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Corruption and Publicity

The media's impact on corruption and its social judgement

SUMMARY: The present study sets out to examine the subject of corruption and publicity. It states that: 1. publicity can help to uncover and prevent corruption, and take sanctions against it, 2. business and political interests might hinder the media's effective anti-corruption activities; 3. the media are able to influence the social judgement of the extent and frequency of corruption. The study proposes to investigate, with empirical research, the links between the level of corruption, its media presentation and its social perception. *Methods*: the prevalence of some keywords and expressions (corruption, bribe, slush-fund, severance pay) were examined in two leading daily political newspapers published in 2009 and 2010. The results were compared to Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, published six months later and the corruption ranking, based on it. *Results:* the number of media reports on corruption increased between 2009 and 2010, as well as its social perception. *Conclusions*: if corruption cases are uncovered and presented by the media, thus reducing the chance of corruption, its social perception will increase.

PUBLICITY AS AN ANTI-CORRUPTION REMEDY

The role of publicity in the fight against corruption has similar interpretations in literature. In general, it is an apodeictical axiom that publicity helps both uncover and prevent corruption.

In open and developed societies, the media are a weapon against corruption. When the media are working well, they prevent corruption by employing investigative journalism and revealing social values. Relying on freedom of speech, the media perform their watchdog function in society as they curb and expose social injustice. In reporting on cases of corruption, the media fulfil their social function in satisfying people's need for information. (Utriainen, 1997).

The media can shape the climate of democratic debate and help the establishment and maintenance of good governance, writes *Peters* (2003). Freedom of the press is fundamental to open, democratic society. Journalists have played a central role in promoting democracy, sacrificing their lives or freedom to promote transparent and accountable governance and a cooperating governmental behaviour. The author refers to specific examples of journalists as victims of the fight against corruption by writing: "Of the 68 confirmed cases of murders of journalists in 2001, 15 were related to their investigative work on issues of corruption. This is an alarmingly high number"[1].

According to *Suphachalasai* (2005), freedom of media reduces corruption. According to his opinion, the corruption problem in Italy could be reduced to the level experienced by France if the media industry was to be improved to the same level as that of the United Kingdom. In numerous articles, the authors illustrated the

role of the media in reducing corruption through actual cases (David, 2001; Brunetti & Weder, 2003). Staying with the example of Italy, *Giglioli* (1996) analysed the role of the media in the Tangentopoli affair and concluded that the judicial review, launched in February 1992 following the discovery of a minor political corruption case, led to the collapse of the political regime, which had governed the country for forty years.

While according to international statements, the role of publicity in the fight against corruption is clearly positive, it is only generally so in Hungary. The press has (could have) a very important role in revealing corruption cases, as most highly positioned corrupted/corrupting individuals fear public disclosure much more than the actual penalty (Szárny és teher [Wings and burden], 2009).

Considering that SAO is the "highest financial control body of the state with a general scope of competence", it does not have any decision-making authorities. Its 'weapon' is publicity, its reports are available to the public, its scope of audit is extensive, and it can make proposals or suggest sanctions with regard to detected crimes, but it does not have any real tools (Somogyvári, 2009). As *Papanek* (2003, 2005) points out, Hungarian experiences of recent years indicate that transparency and publicity are not enough on their own. In his article he also proposes that a list of politicians involved in corruption cases should be published on the Internet, as this solution proved to be a rather effective and important deterrent in Argentina.

On the other hand, however, Hungarian publications dedicated to corruption and publicity contain a theme, which is not typical internationally. The Hungarian authors indicate that public discussion of corruption affects its social perception, and deem this effect negative. *József Petrétei*[2] writes for example: "On the other hand, we must also take into account a specificity that fight against corruption can

itself also feed corruption. Any unfounded discussions on corruption may lead to excessive reactions, because the myth and fear of its generality may cause further damage to society's confidence in public institutions, and may hinder the effective fight against corruption". *Elemér Hankiss* conveys a similar suggestion: "If, for example, the media's coverage of corruption, be it superficial, is an everyday phenomenon and if the media is full of superficial and not firmly founded news on corruption, this may lead to people becoming so full of it that they feel that they live in a completely immoral and corrupt country" (Hankiss, 2009). The Gallup Institute writes about the "neurosis of corruption", generated by the media. The second half of the article covers the impact of the media on topic definition, and its influence on social perception and judgement.

