is included as well. As a general rule, a person's whole name is disclosed, as well as their position and role in relation to the depicted event and its context. However, this does not always apply to specific events such as protests and mass demonstrations. In these cases, only the individual's relation to the depicted event is usually mentioned – e.g., a protesting person, a witness, etc. As for politicians, their names and functions are always stated. The second part of the textual appendix consists of an agency news item, which is directly related to the offered video recording, specifying its contexts and including additional information necessary to process news coverage.

Since news coverage, of course, includes not only one-off topics and phenomena, but also events that are relevant over a longer time period – e.g., protests, natural disasters, summits, elections, etc., the individual items included in the

research data set also comprised additional information on whether the audio-visual materials were recorded or released on the same day the news report was broadcast, or whether these materials were produced over a longer period of time (over one week). This also means that the occurrence of video recordings that were directly associated with the presented topics was taken into consideration; these materials could have been published by *Reuters* at any time during the seven days prior to processing the topic into television news. Both types of audio-visual recordings might be considered as up-to-date. It is also necessary to state that while processing research data, we did not distinguish between whether the editors used a particular material in its entire length, or whether they only selected certain images from it.

The data set makes it quite clear that despite the fact that *TA3* television broadcast a total of 1621 news items and *Reuters* released 4208 audio-visual materials with textual components during the reviewed period, in terms of the coding units *TA3* and *Reuters*, we identified topical matches only within 1145 news items (70.64% of all news items broadcast by *TA3*) and 1627 videos (38.66% of all audio-visual materials released by *Reuters*). In these cases, the video recordings could be partially or completely processed into television broadcasts. The remaining 2548 videos with text attachments (61.03%) were not broadcast according to the data set. This also means that *TA3*'s editorial staff used an average of 1.42 up-to-date audio-visual materials to create one news item.

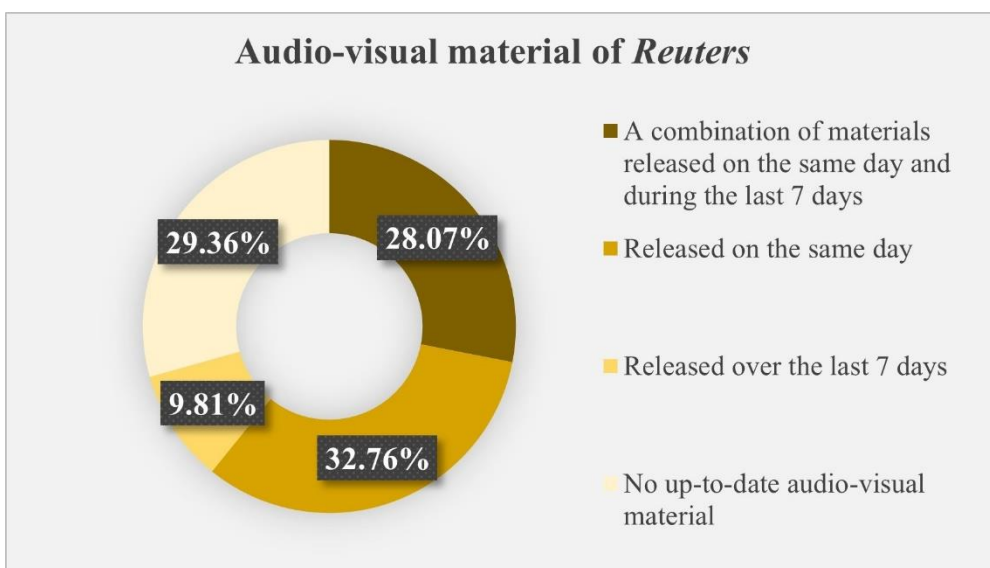


Figure 1. Audio-visual material of *Reuters*

Note. Own processing

TA3 was able to use the audio-visual material recorded and released exclusively on the same day the appropriate news item was broadcast in 531 cases (32.76%) and video recordings recorded over the previous week in 159 cases (9.81%). Combinations of audio-visual materials released on the same day and video recordings taken over the previous week were identified in relation to 455 news items (28.07%). In total, 476 news items (29.36%) could not be processed based on any up-to-date audio-visual materials released by *Reuters* (see Figure 1). However, the absence or the hypothetical use of *Reuters*'s current video material does not mean that the broadcaster did not use other sources of video news.

