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# The climate change speaking subjects in the Slovak quality press<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Almost one-half of all the citizens of the European Union believe that climate change is a serious threat to society.<sup>2</sup> According to the populations of some states, it is actually the biggest threat we face.<sup>3</sup> In 13 of 26 EU countries, the climate crisis ranked as the number one threat to society, followed by the threat of militant Islamism and cyber terrorism.<sup>4</sup>

The public's concerns are shared by politicians and media around the world. Although there are still some people today who deny the existence of climate change

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a revised and translated version of the chapter: T. Profant, *Kto dostáva slovo v diskusii o klimatickej zmene*, [in:] *Slovenské skúsenosti s neoliberalizmom alebo ako sa deformuje obraz socioekonomickej reality na Slovensku*, eds. J. Košč, Z. Homer, R. Žanony, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Bratislava, pp. 124–133. This paper was presented at the conference „Central and Eastern Europe in the International Politics of the 20th and 21st Centuries“ in Szczecin, May 26–27 2022 and should be considered an equivalent to a paper in conference proceedings.

<sup>2</sup> S. Fleming, *What Do People around the World Think about Climate Change?* World Economic Forum, 8.1.2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/01/climate-change-perceptions-europe-china-us/> [accessed: 7.6.2023].

<sup>3</sup> J. Poushter, Ch. Huang, *Climate Change Still Seen as Top Global Threat, But Cyberattacks Rising Concern*, Pew Research Center, 10.2.2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/02/10/climate-change-still-seen-as-the-top-global-threat-but-cyberattacks-arising-concern/> [accessed: 7.6.2023].

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

or that it has been caused by human activity, the prevailing opinion recognises that the world is facing an unprecedented problem and it needs to be addressed.<sup>5</sup>

It is clear that climate change and the climate crisis are important issues for all of society. The question is who is it we are hearing from on this – who gets to speak about it. Whose ideas are dominating the public discussion of climate change? This question is just a particular variation of the more general question about the dominance of elites in society and in relation to environmental problems is a crucial part of the field of political ecology. It is within this field that this paper intends to make its contribution.

Anyone today can say (almost) anything they want. And (almost) anyone can write or share anything in a way that the rest of society has easy access to it. Technological changes have brought about an unprecedented level of equality in the possibility to voice and share one's thoughts.

While there is equality in the possibility to present one's opinions to the public, there is no equality on the matter of who is listened to or heard. Only the words of those who are heard have the power to achieve anything. It is therefore important to look at those who are speaking in the media and whose words thus have the potential to have a real impact.

The research aim of this paper is to focus on those who are speaking in the media. In particular I ask the research question: Who is quoted or paraphrased in the selected media?

## Theoretical perspective

While in the economic sphere it would make sense to focus such an analysis on the activities of economic think-tanks, given their dominance in this arena, but they do not have as much dominance in the environmental sphere. Analysis of the actors involved in this sphere and what they are saying is still only in its early stages.

We should begin, therefore, by asking the question posed by Foucault: 'Who is speaking?'<sup>6</sup> Foucault's poststructuralist perspective on power is the theoretical basis of this paper. He further asked: 'What is the status of the individuals who – alone – have the right, sanctioned by law or tradition, juridically defined or spontaneously accepted, to proffer such a discourse?'<sup>7</sup> Foucault's analysis was concerned with the status of the doctor. He discussed the criteria that establish the doctor's competence and knowledge, the institutions, such as the hospital, that confer legitimacy, and the doctor's hierarchical relations to other groups that place him or her on the

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g.: European Commission, *Causes of Climate Change*, <https://ec.europa.eu/clima/> [accessed: 7.6.2023].

<sup>6</sup> M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Routledge, London and New York 1989.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 55.

pedestal of knowledge. The crucial point was that ‘medical statements cannot come from anybody.’<sup>8</sup> If someone is a plumber or a lawyer, their opinion on medicine carries much less weight than that of a doctor or a scientist. Foucault analyses how the birth of the clinic created an enormous power apparatus in which the doctor became the speaking subject.

