

Czech UPF program: The Media and Us: Influencing the Public Opinion

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Prague, Czech Republic—“The Media and Us: Influencing the Public Opinion” was the title of a lecture organized by the Czech UPF chapter.

The lecture, presented on January 24, 2017, by Austrian journalist Barbara Grabner, was attended by some 30 people, including journalists, politicians and students.

Dr. Juraj Lajda, the secretary general of UPF in the Czech Republic, opened the meeting by commenting on the relevance of the topic, especially in today’s world and society.

Mrs. Grabner spoke about the Spiral of Silence theory developed by German political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. According to this theory, people almost instinctively sense the opinions of those around them and shape their behavior to the prevailing attitude about what is acceptable and what is not. People are more willing to publicly express their opinions when they perceive their view is either the dominant one or on the rise.

People are afraid of becoming socially isolated and thus try to avoid such situations, as demonstrated by the 20th-century Polish psychologist Solomon Asch in his conformity experiments, the speaker continued. These experiments showed how people react to the decisions and attitudes of the majority. Dr. Asch found that people feel more comfortable agreeing with opinions that they know are wrong than telling others their viewpoint—as in the fairy tale “The Emperor’s New Clothes.”

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

The press primarily gives coverage to people who are highly educated or who have greater status (fame) or who do not fear isolation and are likely to speak out regardless of public opinion. The vocal minority is a major factor of change, while the silent majority is a factor of stability. There is a vocal minority, which remains at the top of the spiral in defiance of threats of isolation.

As an example Mrs. Grabner used the abortion debate in Germany. In 1971, when abortions were illegal, the well-known German newsmagazine Stern featured famous women who had had abortions. After this article appeared, the law was changed.

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

The media shape public opinion by selecting sources and topics. An opinion or fact that is not published appears to be “non-existent.”

People understand events and circumstances mainly by the symbols and pictures produced by media reports, Mrs. Grabner said. These pictures in our heads derive from the media using stereotypes as a means to make complicated matters simple and easy to understand. But they also produce prejudices and lead to stigmatization. The famous 20th-century U.S. journalist Walter Lippmann said, “We are all captives of the picture in our head.”



As an example of biased journalism, Mrs. Grabner stated that in the year 2015, around 1,000 terror suspects were arrested in the European Union. Among them were 667 jihadists, 168 nationalists/separatists, 67 leftist and 11 rightists. In contrast the media rarely report about leftist violators but focus on acts of violence by the extreme right.

From the huge amount of news stories that are available every day, journalists and publishers focus on the news stories that they want to be spread. Personal preferences are the key factor of selection. Selective reporting shapes the preferences and decisions of the population. Bias may cause a credibility gap if the public detects grave forms of selective reporting.

Research shows that the majority of journalists prefer leftist or liberal views and sources. Television teams employ certain camera techniques to influence the opinion and decision of voters. Sources are presented without the viewers being informed about the sources' party affiliations or worldviews. The existence of numerous newspapers or TV channels does not guarantee a diversity of opinions or freedom of choice, the speaker claimed. Today the great conformity of media reports is not caused by force, as in totalitarian systems, but by self-censorship.

In answer to a question about the motivation of journalists, Mrs. Grabner named the explicit desire to change or reform society, to gain fame and feel gratification through publicity, the power to avenge personal grievances, to be an advocate for a just cause, the ability to shape politics or to make history.

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

Journalists inform and educate the public but also function as watchdogs of the political and social spheres. Politicians who have failed can be voted out of office. But what about journalists who write untruths, causing damage? Who controls the controller? the lecturer asked. The 20th-century German sociologist Helmut Schelsky called them “desk criminals,” the speaker said in conclusion.

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

In the end Dr. Lajda mentioned five ethical rules of The Washington Times, a daily newspaper that was started in Washington, D.C., in 1982 by the founders of UPF: The media should be free and responsible, the media should be moral, get the whole story, get it right, and be the first to get it.