RQ1: Which sources of audio-visual material are declared by the TA3 newsroom in relation to events that are not audio-visually covered by Reuters?

Within the research material of this study consisting of 712 news reports, we focused on the possibility or impossibility of using up-to-date audio-visual material released by *Reuters* (whether taken on the same day, during the past seven days, or a combination thereof). Of the stated number of news items, 269 contents (37.78%) could not use audio-visual materials released by *Reuters*. By further examining these news items, we identify other sources of visual material that were used.

Table 2. Other sources of audio-visual materials used by *TA3*

	Name of Source	Frequency
1.	<i>ČTK</i>	4
2.	<i>CNN</i>	3
3.	<i>ČT24</i>	3
4.	<i>Twitter</i>	2
5.	<i>TA3</i>	2
6.	<i>La Repubblica</i>	2
7.	<i>TASR</i>	2
8.	<i>YouTube</i>	2
9.	<i>Netflix</i>	1
10.	<i>Google Earth</i>	1

Note. Own processing

During the analysis, we recorded 20 news stories (2.81%), in which the newsroom mentioned a total of 10 other sources of the audio-visual material. We offer an overview of them in Table 2. As we can see, these sources include news agencies located in the Central European region – namely *ČTK* and *TASR*, which are the examined broadcaster's dominant information sources of textual material for foreign news (Greguš & Višňovský, 2020). Other sources are foreign in terms of the broadcaster – American *CNN*, Czech *ČT24*, Italian *La Repubblica*, the social networking site *Twitter*, platforms offering streaming services *YouTube* and *Netflix*, and the *Google Earth* application. In Table 2 is also mentioned *TA3* itself. The reason is that reporters vividly informed the audience directly from the location where an event took place and therefore it was clear they did not use additional footage from any alternative source, only authentic images. In total, 249 news items (34.97%) could not use any current video material received from *Reuters* and at the same time, in these cases we were not able to identify any other source of audio-visual material.

In the context of media reality construction and the hyperreal nature of foreign news broadcast on television, we also examined displaying of on-screen notes indicating 'Stock Footage' and 'Archive Footage'. These claims are an inseparable practice associated with TV news dissemination. They are used to label general footage which depicts places, events or other phenomena without any direct time connection to the described events, serving as an illustration accompanying the reporter's commentary. They may also indicate older, sometimes even historic footage which displays places, events or other phenomena with or without any direct connection to the described events. These on-screen notifications help the recipients understand the watched scenes and refer to the fact that the used footage fulfils only supplementary functions. Thus, it is not a direct reflection of the described or commented objective reality. Given that, we expect that television news unable to use any current or several-days-old visual materials that would be authentic (which, at the same time, does not state any other source of video) should contain an on-screen notification such as 'Stock Footage' or 'Archive Footage' since the footage is not up-to-date, or it serves only as an illustration accompanying the broadcast news item. Of course, archive footage can be drawn either from a television channel's own archive or from archives of a contracted news agency.

