Negative News about the Catholic Church as a Challenge for a More Active and Critical Reading of the News

Negatywny obraz Kościoła katolickiego w wiadomościach jako wezwanie do bardziej aktywnego i krytycznego podejścia do przekazu

David Kraner

University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7394-6508

david.kraner@teof.uni-lj.si

Abstract: Media content is not the facts that happened, but the media's representation of these facts. The media report and narrate reality in a way that is as interesting as possible for the audience. Because media content contains exaggeration, drama and speculation and frames facts in different contexts, consumers of media content rightly feel that the media distort the truth. We find that there is a very large discrepancy between the life of the Catholic Church (and Catholics) and the news we find in the media, and that the line between fake news and convincing news is very thin. In order to ascertain the facts in media news (and to distinguish between facts, exaggerations and representations), it is necessary to critically evaluate media content. This requires a high level of personal engagement and knowledge of the topic, but also professional expertise in media content. As a result, most users do not analyse media content, but interpret it intuitively or take it literally. Our 2019 survey shows that the media in Slovenia most often associate the Catholic Church with sexual abuse, money and politics. In an analysis of 3735 articles, we examined these topics in detail and found that the connotations of these articles are polarised: half are positive, half negative. Furthermore, in these articles we find no reports on serious socio-political problems and the positive solutions offered by the Catholic Church.

Keywords: media, social representations, Church, fake news

Abstrakt: Treści zawarte w mediach to nie fakty, które miały miejsce, ale medialne przedstawienie tych faktów. Media relacjonują i przedstawiają rzeczywistość w taki sposób, aby były one jak najbardziej interesujące dla odbiorców. Ponieważ media posługują się przesadą, dramatyzmem i opierają się na spekulacjach, zarazem przedstawiając fakty w różnych kontekstach, odbiorcy słusznie uważają, że zniekształcają one prawdę. Widać to na przykładzie tego, jak wielka jest przepaść pomiędzy życiem Kościoła katolickiego (i katolików) a wizerunkiem Kościoła przedstawionym w mediach. Widzimy ponadto, jak cienka linia oddziela fałszywe wiadomości, tzw. *fake news*, od wiadomości wiarygodnych. Aby móc odróżnić fakty od ich przesadnej interpretacji i reprezentacji, należy krytycznie podchodzić do przekazu medialnego. Wymaga to jednak dużego zaangażowania osobistego i znajomości tematu, jak również fachowej wiedzy w zakresie treści medialnych. Z tego powodu większość odbiorców nie analizuje wiadomości, opierając się jedynie na ich intuicyjnej interpretacji lub odbierając je w sposób dosłowny. Z przeprowadzonego w 2019 r. badania wynika, że wiadomości medialne w Słowenii najczę-

ściej przedstawiają Kościół katolicki w kontekście wykorzystywania seksualnego, pieniędzy i polityki. Szczegółowa analiza 3735 artykułów pod kątem tych tematów pokazała, że ich wymowa jest mocno spolaryzowana: połowa jest pozytywna, połowa negatywna. Ponadto w artykułach tych nie ma doniesień o poważnych problemach społeczno-politycznych i pozytywnych rozwiązaniach proponowanych przez Kościół katolicki.

Słowa kluczowe: media, reprezentacje społeczne, Kościół, *fake news*

Introduction

The media facilitate the "circulation" of information among people, thereby shaping and reinforcing individual and societal representations, not just public opinion. Just as the problem of media propaganda was addressed 70 years ago, today we are dealing with the problem of increasing violent statements, transparency (Miklavčič 2023), provision of a positive environment (Nežič Glavica 2023) and the crisis of authority (Vodičar 2023). What do the media of the past and the media of today have in common when they report on the Catholic Church? They co-create, influence and shape opinions, attitudes and the image of the Church. They influence the formation of media representations (MR), especially in the news media, and social representations (SR) that people receive.

An Italian sociologist, Gianni Losito emphasises that the impact of the media should not be seen as a general theory of impact or as a theory of the social impact of the media, but precisely as a theory of the impact of the media on specific opinions, attitudes and behaviours of individual members of the public, each of whom has a particular psychological profile and social experience (Losito 2004, 49-50).