Although the media's role in the prevention and sanctioning of corruption in general has not been analysed with empirical methods, we also accept the assumption, whereby the media can punish and prevent corruption by revealing and widely covering certain corruption cases. It is especially true for political corruption, because, apart from international examples, the 2010 elections in Hungary also clearly showed the consequences of the public coverage of corruption cases on the assessment and election results of certain political parties. The political party, whose election defeat was primarily caused by the disclosed corruption cases, will think twice in the future before it gets involved in similar cases again. In its analysis, the Socialist Platform is trying to identify the causes of MSZP's (Hungarian Socialist Party) possibly biggest current problem: the loss of credibility (Ferenc Baja). According to the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, the main reason of the Hungarian Socialists' defeat was corruption (Budapest Transport Company's cases, Zuschlag case, downtown property scandal, Casino town – Sukoró). On the other hand,

such consequences of the public discussion of corruption cases can be useful lessons for all political parties and might also reduce the probability of further cases of political corruption.

DO THE MEDIA COVER UP OR UNCOVER CORRUPTION?

Articles about corruption and publicity often describe the economic and political factors that hinder the media in fulfilling its historical role.

Although the media's role in preventing corruption is indisputable, it is not without its problems (Utriainen, 1997). In an ideal situation, publicity and ethical procedures go hand in hand, yet often there is a conflict between media demands and fair, objective criminal investigations (presumption of innocence, rights of family members, etc.) Competition in the media can make thorough analyses absolutely impossible: in many cases, we only receive fragments of information, and the media often have a will of their own, causing unexpected 'side effects'. Until corruption suspects are treated appropriately, the media may have positive and negative impacts. Reports on corruption cases indirectly affect the decision-making process of the courts. However, Peters (2003) considers it a problem that in many countries the media faces regulations that cover up information (e.g. repressive defamation laws that put the burden of proof on journalists and grant special protection to public officials exist across Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia and parts of Latin America. These laws often forbid truth in order to protect the reputation of public officials. Fear discourages investigative reporting and the exposure of corruption).

Suphachalasai (2005) also reaches a different conclusion from *Utriainen*, while investigating the relationship between bureaucracy and mass media industry, and its implications to corruption. According to the researchers' "bureau-

cratic model of corruption with mass media", different degrees of "media freedom" and competition affect production and employment decisions of media firms, and this in turn affects the effectiveness of the media in monitoring corruption, similarly to the impact of the degree of competition in the market. Freedom of media also reduces corruption. However, according to the author, media competition appears to be a more important tool to combat corruption than press freedom.

Peters also stresses the importance of competition, as he thinks that no analytical reports have identified corrupt practices in media giants. In some cases, private media owners themselves can have a strong influence on whether corruption is covered, especially if they pursue greater profits rather than principles of free reporting or access to information. (a major deal struck between the Chinese government and the media giants AOL Time Warner and Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation.) Italian prime minister *Berlusconi* owns the public media: although in theory journalists enjoy a certain editorial independence, in reality they risk losing their jobs by reporting too aggressively on the government. Although vital to media companies' financial performance, advertising has had an increasingly pernicious impact on editorial departments. Corruption also exists within the structure of media organisations and in the way journalists carry out their reporting tasks. Many engage in a host of corrupt practices, ranging from 'chequebook journalism' to news tailored to suit advertising or commercial needs.

Peters (2003) also analyses the topic from the journalists' point of view. In his opinion, journalists often face obstacles: censorship or restrictive regulations on journalistic work, as well as lack of training, poor professional standards and a dearth of investment into investigative reporting. In addition, journalists must also face the problems of the media itself (role

of advertising, corrupt journalistic practices and ownership concentration). Uncovering corruption is a dangerous assignment. By doing their jobs, journalists have played a central role in promoting democracy. They put their lives or freedom at risk to promote transparent and accountable governance. Of the 68 confirmed cases of murders of journalists in 2001, 15 were related to their investigative work on issues of corruption – states the author.

To promote openness in society and reduce corruption, the media must resist pressures from political and private interests. In terms of importance, editorial independence is directly next to the journalists' independence. Journalists and media freedom groups need to lobby together to pursue and publish stories in the public interest (including exposés of corruption).

Various countries regulated the operation of the media with laws and ethical standards. Later, international organisations also defined the ethical norms of journalists. Journalists apply them in most corruption cases. If they are not applied, human rights may be violated.

THE MEDIA'S IMPACT ON SOCIAL PERCEPTION

The media are part of the social structures and the sets of values surrounding us. Unfortunately, articles covering the relationship between corruption and the media do not contain any reference to media research, which focuses on the topic setting impact of the media, or how the media can influence the social perception or social assessment of corruption. In fact, it is almost exclusively through media coverage that the majority of people learn about corruption, especially political corruption, which cannot be experienced directly; we would like to make up for this shortfall with the following short summary.