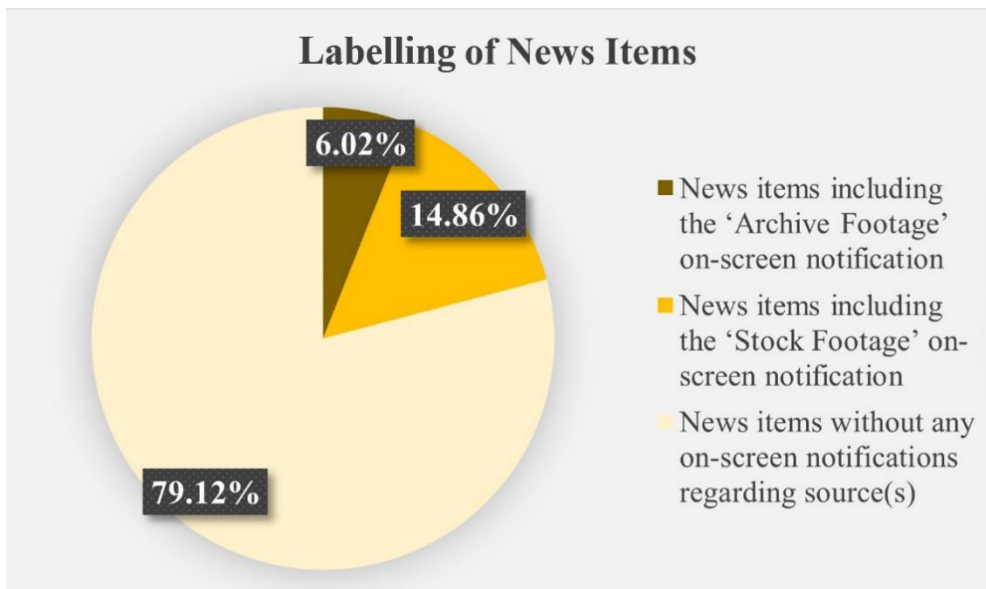


Figure 2. Presence of on-screen notifications indicating 'Archive Footage' or 'Stock Footage'

Note. Own processing

Within our analyzed material consisting of 249 news stories unable to use video received from *Reuters*, which also did not indicate any other information source, only 37 news items (14.86%) were labelled as 'Stock Footage' and 15 news items (6.02%) were labelled as 'Archive Footage' (see Figure 2). The rest of the examined content – in total 197 news items (79.12%) – were not labelled by any notification and that could lead the recipients to (falsely) believe that the used footage directly reflected actual objective reality. This is, in fact, highly misleading.

The news items based on unmarked inauthentic footage comprise a significant part of our 712-item research material (n=197; 27.67%). Such news stories are able to distort objective reality in recipients' minds. We do not evaluate whether this was intentional or not since we do not know all the circumstances under which this news was produced. At the same time, we cannot measure the extent of reality misrepresentation because we do not know what kinds of footage the reporters had, which types they selected and why, what criteria of selection they applied, etc. However, it is important to point out that if we consider the news agency *Reuters* as the primary audio-visual source of the examined television's newsroom and every other information source has to be marked – as the reporters did with the 10 sources mentioned above and, simultaneously, if we consider a week as a time period during which audio-visual footage can be perceived as up-to-date, every news item that does not meet these criteria must be labelled by notifications such as 'Stock Footage' or 'Archive Footage'. This measure aims to prevent any possible incorrect decoding of television news content, any false idea that the used images represent actual reality. If we look at the relationship between the research material (712 news stories) and the news unable to use video footage provided by *Reuters* or any other source, but still without any on-screen notification regarding its source (197 news items), the hyperreal nature of news is certainly manifested in the case of almost every fourth news story (the exact value: 3.61). If we wanted to generalize this feature in relation to the whole data set consisting of 1621 news items (all news broadcast by *TAT* over two months – Greguš & Višňovský, 2020), we would have to acknowledge that these flaws occurred in 12.15% of all broadcast foreign news, i.e., such reality misrepresentation is manifested at least in every eighth news item (the exact value: 8.23).