SRs go deeper into the human psyche than public opinion. Sergei Moscovici, the founder of the theory of social representations, defines them as a set of theories and ideologies that are linked in the interaction of individuals in a society or group. They are characterised by the fact that they convert (transform) individual ideas into collective experiences and interactions into collective behaviours. Social representations have their origins in modern society, in the political, scientific and human environment. They are dynamic, as rapid changes in society do not allow them to remain permanent and unchanging. SRs directly increase heterogeneity in society and change "standardisation systems" (of official sciences, religions, ideologies). Where they bring about change, they become collective realities. The mass media accelerate the emergence of SRs by fostering heterogeneity in society and further multiplying the changes, creating the need for connections between completely abstract "sciences" (or collective beliefs on the one hand) and concrete activities of social individuals on the other (Moscovici 2005, 29).

This SRs dynamic represents a major "risk" for the acceptance of fake news as true. This news is harmful. A communication scientist, Professor Peter Lah describes fake news as a form of propaganda. "They contain a grain of truth [...]. Manipulators use this fact to make claims that are logically false in order to mobilise people for their own goals. People fall for propaganda claims because

they cannot find a logical flaw, but mainly because they want to believe them" (Lah 2018, 2).

Ultimately, such falsehoods lead to mistrust and have a negative impact on young people and education (Vodičar 2023, 1038). In addition, news outlets that use artificial intelligence and chatbots can target people with such fake news and present it in a way that appeals to a specific user and is highly engaging (Centa Strahovnik 2023, 863).

News media creators are looking for different techniques to make the news as interesting and appealing as possible to consumers. But at what cost?

More aggression, less transparency and less trust. A survey of 428 young people (and 214 parents) in the United States found that a quarter of young people had been directly or indirectly involved in aggression on social networks. In addition, a third of young people had experienced aggression. Almost a third of parents said they were unsure whether their child had been involved in social media or had been a victim of aggression (Barry, Briggs and Sidoti 2019).

In our study, we limited ourselves to exploring only the themes and connotations of media content in which the Catholic Church is mentioned, and we set three initial hypotheses. First, news content mentioning the Catholic Church is related to ethical issues, religious holidays (Easter, Christmas), sexual abuse and finance. Secondly, negative associations predominate in this content. Thirdly, among the contents of the news media, we will not find topics that have a positive connotation and propose solutions to social problems from the perspective of the Roman Catholic Church.

1. Research

We analysed 3735 articles from print, radio, television and online media in four trimesterly analysis periods in 2019. Kliping d.o.o., a company for monitoring and analysis of media, provided us with the articles in which the Catholic Church was mentioned on a daily basis. The quantitative analyses were carried out using the SPSS programme.

1.1. Purpose and objectives

The news media often present their own interpretation of the news. Therefore, one cannot read the news literally, but should look for the deeper meaning of it. In this study, we have not contented ourselves with the literal meaning of the texts but have also looked for connotative and ideological messages in them. The aim of this analysis is to highlight the problem of "too much freedom" in the expression of the news: Exaggeration, attraction, drama and framing.

1.2. Methods

The analysis includes newspaper articles from the print media, radio and television news from the news programme and online news from the Slovenian

Press Agency (Kraner 2021). The analysis includes newspaper articles, radio and television reports from the news programme and online news from the Slovenian Press Agency (STA). Different types of texts are referred to below as "articles", even if they are radio or television reports. In order to facilitate data processing, we have categorised local media into the following categories: "Other-print," "Other-radio," "Other-TV" and "Other-web." The question we wanted to answer was how the Slovenian media portray the Catholic Church. We assumed that their representations of the Catholic Church have the potential to influence the social perceptions that people have of the Catholic Church.

The questionnaire was designed to answer the following research questions: What topics do they address in relation to the Catholic Church? What connotations do the articles have? We will limit ourselves here to connotations and topics.

1.3. Results

The representations of the Catholic Church in the media during the study period are divided into extremely negative and extremely positive connotations (Table 2).

Since users are more sensitive to surprising and negative news (Newman et al. 2022, 10), we assume that the media emphasise the Church's problems in order to attract more users (Wróbel 2017). Exploitation of the three pervasive themes (sexuality, finance and politics) is present in different waves throughout the year (Table 2). These topics are the main topics for framing. A concrete example are articles that report on a positive topic (e.g. Catholic Easter) but are placed in a negative context (sex scandals, financial crisis, etc.). To this, media content creators add narrative drama: the content must be interesting and attractive to media consumers.

