[SCIENCE+] We know better

Increasing distrust of the media is a problem that could undermine democracy as such – but is it really true? And if so, how do people form opinions in such atmosphere? How do they choose the source and what influences them?

"We know better".
Is the individual approach the answer for Slovakia?

By Ivan Godársky (MEMO 98) for SCIENCE+ (newsletter in English, v slovenčine)

Introduction

Increasing distrust of the media is a problem that could undermine democracy as such – findings concluded by myriads of polls and research papers. But is it really true, and if so, how do people form opinions in an atmosphere of distrust and skepticism? How do they choose the source and what influences them?
New research by **Free Press for Eastern Europe** and **InsightLab** tries to look for the answers. Researchers closely followed the "movable middle" demographic group of society (with 12 respondents, aged 18-35) – trying to explore this more nuanced stratus of those who do not consider themselves captured by conspiracies, or completely disengaged from the news or the more media literate.

Qualitative research: media trust, disinformation, and online behavioural patterns

Slovakia

Two methodological approaches were used, combining online diaries (it has recorded during the thoughts and evolution of respondents' attitudes over a period of time - entirely subjective and uninfluenced by an moderator or other participant) and online focus groups discussion (moderated for 2 hours by a researcher with a focus on a specific topic - unlike one-on-one interviews, these allow participants to interact with and influence one another).
So what are the conclusions and how do they fit to the studies done elsewhere?

Key Findings

Distrust and skepticism permeated both phases of the research. The view of current and future society is rather pessimistic.

The current society is divided. **This polarization is perceived as negative because it leads to conflict and misunderstanding.** The pandemic and the way we communicate on social media have contributed to it. **Fears about the future are linked to the AI rise** and the vast volume of generated information that will be difficult to navigate.

Mistrust of the system and the media leads respondents to rely on themselves, their own activities and skills. This emphasis on individual access and initiative influences the choices - they decide for themselves what news they consider important, how to verify information, and how to form an opinion on current events.

Rarely does a respondent have a favourite medium. It is more common to get their information about events from a variety of sources. In addition to the media (in particular online outlets), social networks (especially profiles of different personalities), and discussions with friends and family are important.

The motivation for **combining different sources** is a belief that this **makes it easier to check the veracity of information and to identify false information.** Respondents do not want to be dependent on one source. This is also why they follow profiles of celebrities and politicians - to get first-hand information instead of being dependent on media's interpretation.

Although respondents follow world and national events, they are not satisfied with the choice of topics. They are tired of war, conflicts, and world and domestic politics. **They would like to see more positive news (positive motivation, examples of solutions) and news from their local area (stories of local heroes) in the media.**

Respondents are tired of coverage of the Russian war on Ukraine and do not pay much attention to it. In comparison with the beginning, today the intensity of following has decreased. **This is partly due to fatigue, a preference for other issues and a feeling that the conflict is stagnating and does not affect life in Slovakia.**

There was a gender difference concerning news avoidance. Women, in particular, tend to consciously filter out negative news and focus only on issues that interest them personally, such as health, travel, gardening or recipes instead.

There is no awareness of media literacy activities. There is a question mark over whether an institution or organization should or could organize it. Delegating such a role to a specific institution could run the risk of totalitarian mechanisms, where what is true and what is not is determined by someone. Nevertheless, respondents consider it important to combat the spread of disinformation and expect a stricter legal framework to sanction it.
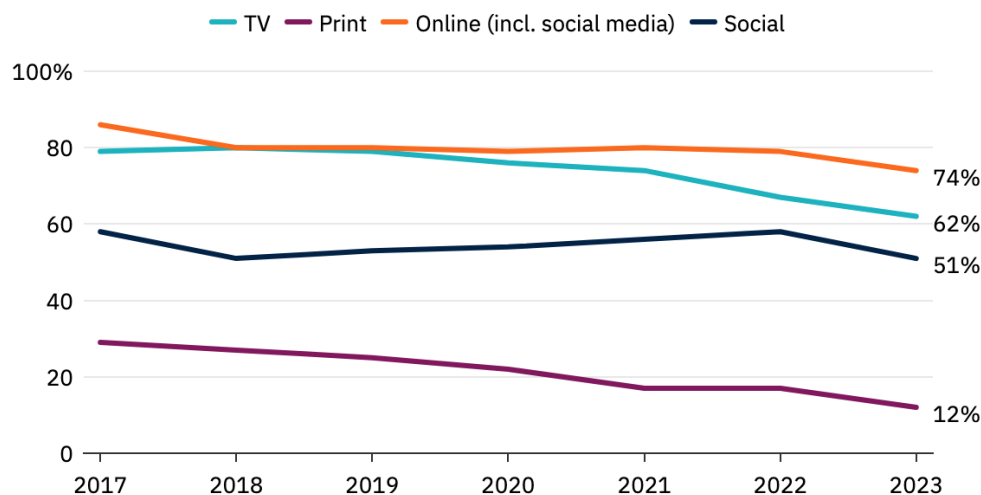
An opinion