Table 3. Descriptive characteristics

Foreign News with Misrepresentation of Objective Reality	
Mean	3.177419
Standard Error	0.248235
Median	3
Mode	2
Standard Deviation	1.954601
Sample Variance	3.820465
Kurtosis	-0.50482
Skewness	0.491381
Range	8
Minimum	0
Maximum	8
Sum	197
Count	62

Note. Own processing

The estimated frequency of this phenomenon's occurrence is at least three news items a day (mean: 3.18; median: 3). Moreover, in the 62-day research period, there were only 3 days when no such news stories were aired (see Table 3). We find it important to remember that the above-mentioned reality misrepresentation could be much more extensive as the number of cases when insufficient reality representations occurred within television news could be considerably higher. The same problem with insufficient labelling of stock and archival footage or footage received from another audio-visual source could have happened in terms of at least some of those news items which included (or could have included) *Reuters* videos. In general, television reporters do not work just with up-to-date materials – for example, when they disseminate background information on an event or a situation. Also, the sole existence of current footage does not automatically imply its use in the news production process; other sources can be used instead. The ways it is used, the editing process and the accuracy of visual content, etc. are also questionable. Since we were unable to obtain this type of data, another limit of our research must be acknowledged here. Therefore, while interpreting our results, we focus on news items with proven hyperreal nature, which, as we may assume, have a direct effect on the recipients' perceptions of specific places, situations or events – in the research material there were 197 such news stories.

RQ1.1: On which geographical parts of the world and to what extent did TA3 news stories not have any actual audio-visual material from Reuters, but the newsroom still did not specify any other source?

To better understand the possible effects of audio-visual simulacra on television news' recipients, let us draw our attention to the representation of certain parts of the world within news stories of hyperreal nature. During the research period *TA3* aired news about seven main geographic areas – Europe, North America, South America, Asia, Africa, Australia and Oceania, and Other.

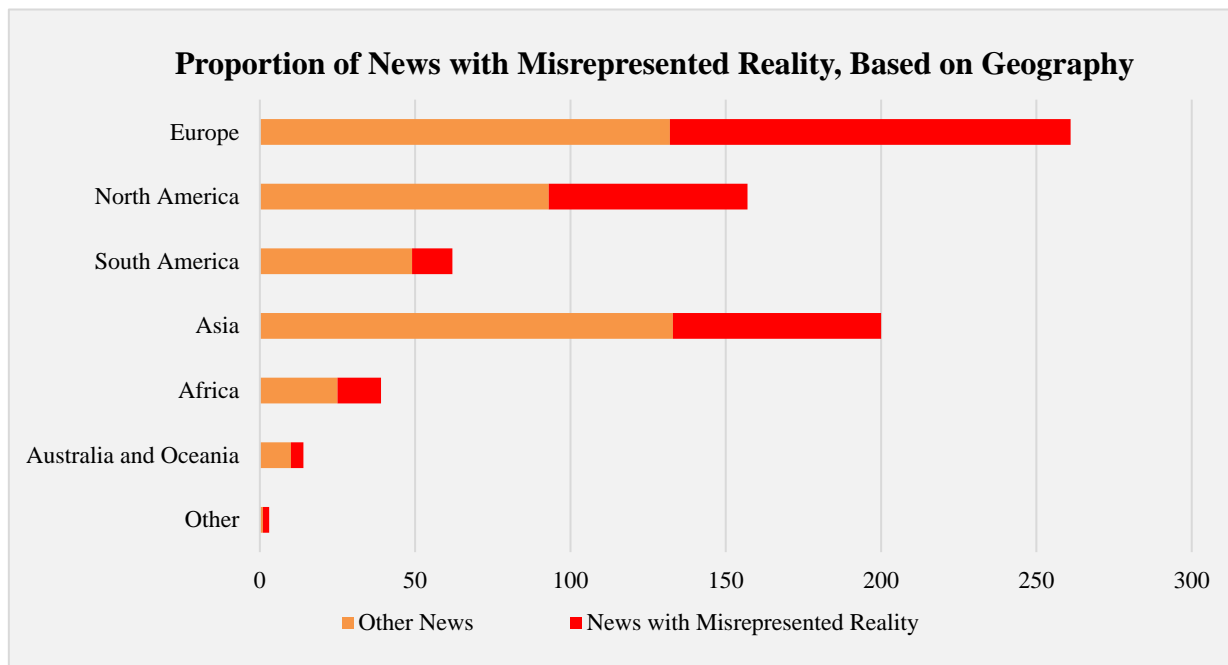


Figure 3. Proportion of news presenting misrepresented reality, based on geography

Note. Own processing

Every main geographic area of the world was represented in the broadcast. After identifying 197 news items with clear hyperreal nature, every global geographic area was covered by it – see Figure 3.