Today the privileged position of the physician in society is considered natural and is perhaps only ever challenged by marginal criticism relating to childbirth or the political economy of pharmaceutical interests. But at its core it remains unshakable. The physician is the main power subject in the field of medical knowledge.

The question of who dominates public discussions on the environment comes from the field of political ecology. One of the basic issues political ecology is interested in is ‘the centrality of expert knowledges (and discourses) in giving shape to the definition of problems and solutions, and of the indisputable significance of transnational scientific mobilization.’<sup>9</sup> This scientific mobilisation, along with the presence of other actors, forms the discursive basis on which political battles are fought. The views of Donald Trump or Václav Klaus, on the one hand, and Greta Thunberg, the European Commission, or Progressive Slovakia, on the other, are not expressed in a vacuum and do not exist without some kind of foundation. This foundation is represented by the central role of expert knowledge noted above. It is only after this foundation has been formed that the political fight ensues, a fight that is deeply unequal and skewed in advance to favour some political groups over others.

My recent research on public discussions about the media found that there indeed exists a dominance in public debates on the media,<sup>10</sup> but it is not of a particular institution or profession. It is the dominance of a normative position, which gets to speak to us about the media. The people who dominate the discussion, to the point where they are basically talking amongst themselves, and thereby create an almost impenetrably closed arena of discussion are: journalists from the centrist media, people with a centre-right political background, and people who work in the part of the non-governmental sector that positions itself against the alternative media. The alternative media, which also publicly discusses the media, are excluded from this arena and must create their own (discursive) space.

I posed a question similar to Foucault’s but in relation to the issue of climate change. I want to know who has been assigned the right to speak about this subject. Who do the organisers of the discourse – i.e. journalists – choose to quote in their articles? Who do they give the authority to, who do they empower to tell us the truth (or untruth) about climate change?

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 56.

<sup>9</sup> R. Peet, P. Robins, M. Watts, *Global Nature*, [in:] *Global Political Ecology*, eds. R. Peet, P. Robins, M. Watts, Routledge, London and New York 2011, pp. 1–49, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> T. Profant, *Slovenské verejné diskusie o médiách. Analýza normativity diskutujúcich*, “Sociologický časopis” 2020, vol. LVI, no. 5, pp. 639–663.

The media's relationship to climate change is generally problematic. The increasingly frequent episodes of extreme heat on the planet are no accident. They are being caused by the climate crisis, which in turn has been caused by humankind. The problem is that weather reports are now being presented in the media as though the higher temperatures are just temperatures, and there is nothing more to it. This effectively neutralises what the planet is telling us. In a study titled 'Extreme Silence', a content analysis revealed that out of 226 reports of extreme weather events presented on the six largest US television stations in 2018, only 6 of them mentioned climate change.<sup>11</sup>

The conceptualization of media to climate change is difficult as the problem of depoliticization of event and especially of their origins is common in the media in general. Whereas issues such as murders or corruption cases usually have clear culprits or at least those accused of having committed them, this is not the case with more general social problems such as poverty, inequality, homelessness or simply a lack of bike lanes. Causal reasoning that would identify the culprits is usually missing. It is in general difficult to point at one particular person and other factors than just a visible behaviour are also at play. One might thus argue that the relation between (mainstream) media and climate change is one of the reproduction of the hegemonic knowledge, which in general ignores the question of inequality in terms of causes of climate change and at the same time offers mainstream solutions to the problem akin to those already proposed by international organizations, governments and corporations.