At this point, we would like to emphasise the following results of this study: 1) the connotations of the content depending on the medium and 2) the topics covered.

1.3.1. Connotation of content by medium

In the analysis, the texts of the articles are evaluated according to four different connotations of the articles: positive, negative, balanced (positive and negative at the same time) and ideological (interest-related). The criterion for an article with a positive connotation presupposes that the text of the article describes the Catholic Church in an overall positive way. A text with a negative connotation is a text that describes the Catholic Church in a purely negative way. The highest number of articles with a positive connotation can be found in the local press, while the highest number of articles with a negative connotation can be found in Dnevnik, Delo and Sta.si. (Table 1).

Table 1. Connotation of articles by medium

The number of articles with a positive and negative connotation is balanced:
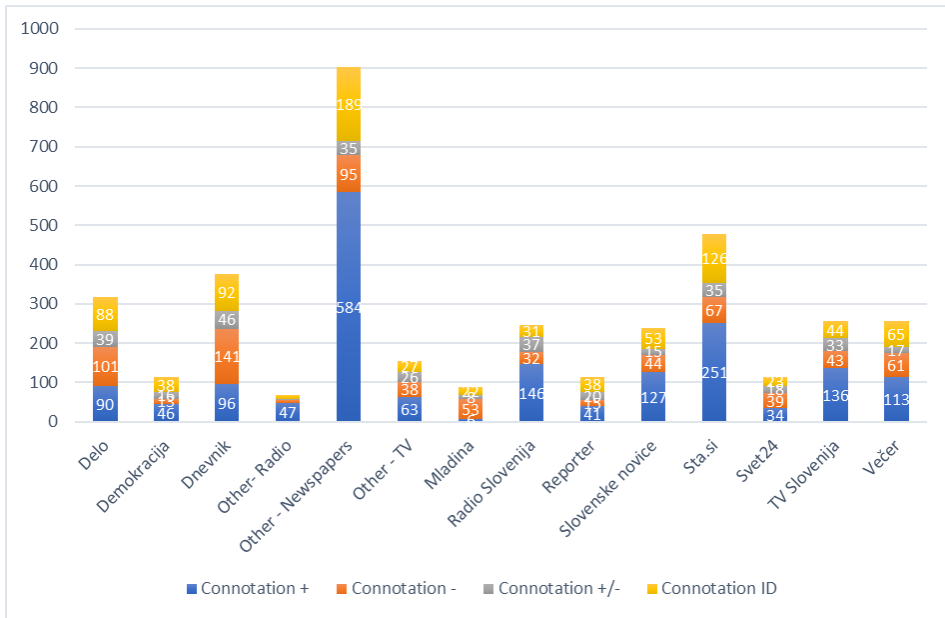
roughly the same number of articles with content about the Catholic Church have a positive connotation as the number of articles with a negative connotation. Articles with a balanced connotation are most frequently found in Dnevnik, Delo,[1] Radio Slovenia, TV Slovenia[2] and Sta.si[3] (Table 1).

The term "ideological" is used for all those articles that contained neither positive nor negative descriptions of the Church, but only general, indifferent content. Most articles with ideological connotations in the analysis were found in the local press, Sta.si, Dnevnik and Delo.

Media with individual connotations comprising more than 60 articles were found in Delo, Dnevnik, Druze Press, Radio Slovenija, Slovenske novice, Večer, Sta.si and TV Slovenija.

Highly critical and negative opinions towards the Catholic Church contained in the analysed articles convey a subtle demand that everyone must agree with the prescribed public opinion. Individual opinions of influential people are presented in the Slovenian media as the only true ones. The ideological and negative connotations of the articles increasingly spread fear among dissenting voices and keep them trapped in a spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann 2002, 18-21).

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[1] *Delo* was the most important Slovenian newspaper of the social communists from 1920 to 1940. Today it represents liberal ideas, most of which are at odds with Catholic morality. *Dnevnik* covers the same political topics and is the local newspaper of the municipality of Ljubljana.

[2] *Radio Slovenia* and *TV Slovenia* are national media.

[3] STA is the Slovenian news agency.

To summarise, the local media most often write and report about the Church with a positive connotation because they are in direct contact with the local Church (parish priests and the parish) and because they report on specific events. Dnevnik, Delo and some other media write and report about the Church with a negative connotation, because they have no contact with concrete people or witness events in the Catholic Church and stick to their editorial policy rather than the reality of events.