Table 4. Percentual proportion of the occurrence of simulacra in news – geographic zones

Name	All	Misrepresented	Rate
Other	5	2	40.00%
Europe	390	129	33.08%
North America	221	64	28.96%
Africa	53	14	26.42%
Asia	267	67	25.09%
Australia and Oceania	18	4	22.22%
South America	75	13	17.33%

Note. Own processing

Then we identified individual extents of reality distortion. We measured the exact extent of reality misrepresentation for the individual geographic areas by using the following formula:

$$\left(\frac{\text{the number of broadcast news items with clearly hyperreal nature about a certain world area}}{\text{the number of all broadcast news items about a certain world area in the narrowed sample (n=712)}} \times 100 \right) \quad (1)$$

The highest rate of occurrence, as can be seen in Table 4, was identified in the area marking ‘Other’ parts of the world (40.00 %); we analyzed news stories about Antarctica and arctic areas, as well as news connected to space exploration and space missions. We have to bear in mind, however, that this result is not relevant due to the small overall number of news stories of hyperreal nature (only 2 items). In our opinion, the occurrence of one or two news stories with improperly labelled or unsourced audio-visual material can be caused by, for example, personal error by a reporter or an editor who should have checked all news items to be aired on television. However, the common recipient does not possess any access to such information and therefore we cannot simplify the obtained data. On the other hand, what we cannot interpret in a similar manner is the geographic area ‘Europe’. Here we recorded a reality misrepresentation rate of 33.08%, which clearly means that hyperreal processing of images occurred in every third news item. In this case, we do not expect 129 personal errors in relation to 129 different news stories, but rather systematic, insufficient labelling of used footage as a part of common practice – given the theoretical premise that stock footage or out-of-date audio-visual

material should always be labelled by on-screen notification. These kinds of simulacra also frequently occurred within news reports about ‘North America’ (28.96%), ‘Africa’ (26.42%), ‘Asia’ (25.09%), and ‘Australia and Oceania’ (22.22%) – every fourth news content affiliated with these areas of the world was insufficiently sourced in terms of the used audio-visual material. The lowest rate was measured in the context of news about ‘South America’; the rate reached 17.33%, which means the phenomenon occurred in the case of every fifth news item.

RQ1.2: On what topics and to what extent did TA3 news stories not have any actual audio-visual material from Reuters, but the newsroom still did not specify any other source?

In addition to the geographical point of view, it is also necessary to discuss topics the analyzed news stories dealt with most frequently. We recorded the occurrence of 12 topics which involved hyperreal images.