Despite all the claims that the media play only a partial role in the opinion-forming process, reality often suggests that in fact it is still quite opposite – the research study of the opinion agency AKO for TV JOJ from March 2023, TV (64%) and online media (59.4%) dominate, followed by social networks (37.5%), radio (35.1%) and print (24.6%). Only then were mentioned family members, friends and work colleagues.
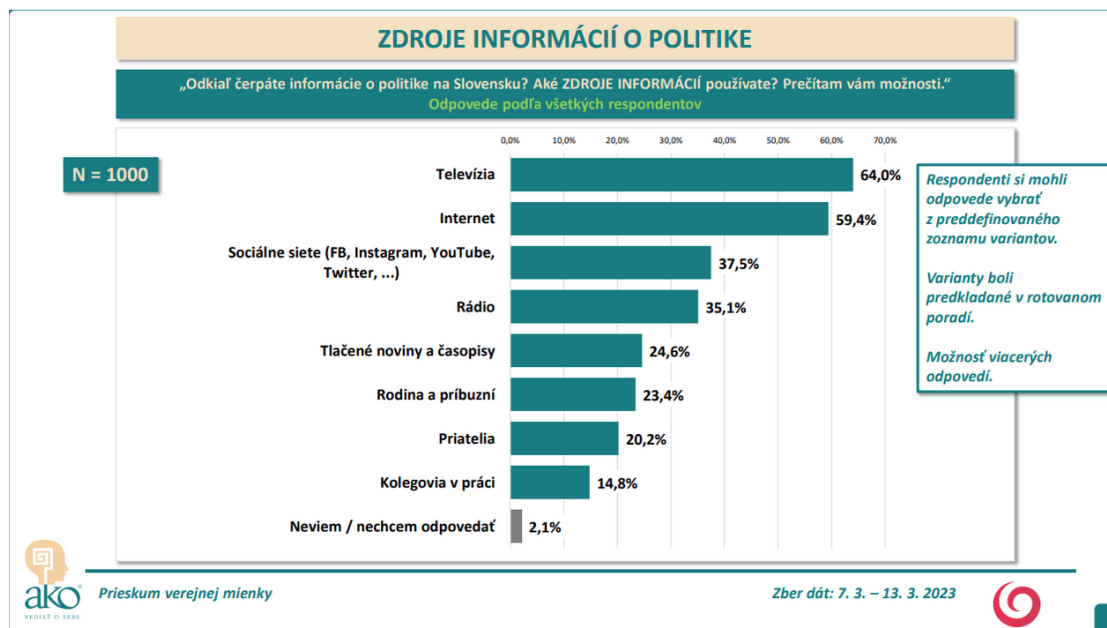
## Sources of news

2017–2023

Slovakia

Get the data • Embed

Digital News Report 2023 - Slovakia, Information sources

The same combination seems to be valid also for the group of movable middle - **the media play only a partial role in the opinion-forming process,** with respondents trying to **use multiple sources to independently verify and compare news.** Discussions with relatives and, for some respondents, the opinions of other public figures have an important influence on opinion formation.

Interestingly, in comparison with the Czech Republic, much more spontaneously, Slovak groups reported that they like to follow various personalities, experts, but also politicians (President Zuzana Čaputová) or even religious leaders. One of the possible explanations is that in the Czech Republic, the need appears to be largely saturated by the media, whereas in Slovakia people look for alternatives as there is more distrust in the media. Is it so?

Low trust towards media

The research suggests a distrust of the media, institutions and politicians - a conclusion that is also drawn by findings and conclusions of several research studies. The latest Digital News Report 2023 by the Oxford University Reuters Institute says that media trust is very low - **only 27 per cent - which puts Slovakia almost at the tail** (44 out of 46 countries, with only Hungary and Greece behind, Finland tops the list with 69 per cent, with three other Nordic countries in the top 10).

Overall trust score
Change over time 2017-2023
Slovakia
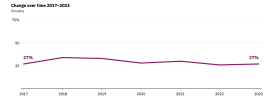
By the way, the hypothesis about the Czech Republic would perhaps need a reshape soon enough – while the overall trust towards media was 39 per cent some decade ago (2015), it has decreased to the current 30 per cent, also quite low in the ranking (38th out of 46 ranked countries).
The level of overall trust in the media in Slovakia has not changed significantly over period - in 2017 it was exactly the same (27%). It peaked in 2018-19 (34-33%) in response to the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová, and has been declining since. However, these numbers turn out to be interesting if we break them down into small pieces.