1.3.2. Topics related to the Catholic Church

The range of topics that appear in the media is limited. Topics relating to the Catholic Church can be classified into 14 groups. Most articles describe Catholic events or rites. This is followed by topics related to sexual abuse, politics and money. (Table 2)

Table 2. Topics related to the Catholic Church
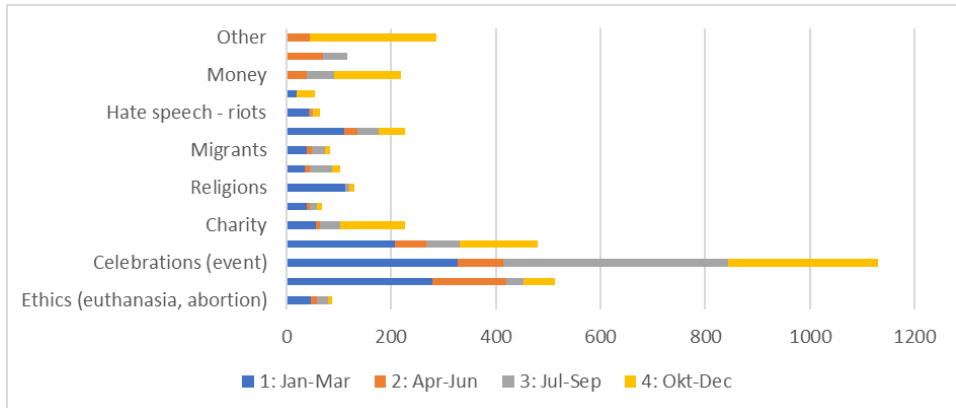
2. Discussion

In our study we can confirm two hypotheses and reject one. First, the news media report most frequently on Church events (holidays, celebrations), followed by sexual abuse, politics, finance and ethics. Secondly, we assumed that negative connotations dominate this content. Although there is a high proportion of articles with a negative connotation in all media, the number of articles with a positive connotation predominates in all media. Thirdly, we have confirmed the assertion that we will not find any topics among the content of the news media that propose solutions to social problems from the perspective of the Roman Catholic Church.

In our study, we do not and cannot look for a causal relationship between negative news and vandalism, but it is nevertheless necessary to show the context in which the Catholic Church finds itself and what Christian's experience is.

2.1. Vandalism and violence

Words can also be a form of violence and they can be used in defence or attack. A French sociologist and anthropologist, Phillipe Breton writes about three ways in which words can become different types of violence.

"The first concerns irrational violence, that of the serial killer or homicidal madness, but also that of the 'serial tormentor', the social pervert. This violence, whether physical or moral (psychological), is very little at odds with speech, which is therefore not a possible alternative. The fact is that in this case, the victim's word has no status: for the aggressor, it is not a word, but an object. Salvation can only come from the application of a stronger violence or escape, when possible. [...] The second configuration concerns physical violence exercised as a mode of action. Taking the floor, in this case, can be a practical means of opposing violence, using it as a space for transposition. War can thus result in a cease-fire and then be the subject of negotiations. Physical aggression can be interrupted to make way for dialogue and reasoning. A violent person may accept the process of controlling his impulses by putting his violence into words in order to diminish its scope. [...] The third configuration refers to the situation in which violence, used as a mode of action, passes exclusively through the use of speech. In this case, the aggressor exploits all the resources of speech, especially those that enable him to exercise power, or rather dominion over the other. Three major categories of behaviour then come into play: coercion, bullying and harassment" (Breton 2004, 79-81).

None of the three types of violence are found in the articles analysed. However, we do find it in society, which is why we want to mention it here.

We need to relate our research to the European and Slovenian context in which it was conducted. A report by The Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe shows that there was a 70% increase in discriminatory acts against Christians in Europe between 2019 and 2020. The areas of life most affected are Church life, education, politics and the workplace. For example, in the field of education, it is noted that Christian university students are unable to freely discuss certain topics or express their opinions without condemnation or negative consequences, leading to the crippling effects of self-censorship (Chavez-Reder et al. 2012, 6).

In Slovenia, the number of recorded cases of Christianophobia during our survey has doubled compared to the previous year. In its Annual Report 2019, the Catholic Church in Slovenia cites six cases of vandalism, most of which involve destruction of religious symbols (crosses, chapels and other objects) and one case of offensive writing by a journalist from Mladina magazine (SŠK 2019, 154-160).