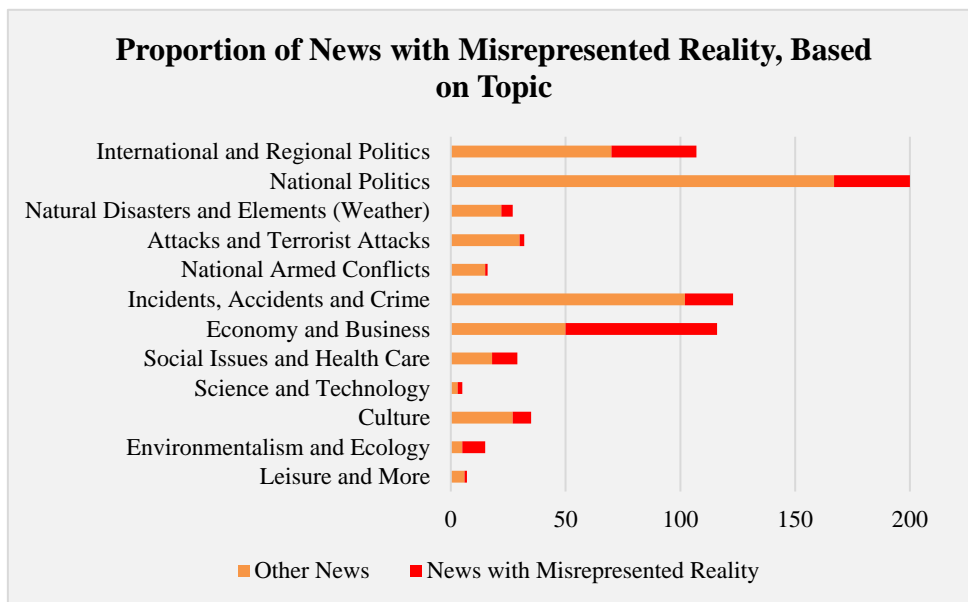


Figure 4. Proportion of news with misrepresented reality, based on topic

Note. Own processing

As shown in Figure 4, the most frequently represented (n=200) was ‘National Politics’, followed by the topics of ‘Incidents, Accidents and Crime’ (n=116) and ‘Economy and Business’ (n=107). Together, they comprised more than half of all analyzed news items (n=720).

Table 5. Occurrence of simulacra in broadcast news – thematic definition

Topic	All	Misrepresented	Rate
Environment and Ecology	15	10	66.67%
Economy and Business	116	66	56.90%
Science and Technology	5	2	40.00%
Social Issues and Health Care	29	11	37.93%
International and Regional Politics	107	37	34.58%
Culture	35	8	22.86%
Natural Disasters and Elements (Weather)	27	5	18.52%
Incidents, Accidents and Crime	123	21	17.07%
National Politics	200	33	16.50%
Leisure and More	7	1	14.29%
Attacks and Terrorist Attacks	32	2	6.25%
National Armed Conflicts	16	1	6.25%

Note. Own processing

While determining the news content with distorted reality (n=197), we also noticed the representation of individual topics as well as the degree of misrepresentation of reality considering the sample. We calculated this rate for each

thematic area using the following formula:

$$\left(\frac{\text{the number of broadcast news items of hyperreal nature in a specific thematic area}}{\text{the number of broadcast news items related to a specific thematic area in the narrowed sample (n=712)}} \times 100 \right) \quad (2)$$

In Table 5 we would also like to draw attention to the topics of ‘Science and Technology’, ‘Leisure and More’, ‘Attacks and Terrorist Attacks’ and ‘National Armed Conflicts’, where the occurrence of inauthentic audio-visual material was manifested in one or a maximum of two news items. For other topics, the incidence was more significant. Regarding the most audio-visually distorted topics, we recorded the highest rate in the field of ‘Environment and Ecology’ (66.67%); therefore, it was possible to determine the clear hyperreal nature of footage used in almost every broadcast news item. In at least every second news story, hyperreal images appeared in terms of ‘Economy and Business’, ‘Science and Technology’, ‘Social Issues and Health Care’, and ‘International and Regional Politics’.

We can see that the hyperreality of images mainly concerns topics of television news, for which the use of archive and stock footage is very common. Production of new footage regarding nature, business enterprises, economic activity, research centers and research teams or medical facilities is typically only occasional, because these areas of interest do not change as often as political realities – state officials, summit venues and conferences, etc. On the contrary, very low rates of using simulacra within television news – and again, personal errors can be expected and considered – can be seen in relation to important and up-to-date topics such as ‘Attacks and Terrorist Attacks’ (6.25%) or ‘National Armed Conflicts’ (6.25%). Given that we want to compare simulacra included in news stories on the mentioned topics in different areas of the world, we offer Table 6.