The Czech daily newspaper *Deník Referendum* (Daily Referendum) drew attention to the links between media and energy ownership and media content in the Czech Republic.<sup>12</sup> Daniel Křetinský, the majority owner of EP Holding (Energy and Industry Holding, an investment company largely focused on the energy sector), is also the co-owner of the Czech News Center, a media house that operates the website *Info.cz*. According to Petr Bittner, the content of articles on energy-related issues published on *Info.cz* serves the holding's interests in brown-coal mining. *Info.cz*, for example, has criticised the transition to clean energy in Germany and (together with BIS – the Czech Security Information Service) has described activists involved in Climate Action Camps as left-wing extremists. Whereas a direct relation between an owner of a newspaper and its content is difficult to trace a content or discourse analysis usually shows a clear affinity.

Like *Deník Referendum*, the Slovak dailies *SME* and *N* (and *Aktuality* and *Kapitál* as well) have joined the 'Covering Climate Now' initiative.<sup>13</sup> The aim of the

<sup>11</sup> D. Arkush, A. Fisher, V. Brown, M.S. Wachter, *Extreme Silence. How the US Media Have Failed to Connect Climate Change to Extreme Heat in 2018*, Public Citizen, Washington, D.C. 2018.

<sup>12</sup> P. Bittner, *Limity slušného tisku ve službách něčího zisku*, *Deník Referendum*, 25.5.2018, <https://denikreferendum.cz/clanek/27683-limity-slusneho-tisku-ve-sluzbach-neciho-zisku> [accessed: 7.6.2023].

<sup>13</sup> *Covering Climate Now: Partners*, Covering Climate Now, 2020, <https://www.coveringclimatenow.org/partners> [accessed: 7.6.2023].

initiative is to provide more and better coverage of the climate crisis. *N* has even started publishing data on the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, and every time it presents such data it includes a link to an article explaining why the editors decided to publish the data.<sup>14</sup>

It is clear that the media's attitude towards the climate crisis is ambivalent and complex, and different media outlets approach the crisis in different ways. The quality media are the most important such outlets and the research question in this paper is specifically applied to them.

A basic assumption of political ecology is that environmental problems are socially constructed. However real the phenomena we are witnessing in the physical and natural world are, it is only social discourse that gives them meaning. This is true both of the hard to refute constructedness of the use of terms such as 'climate change' or 'climate crisis' and the consensual constructedness of measuring the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Even these molecules only make sense to us once a discourse has formed about their existence and measurement. On this (discursive) foundation it is then possible to build a discussion about whether the earth's changing temperature is being caused by CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, or, for example, whether it is perhaps being caused by water vapor, whether what's happening is climate change or a climate crisis, and whether humans are responsible for it, or, for example, it is being caused by changes in solar radiation.

None of the above statements are intended to be controversial in any way. This is just a way of presenting a basic theoretical perspective that indicates how important it is to analyse how the whole phenomenon of the environment is constructed. To put it simply, there is nothing inherently natural to the way we talk about the climate crisis, as this discussion has been and is being shaped by multiple actors and by the power relations between them.

While science on its own provides us with enough reasons to distrust it, it also often comes up with information that offers no reason for it not to be consensually accepted and considered true by those who are interested in discussing it. Although a distrust of such scientific 'facts' indeed persists, it is not the aim of this text to question them.

This text seeks rather to consider scientific facts as part of the discourse on climate change and to answer the question: Who is speaking in this discussions? Which actors are dominating it and which are being marginalised? Which actors are given room to speak and which, on the contrary, are denied it?

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<sup>14</sup> T. Vasilko, *Dennik N bude uverejňovať údaje o CO<sub>2</sub> v atmosfére. Je ho tu najviac za tri milióny rokov*, "Denník N", 8.5.2019, <https://dennikn.sk/1460056/dennik-n-bude-uverejnovat-udaje-o-co2-v-atmosfere-je-ho-tu-najviac-za-tri-miliony-rokov/> [accessed: 7.6.2023].