In academia, there is no new research related to Christianophobia and media representations of the Catholic Church. Older European research on this topic looks at media representations of Muslims in Europe (Baker et al. 2013; Ameli et al. 2007). Slovenian research, however, only addresses the problems of representations of ethnic small groups in Slovenia (Petković et al. 2009) and Catholic Church finances and media ownership (Bašić-Hrvatin et al. 2007).

2.2. Missing positive news about the Catholic Church

Socio-political issues, where the Church could make an important contribution to improving society, are not included in public discourse. This is confirmed by the results of connotation analyses, which show that such topics are neglected or negatively connoted in the media. This type of reporting on the Church in the media leads to the Church being removed from the public discourse and only being portrayed as a negative institution.

The results of the above-mentioned analysis of media coverage in Slovenia certainly provide a reflection of today's European society and its attitude towards the institutional Church (Sadowski 2021). It is not a novelty that the media are not favourably disposed towards the Church.

News about the Catholic Church that appears negative at first glance because it criticises a certain behaviour is not always negative. Dulles has already pointed out seven conflicts between the Church and the media: The mystery of the Church versus the investigative research of the media; the eternity of the truth of the Gospel versus the novelty of the media; the building of unity in the Church versus the disunity and contention of the media; the abstract language of the Church versus the concrete, specific and practical language of the media; the hierarchical order within the Church versus the democratic equality of all citizens; complex and intricate theological content versus simplistic interpretations of the media; faith-based justification versus a secular interpretation of reality (Dulles 1994).

Furthermore, it is important to consider the different ways in which media consumers are influenced by the media. Just to mention the theory of agenda setting. The process of agenda setting is a constant endeavour by the proponents of the cause to gain the attention of three social actors: Media professionals, the public and the political elite. This process helps us to explain why, in democratic countries, some issues are in the public eye and others are not. It also helps us to understand how public opinion is formed. An agenda is a collection of issues. Depending on how important individual issues are, they are communicated to the public over a certain period of time. Since time periods are not static and agendas are the result of dynamic interactions, certain topics appear and disappear at different times depending on their importance. Agendas therefore provide snapshots of this fluidity (Dearing and Rogers 1996, 42).

2.3. Reframing religious content

The topics of sexual abuse, money and politics mentioned above fall under the heading of crisis communication. For more than thirty years, we have been aware that we live in a fluid modernity and in a society of uncertainty (Bauman 1999; Bauman 2012). Church documents encourage Catholics to use media content thoughtfully, carefully and actively (CI 2002; PK 2021).

This environment has brought with it a different way of communicating. Before the internet, institutions (including the Church) could remain silent in crisis situations. Today, silence is the worst possible response to a crisis. (Platovnjak

2024, 201-203). De La Cierva, an expert on crisis communication in the Church, argues that institutions need to monitor their actions in four areas: Prevention (what to do to avoid a potential crisis), Planning (how to prepare for a potential crisis), Communication (how to implement a communication plan in the times of crisis), and Evaluation (how to assess the organisation's response and how to bring about recovery) (De la Cierva 2008, 44).

All of this requires great wisdom, truthfulness, but also an awareness that media messages are not always well received by users. Hall discusses three hypothetical positions for decoding media discourse. The first is the dominant-hegemonic position. The viewer fully and directly accepts the meaning conveyed by the media and decodes the message according to the reference code in which it was encoded. The second position is the negotiating position. Most users of media content understand what is dominantly defined. Decoding within the conformist and oppositional elements recognises the legitimacy of the hegemonic definition to create an overarching label, while creating its own rules of the game on a more limited, situational level. The third element is the oppositional code. The user of media content fully understands both the literal and connotative emphasis of the media discourse but decodes the messages in an oppositional sense (Hall 2012).

The very lukewarm reaction of Catholics to articles with negative connotations could indicate that Slovenian Catholics decode media content in a "negotiating" way: Most of them understand what the media want to convey, but they think in their own way. They do not publicly show what they think. Young Catholics are more active and dare to take to the streets and show their faith publicly (Šegula 2018; Merše 2023).