Table 6. Frequency of the occurrence of simulacra in television news

Topic	Europe	North America	South America	Asia	Africa	Australia and Oceania	Other
International and Regional Politics	39.34%	26.92%	40.00%	28.99%	40.00%	–	–
National Politics	24.78%	16.67%	–	17.78%	–	–	–
Natural Disasters and Elements (Weather)	–	25.00%	–	20.00%	–	100.00%	–
Attacks and Terrorist Attacks	16.67%	–	25.00%	–	–	–	–
National Armed Conflicts	–	–	–	–	33.33%	–	–
Incidents, Accidents and Crime	15.07%	20.00%	5.00%	14.71%	55.56%	–	–
Economy and Business	68.57%	47.54%	40.00%	39.62%	100.00%	50.00%	–
Social Issues and Health Care	37.50%	–	28.57%	42.86%	–	16.67%	–
Science and Technology	–	40.00%	–	50.00%	100.00%	–	50.00%
Culture	20.00%	37.50%	–	–	–	–	–
Environment and Ecology	55.56%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	50.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Leisure and More	20.00%	–	–	–	–	–	–

Note. Own processing

5. Discussion

While talking about constructing media reality via television news, access to audio-visual material can be considered as an important factor influencing the production of television news stories. Burton and Jiráček (2003, p. 249-255) also state that recorded footage is one of the processing values of an event or phenomenon that are as important as the news values themselves. Since television is an audio-visual medium, the systematic supply of audio-visual materials is a necessity. While conducting our research, we focused on a number of such recordings, which were provided to *TA3*'s newsroom by *Reuters* during the monitored period. Based on the data set (Greguš & Višňovský, 2020), television *TA3* was able to use 4208 audio-visual materials with textual components; either fully, partly or not at all. Out of a total number of 1621 television news items, there was a consensus between *TA3* and *Reuters* in relation to 1627 different audio-visual materials released by *Reuters* and 1145 television news items aired by *TA3* (70.64% of all news broadcast

within two months). Audio-visual material, which was released on the same day when the specific news item was broadcast, could be used by the newsroom for 531 different television news items (32.76%); videos that were no more than 7 days old for 159 news stories (9.81%) and their combinations for 455 news reports (28.07%). While processing a total of 476 news reports (29.36%), *TA3* could not use any current audio-visual material published by *Reuters* during the examined period.

However, the absence of up-to-date video material released by *Reuters* does not automatically mean that the broadcaster did not use other sources of video news. According to the conducted content analysis of 712 television news items, which we selected from the broadcasting based on their presence in foreign news blocks as a regular part of the investigated broadcaster's programming, we recorded 20 news stories (2.81%), in which the editors mentioned 10 other sources of the used audio-visual material. The most of them were, in particular, other news agencies operating in the Central European region, various foreign media or websites and social networking sites. We found that out of the 712 analyzed contributions, a total of 197 news items (27.67%) were not able to use any current video material from the contracted agency; respectively, it was not possible to determine the source of the audio-visual parts of the appropriate television news stories. In this context, it is necessary to pay attention to another important phenomenon. As Šebeš claims (2016, p. 85-86), "live news/live reporting" is also very typical for television news. Recipients can feel direct contact with unique, unpredictable and ever-changing reality. At the same time, it is a very authentic way to cover the observed phenomenon. According to the author, live news and live broadcasts in general, which often use the on-screen notifications 'Live' or 'Happening Now' evoke in recipients a feeling that the content being watched is entirely authentic. This intensifies their contact with media communication, reception experience and, at the same time, assures them that they are, in fact, witnesses or actors tied to a specific event unfolding in real time. According to Šebeš, this is one of the most prominent advantages of television news, because "in the case of ordinary television broadcasting, the audience knows that the programs are carefully prepared" (Šebeš, 2016, p. 85-86). Due to the fact that television audiences are also accustomed to live broadcasts, we may assume that the relationship between the images used (displayed reality) and objective reality will be different within the viewers' minds – unmarked footage will be considered as more credible while broadcast in news blocks than the same footage included in other (e.g., fictional) types of television content. That is why the creators of television news, shots and accompanying materials should approach their work as seriously as possible and not misrepresent the objectively existing reality unnecessarily.