## Methodology

The discussion of climate change is here represented by a very limited set of 60 articles on this topic that were published in the Slovak daily newspapers *Denník N* and *SME* in August, September, and October 2019. The newspapers were selected for how significant they are in society. Although they are not the media with the highest readership figures, their significance derives from the fact that they are quality media and not tabloids. In the third quarter of 2019 *SME* had a circulation of 21,324 copies per month (for a comparison, *Nový čas* – ‘A New Time’, a tabloid paper – sold 68,523 copies per month in the same period),<sup>15</sup> and in 2019 *SME*’s website had just over 2.5 million ‘real users’ per month.<sup>16</sup> In 2019 the estimated readership of *SME* was 5% of the population (*Nový čas* has a readership of 14%).<sup>17</sup> According to its own data, *Denník N* had 45,000 subscribers in 2019 and just over a million monthly visitors to its website.<sup>18</sup> This article thus presents an analysis of a very significant part of the mainstream media.

The articles included in the analysis were selected from the ‘Climate Change’ section of the two dailies *Denník N* and *SME*. A table was then created in which each person quoted or paraphrased was recorded and assigned a descriptor. This could be a natural scientist, a social scientist, an economist, a journalist (possibly a YouTuber), a politician, an activist, or a person from the non-governmental sector, a person in the role of ‘a representative of the people’, which means someone who is not an expert, activist, politician, or journalist – for example, a fisherman, farmer, or mother. People included in the category of the ‘uncategorised’ were those who were hard to assign to any category, such as novelists, or people who would have fit in more than one category at the same time.

This article analyses the frequency with which these individuals were quoted or paraphrased. A limitation of the analysis is that it does not examine what was said or how much room the individual was given to speak. It is thus just a first step towards answering the question of who in Slovakia gets to speak about climate change or the climate crisis.

<sup>15</sup> *Archív výsledkov*, Audit Bureau of Circulations SR, 2020, <http://www.abcsr.sk/aktualne-vysledky/archiv-vysledkov/> [accessed: 7.6.2023].

<sup>16</sup> *SME.sk*, Petit Press, 2020, <https://www.petitpress.sk/inzercia/inzercia-sme-sk/> [accessed: 7.6.2023].

<sup>17</sup> *MML-TGI národný prieskum spotreby, médií a životného štýlu Market & Media & Lifestyle – TGI*, Median SK, Bratislava 2020, <https://www.median.sk/pdf/2019/ZS1914SR.pdf> [accessed: 7.6.2023].

<sup>18</sup> *Infografika: Ako sa Denníku N darilo v roku 2019*, Redakčný Blog Denníka N, 2020, <https://dennikn.sk/1700685/infografika-dennikn-2019/?ref=tema> [accessed: 7.6.2023].

## Analysis

Table 1 contains the basic data of the analysis, where the specific persons cited and paraphrased are aggregated according to their social roles in society and showing the frequency of these roles.

Table 1. People cited and paraphrased in the media

Social role	Number of persons with this role/function (from the given sphere) quoted or paraphrased in the media (total: 257)
Natural scientists	82 (32%)
Politics	56 (22%)
Economics	31 (12%)
Journalism and YouTube	21+4 (10%)
Social sciences	19 (7%)
Activism and NGOs	15+4 (7%)
Representatives of the people	7 (3%)
Business	5 (2%)
Medicine	4 (2%)
Uncategorised	9 (4%)

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The analysis of the frequency of individual social functions reveals that the mainstream media most often quote and paraphrase natural scientists in this discussion. This group made up almost one-third of all the individuals who were quoted and paraphrased. Politicians accounted for less than one quarter of the persons quoted or paraphrased and thus speaking to readers. More than one-tenth of those cited were economists, but almost one-half of them were all found in the article *Panel ekonomických expertov: Čo by malo Slovensko robiť v reakcii na klimatickú zmenu* (A panel of economic experts: what Slovakia should do in response to climate change). Journalists and YouTubers represented one-tenth and social scientists 7% of individuals quoted and paraphrased. In addition to these groups, doctors, businessmen and businesswomen, and 'representatives of the people' were also given space to speak in the texts.