Any trusted media here?

It is rather interesting to dig deeper and to see the evaluation of individual media. Respondents in the FPI and InsightLab research, as well as the data from the aforementioned Reuters Institute report 2023 (RI report), suggest quite **a surprising verdict - most important mainstream media are often perceived as trusted sources.**
In the RI report, of the 15 media outlets ranked, trust was the overwhelming assessment for as many as 11 of them (only 4 tabloids were the opposite – Nový čas, Plus, Topky and Refresher). Still, it is essential to mention **that the trend of recent years is obvious - the number of media outlets perceived as trustworthy is decreasing.** In the 2021 RI report, there were 14 such media outlets (in 2022 there were 12), of which as many as 8 media outlets enjoyed at least 50 per cent credibility (in 2023, only 2 media outlets - TA3 and RTVS - have such a high credibility share).

Brand trust scores
Slovakia
Only the below brands were included in the survey, it should not be treated as a list of the most or least trusted brands as it is not exhaustive

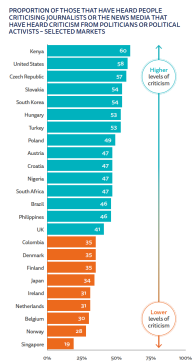| Brand	Trust	Neither	Don't Trust
Aktuality	47%	26%	28%
Denník N	37%	26%	37%
Hospodárske noviny	48%	28%	33%
Nový Čas	36%	20%	44%
Plus	34%	20%	55%
Pravda	43%	29%	28%
Rádio Expres	49%	27%	33%
Refresher	31%	34%	36%
Regional or local newspaper	48%	31%	22%
RTVS (public broadcaster)	54%	20%	25%
SME	41%	27%	32%
TA3	54%	23%	23%
Topky	30%	28%	42%
TV JOJ	46%	24%	30%
TV Markíza	43%	21%	36%

From the responses of the current FPIE and InsightLab research, when evaluating individual media, we learned that they are "relatively objective and impartial", "as a trustworthy and objective media outlet that reflects their views", as "a popular and frequently followed news source" where „respondents appreciate its objectivity and timeliness of information". In general, respondents consider the media to be credible if they are consistent in their reporting, do not distort information and quote sources. The media's longevity and reputation also play an important role.

Media exposure to political criticism

How is it possible that on the one hand the generalising word distrust can be heard, while on the other hand the words objective, impartial and trustworthy are mentioned? There are at least two answers – one is that there is a plentiful of disinformation sources exist in Slovakia, which are generally perceived as part of the media landscape, so overall trust in the media takes this doubtful part of the spectrum into account.
Yet, another cause appears dominant, highlighted out by News Digital Report itself. The report points to **a correlation between the high frequency with which the media are subjected to criticism and the subsequent low trust in them.** Slovakia is mentioned as one of the exemplary cases where the media faces constant pressure and criticism from politicians - in line with the US, Hungary and Turkey (Slovakia has the 4th highest proportion of media criticism by politicians).

PROPORTION OF THOSE THAT HAVE HEARD PEOPLE
CRITICISING JOURNALISTS OR THE NEWS MEDIA THAT
HAVE HEARD CRITICISM FROM POLITICIANS OR POLITICAL
ACTIVISTS – SELECTED MARKETS

Politicians from the national conservative political groupings, and most importantly, top representatives of the ruling SMER-Slovak Social Democracy, over recent years intentionally undermine credibility of the traditional media, **with prime minister Fico at the forefront of this openly hostile rhetoric, sowing distrust and skepticism to this very essence of democratic society.** Regrettably, former prime minister Matovič (OĽANO, recently renamed as Slovakia) on a regular basis uses negative labels towards critical media, thus further decreasing media trust.

News avoidance

The choice of topics in the media is criticized by the respondents. They say that Slovak media pay **too much attention to politics and current events,** such as political scandals and international conflicts, which can lead to audience fatigue.

When respondents were using their daily diaries, much of the media coverage was not about the news as such. **By far the largest number of messages took the form of lightweight and often tabloid topics** - articles about celebrities, cooking, or shopping were quite popular as these topics are tied to positive feelings such as amusement or joy.

Within this context, respondents **are overwhelmed by the issue of the Russian war in Ukraine.** They follow the information only marginally or not at all - especially at the diary stage, when they were not influenced by other opinions, they said that they deliberately did not follow the news. The reason of avoidance was that they perceived the conflict as a local issue that did not concern them and did not affect them. They do not see any change in the development of the conflict and are therefore not interested in further information.