Reuters may have been the primary audio-visual source for *TA3* over the research period, but *TA3* should have referred to other sources used to process the broadcast news more responsibly. We consider a time frame of one week to be a period during which audio-visual recordings are still relevant (especially in relation to longer-observed events and background stories associated with the depicted events). And thus, the editors should always label any other audio-visual material as 'Stock Footage' or 'Archive Footage' to avoid incorrect decoding of television news, i.e., impression that the shots used directly reflect the current reality. We observed that 249 of the 712 analyzed reports were not able to use any current audio-visual material received from *Reuters* and, at the same time, it was not possible to identify another source of the audio-visual material that was used instead. According to the conducted content analysis, we found that only 37 of these news items (14.86%) were marked with the on-screen notification 'Stock Footage' and 15 reports (6.02%) with the notification 'Archive Footage'. The remaining 197 messages (79.12%) had no such labelling. This may have led to the incorrect perception that the images used directly reflected the current objective reality. As for the sample (n=712), this occurred within almost every fourth broadcast news story. This may have led to the perception that the images used directly reflected the current objective reality. The given statement confirms the hyperreal nature of television news produced by *TA3* and it is a clear manifestation of the construction of media reality, i.e., a manifestation of hyperreality merged with authentic television news images. The essence of the simulation is based on creating a false impression that there is no difference between what is authentic and what is not. When media professionals fail to mention that archive or stock footage is used instead of authentic shots, these images appear as current representations of objective reality and, from the recipient's point of view, they become true, even if they are not; moreover, they can be fake. However, based on the obtained data (as Tables 4 and 5 suggest), it is obvious that in the case of *TA3*, this cannot be seen as a targeted manipulation and attempt to 'bend' public opinion, but rather as professional failure or error (obvious inconsistency in terms of letting the viewers know that they are watching archive and/or stock footage). We assume that if the manipulation was deliberate, the degree of distortion of reality would reach more significant values, especially in the thematic areas of 'National Politics', 'International and Regional Politics', 'National Armed Conflicts', 'Attacks and Terrorist Attacks' or 'Incidents, Accidents and Crime'.

6. Conclusion

Naturally, the presented research concerning the misrepresentation of reality within television news cannot be generalized, and its validity needs to be verified by further inquiries – by both quantitative methods focused on content of television news and qualitative research on television broadcasting and television audiences. However, we agree with

Šebeš, who states that the goal of simulacra is to be indistinguishable from reality, even though they are unrealistic: “From this point of view, the most perfect are media images – depictions of things and events disseminated through the mass medium. They are the most perfect, because they succeed in covering their hyperreal nature and therefore, they are considered as credible representations of reality” (Šebeš, 2003, p. 75).

Of course, we cannot claim that mere access to audio-visual material or the use of on-screen notifications are the only determinants influencing the final form of television newscasting. First of all, we focus only on foreign news items; if a television news channel operating nationwide wants to depict foreign affairs in the shortest possible time, obtaining video footage from international news agencies and similar information sources is, in many cases, the only way to find out anything about the depicted events. As for domestic news, we assume that participation in press conferences, being directly at crime scenes or attending specific events, where reporters and cameramen can obtain authentic footage to cover the specific news stories, are the most efficient procedures. It is necessary to pay more scholarly attention to this area of research in the context of media production; using both quantitative and qualitative research methods is necessary, especially when we consider the current changes in media production caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, as outlined above, television news is not able to cover all the events of the day fully and sufficiently in their uniqueness and complexity. Our ideas about the world beyond our empirical experience are thus based on media representations; nevertheless, they are often distorted and incomplete, as our study shows. As Baudrillard (2005) points out, these mediated images become more real than reality itself. And based on our results, their occurrence is prominent. They overshadow the unique significance of various events, which are torn from their natural environment and authentic context, located mostly on the television screen. At the same time, in order to fully understand and explain the factors influencing the news media agenda, it is necessary to analyze editorial processes that are directly related to the strategy of gatekeeping.

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Notes

1 The abbreviations *TASR* and *ČTK* mean *Tlačová agentúra Slovenskej republiky (Press Agency of Slovak Republic)* and *Česká tisková kancelář (Czech News Agency)*.

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