A deeper preliminary analysis would go beyond a simple frequency analysis and would reveal that the group of social scientists included, for example, rectors or the chair of the Slovak Academy of Sciences speaking in their official roles or a photography theorist commenting on a photo. The majority of the economists quoted or paraphrased could not be called representatives of environmental or ecological economics, and an analysis would likely show that their quoted and paraphrased statements were mainly grounded in mainstream economics.

Two groups that could introduce alternative social perspectives into the discussion of the climate crisis are people from the sphere of politics and those from the third sector. Politicians present in the texts, on one side, included representatives from the dominant part of the political spectrum such as President Zuzana Čaputová, MEP Martin Hojsík, and Emmanuel Macron, and on the other side included politicians such as US President Trump, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, and former Czech President Václav Klaus. Among activists, the voice encountered most often in the newspapers was that of Greta Thunberg. Without her, probably no other voice critical of the current liberal and conservative establishment would have been present. From the non-governmental sector, the (in many ways) centrist members of the Znepokojené Matky (Concerned Mothers) initiative and the Envipak recycling organisation were present in the texts.

A qualitative content analysis or discourse analysis would need to be conducted to show what the individuals who were quoted and paraphrased were saying to readers and where they are located within the discourse on sustainable development – whether they are techno-optimists who believe in market forces, modernisers striving for better regulation, individuals fighting against the system, or more esoteric deep ecologists. This initial analysis suggests that more sharply critical views of the current system are being marginalised in the discussion, and when they are heard they are as likely to have been voiced by high-school girls as they are to have come from individuals who usually bring knowledge to the table, such as scientists and doctors. However, it would only be possible to provide more precise findings on this through further analysis.

## Conclusion

How we view or understand the climate crisis is not something that exists naturally. It is socially constructed. What kind of information about the environment reaches us is determined by a variety of actors with different forms of power. While think-tanks dominate the discussion in the economic sphere, that is not the case here. In this discussion journalists give space to different actors in their texts.

Even though journalists pick the sources they will quote or paraphrase, it is difficult to judge the intentionality of their decision. On the one hand they may be perfectly aware of what the quoted subject is going to say and pick him or her on that basis, on the other hand they may only choose such a subject on the basis of his or her profession, expertise or social background. It is important to keep this in mind when presenting the findings from this research.

The modest analysis in this text shows that natural scientists are the ones who speak most on the issue of climate in the quality media in Slovakia. Politicians only come after them. Social scientist, activists, and representatives of NGOs are also



represented, but to a much lesser extent. This research suggests the tendency for a particular political orientation of the discourse produced by the quality media, but only a deeper analysis would show how the public debate is influenced by the actors who are quoted and paraphrased in the media.

Such a deeper analysis would need to be conducted using a greater corpus as well as using interviews to find out about the intentions of the journalists who give space to subjects in their texts.

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*The climate change speaking subjects in the Slovak quality press**Abstract*

The discussion devoted to the climate crisis, like the crisis itself, is not a natural phenomenon but one that is wo-/man-made. It is socially constructed. It is not economic think-tanks that dominate this socially constructed discussion but other actors that do. This article analyses who is quoted and paraphrased in Slovak media writing about climate change. The analysis is based on 60 articles that were published in the third quarter of 2019 in selected non-tabloid daily newspapers (i.e. the quality press) in Slovakia – *SME* and *N*. The results show that natural scientists dominate the media discussion of this topic and are the source of almost one-third of the statements quoted and paraphrased in the newspapers. They are followed by politicians, who make up one-fifth of those quoted or paraphrased. Social scientists, activists, and NGOs each make up just 7% of those quoted or paraphrased. This research represents the first step towards answering the question 'Who speaks?' when it comes to this issue and towards a more thorough discourse analysis that could reveal how certain voices are marginalised in the mainstream public debate.

Keywords: climate Change, media, Slovakia, discourse