While it **was noted that Ukraine is the victim, there was no particular interest in news about the specific fate of Ukrainian refugees,** what for example, is one of the differences between data from Slovakia and Czech Republic, where these stories seem to resonate much stronger.

With an overabundance of political news, there **is a lack of positive news, especially local news,** that gives people hope, shows positive examples in society and motivates people to engage in useful activities - such as people volunteering to repair monuments, or helping the nature. Information that would help respondents in some way to deal with specific life situations (e.g. dealing with the authorities, financial literacy) would also be welcome.

It was expressed that they would be interested in more information that affects them personally at the expense of world news. Topics that would relate to their region or interests. There is a differences when it comes to the topics that interest them personally. For topics that are close to their hearts they seek out information, while other topics are deliberately ignored and avoided.

Fertile grounds for misinformation

The societal division is evaluated very sceptically. A feature of Slovak society for a long time, but the increasing polarization is quite clearly a consequence of the pandemic period. Aside of negative effect of politicians' role, aggressive communication, typical for social media discourse, and the information disorder – the increased availability of information and difficulties to navigate within - also contribute to the division. Many people do not feel that their views are represented and therefore tend to resort to more extreme, or simplistic views.

Most respondents gave examples of people in their environment being influenced by false or misleading information. In a very proper observation, the problem of misinformation is a problem for the whole world. Looking for reasons why public mistakes, professional and ethical failures in a form of misinformation or deliberately distorted information (disinformation) find such fertile ground in Slovakia belong to a national folklore for years – rather unsuccessful.

According to the respondents, the reasons for being exposed to misinformation **can by an average and below-average education as well as the lack of value-based historical heritage** - Slovakia has never been a power, lacks a pro-freedom legacy that would form a healthy self-esteem. Additionally, **frustration with a living situation** that does not go as expected, where dissatisfaction with own life and economic situation provokes anger. People look for the culprit and as a result, they are easily influenced by any self-proclaimed prophets preaching the simple answers.

Individual media literacy

One of key findings, perhaps encouraging for some, **is a self-belief of the „moving middle" that can navigate in the information disorder on their own** – there is a clear emphasis on individualism in verifying information in response to distrust of institutions and media. Participants prefer solutions where each individual is responsible for verifying information.

Respondents also **agree on the need to combat the spread of misinformation**. They feel, however, much less certain what should be a practical solution to this generational challenge. While they would welcome some kind of legal framework and punishment for spreading disinformation, they are not clear about enforcement. Delegating the fight against disinformation to a specific institution creates mistrust. They do not want to leave the role of deciding what is true and what is false to anyone else. **The establishment of a specific institution to debunk disinformation is seen by some respondents as a sign of a totalitarian regime.**

At the same time, there is a commonly shared need to cultivate critical thinking and increase media literacy. Most respondents evaluated positively the idea of fact-checking – with a notable surprise that this kind of activity exists. However, thoughts about the limited impact, concerning the scale of a problem, were highlighted, with a notion that this task should be perhaps delegated to some institution. These efforts, in turn, run up against a lack of trust in institutions.

What next? Light is here, not at the end of a tunnel

Despite the many negative signs mentioned and the growing distrust of traditional media, data undoubtedly offers some hope. And that is the direction to look in. There is a degree of confidence in their own ability to judge the credibility of news - **default skepticism, critical thinking and comparing different sources appear to be common habits of media consumption within the "the movable middle" already now. Still, while individually often on a right track, reinforcement, guidance and systematic enhancing activities (trainings, applications) are highly desired and sought for.**

Daily media consumption

Evaluation of the 'against AI-generated materials' training

*Živé.sk (**zive.aktuality.sk**) - Training materials concerning AI-generated content*

Respondents acknowledge that **spreading misinformation is dangerous.** It can cause confusion among people, but it can also provoke hatred, conflicts, disrupt family relations, and influence the political situation. This seemingly obvious notion is important.

Strengthening media literacy is highly desirable. At the same time, however, it is necessary to look for an appropriate form of education that can capture their attention. Any campaign or discussion about media literacy in Slovakia should be framed as an effort to help individuals critically evaluate the media content for themselves rather than a prescription for all. Such an approach might avoid backlash, misunderstanding and reluctance.

An open discussion in the media and elsewhere about the future of the information world, **freedom of expression vs democracy challenges posed by the deceptive content** as well as the benefits and risks of AI applications could contribute to a more realistic view.

It is appropriate **to listen to specific calls for more positive news in the media.** Not news that merely distracts and entertains, but news that gives hope that there are positive examples and stories.

For more information, please contact the SCIENCE+ coordinator for the Czech Republic, Jaroslav Valůch at jaroslav@fpee.eu