The UK is a very good example of a forward-looking response to the media. In 2012, the international Catholic Voices project was launched. The motivation for the project began in 2010 as the UK prepared for the visit of Pope Benedict XVI. Under the leadership of the project's initiator, Dr Austen Ivereigh, a group of lay people, Catholics, students and employees decided to train in public speaking in the media. The results were excellent. The group helped to change the coverage of the Pope's visit and the perception of the Church. Ivereigh then pointed out one of the key ways we respond to the media. When we communicate in the media, we should not expect everyone to be ready to listen to us immediately, because people have too many philtres that prevent this. This is a process that takes time because the same event needs to be presented in a completely different light (Ivereigh 2023, 9-11).

Ivereigh summarises this process of reframing in the ten principles of good communication: 1. Do not get angry. Change. 2. Be a light, not a fever. 3 Think in groups of three. 4. People do not remember what you said so much as how it made them feel. 5. Actions count, not words. 6. Remember to say "yes". 7. Compassion counts. 8. Numbers are not everything. 9. It's the testimony that counts, not the victory. 10. It's not about you. Because Catholic Voices was independent of the bishops, even though it had their blessing, it was accepted by editors as media-friendly, studio-appropriate and not at all pretentious.

We have a similar example in the Islamic world. There, Salafist groups have "conquered" supremacy in the media world. They disseminate their views through topical commentaries on current affairs. Urška Jeglič, an expert on religions, states on this topic: "At the same time, they are very active in social and communication networks. Thanks to their frequent postings, digital algorithms help them to achieve a higher volume of posts and consequently more views. They are known for their interpretation of holy Islamic texts and the publication of sermons and prayers. Anyone who answers certain questions about Islam via the World Wide Web will sooner or later read or see articles published by members of Salafist groups" (Jeglič 2023, 953).

In a broader pedagogical context, educator and Gestalt trainer Iva Nežič Glavica argues that it is necessary to create a positive climate: "In a globalised, rapidly changing world, it will not be enough for them to impart different knowledge, but it will be equally important for them to create a space in which individuals can develop their personality, their individual potential, their social and emotional skills" (Nežič Glavica 2023, 1052).

In today's Western culture, three typical types of communication and social relations can be recognised. The imperative-obligatory type of relationship is characterised by imperative (monological) communication, the contractual type of relationship (overlapping individual/party interests) by debate and rational explanation. However, neither the one nor the other mode of communication makes it possible to develop a genuine culture of encounter, mutual recognition and the joint search for the truth about a phenomenon: Such a dynamic requires a genuine dialogue, an awareness of at least some points that are common and unifying: According to Sorokin, this is the predominant mode of communication in the true community-like type of social relations (Bahovec 2015).

The media space, which is saturated with negative and false information, should become more transparent: with clear sources and without anonymous texts on the internet. Jonas Miklavčič, a researcher in ethics and artificial intelligence, underlines the complexity of the relationship between transparency and trust (Miklavčič 2021) and argues that "transparency should not be taken for granted as a value that should be maximised in all areas and at all costs. Transparency is indeed often the best route to trust, fairness and accountability [...]. But as such, it should not be absolute, but should be demanded in the right form, in the right areas and for the right purposes" (Miklavčič 2023, 837).

Conclusion

Although much of the news about the Catholic Church is negative, there is still more positive news, in all media. In view of the increasing vandalism in Slovenian society, it is important that hostility, denigration and labelling do not yet appear in the news. It should also be remembered that not all news with a negative connotation have a bad effects but it can even have a positive effect if it helps a community to right wrongs.

When lies, inaccuracies and manipulated truths appear in the news, media consumers may react. Such news must not be taken literally and must be decoded in an oppositional way. If all media consumers reacted to all negative news and all fake news in an oppositional way, media policy would change quickly.

How can you express your opinion in public? It takes at least three elements: decision, content and attitude. Deciding to take the ten steps suggested by Ivereigh is crucial. It helps readers to calm down their emotions which will make it easier for them to focus on arguments, to remain respectful and friendly in a dialogue and to realise that they do not have to "win" everywhere. Content: The opposing opinion should be expressed in a reasoned and professional manner. As long as a personal opinion is not expressed, it cannot become a public opinion. Attitude. The news is always about people: the media, social groups, those responsible in various institutions. Transparency and creation of a positive public atmosphere are important attitude-shaping factors. Teaching respectful attitude must start in schools and educational institutions. These three steps are important so that our citizens begin to approach the media content more critically, become more attentive and dare to take an oppositional stance in the face of injustice.

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