While all of us find that the media are extremely interested in news related to corruption, *Kovach, Rosenstiel and Mitchell* (2003) proved the same fact with empirical methods. Their study reveals that news coverage on politics and public affairs is closely followed by police reports at the top of media topics. Examples shown in the media have a significant influence on our perception of the world surrounding us. Media consumption, such as the length and content of television exposure can have an influence over the viewer's social construction of reality, expectations, desires, attitudes and behaviour (Potter, 1993; Potter and Chang, 1990).

Research results vary in terms of the extent to which the opinions suggested by the media are accepted by the consumers, because their personal opinion is strongly determined by their individual experiences, education, their mindset, commitment and their group identity (Németh, 2006). However, there is a great deal of agreement on the fact that the media can influence what recipients should think, talk about or form an opinion of. Communication researchers have been aware of the relationship between news media agendas and public agendas for a long time (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Several experiments proved that a surprisingly large number of people consider TV to be the true image of reality. *Gerbner,* a world famous media researcher of Hungarian origin, who passed away a few years ago, had been analysing the impact of television on the perception of social reality since 1969. According to his cultivation theory, the length of exposure to television influences our perception of the various social groups (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli and Shanahan, 2002). For example, Gerbner (2001) showed that in the minds of heavy viewers the size of groups, underrepresented by the media (old people, minorities) was smaller than in reality. In addition, according to Gerbner's cultivation theory,

people who watch TV at least four hours a day, become more and more similar to each other, even if they should be different according to their demographic data (gender, age, qualifications). One of Gerbner's research results is especially interesting for the purpose of our topic, according to which heavy viewers consider their environment to be more hostile and dangerous than it really is, compared with light viewers. To the question of what is the likelihood of being attacked in a nearby park at night, an average person indicates a tenfold likelihood, and the person cultivating the TV states a hundredfold likelihood, compared with the actual number. It is also surprising that there is a kind of homogenisation of heavy viewers' conception of reality. This population will be inclined to agree with extreme right (xenophobia, e.g.), and also extreme left ideas (demand for the care by the state). According to the supporters of the cultivation hypothesis, many attitudes are influence by the length of exposure to TV, e.g., traditional sexuality (Morgan, 1987), perception of parental and marital relationships (Segrin and Nabi, 2002; Signorielli and Morgan, 2001), and the attitude to environmentally friendly behaviour (Shanahan, Morgan and Stenbjerre, 1997).

A lot of studies focused on the habits, instead of the length of TV viewing. Researchers assumed that the individual's choice of programmes and the frequency of viewing certain programme types relate to the individual's psychological status, personality and attitudes. *Chory-Assad* (2005) showed that lonely people insisted more on their favourite programmes than people living in families. According to *Shim*'s researches (2007), extroverts are interested in reality programmes, neurotics in soap operas and talk shows, slightly psychotic people are interested in news, while more psychotic individuals are attracted to crime stories. Research results reveal that the viewers' perception of reality and their atti-

tudes are significantly influenced by not only the length of TV viewing, but also the frequency of watching certain types of programmes. The results support the attempts of researchers urging for the enhancement of the cultivation hypothesis. These include *Shrum*'s modified cultivation hypothesis (1995, 2001), which takes into account the length of TV viewing and the frequency of viewing certain contents.

Petrétei points out the media's impacts on social perception without revealing any research results: the development of any such general assumption becomes a self-fulfilling prediction, because people lose their hope in the ability to stop corruption, and therefore they will be less willing to fight and less capable of fighting for the elimination of corruption. The author introduces an important aspect to the discussion, when he highlights the importance of distinguishing the facts of corruption from the opinions about corruption. The facts of corruption also vary, part of them are proven and documented, but the rest are unproven, and are only objects of facts. Opinions also vary strongly, depending on whether they are expressed by politicians, economic actors or common people, and whether they are based on empirical facts, or reflect general assumptions only.

According to the studies of the aforementioned Gallup Institute, fight against corruption can also feed corruption. If, for example, the media's coverage of corruption, be it superficial, is an everyday phenomenon and if streets are full of news about corruption, this may lead to people becoming so full of it that they feel that they live in a completely immoral and corrupt country. If corruption spreads intensively in a country, then the majority of people will sooner or later become indifferent to it or get mixed up in corruption practices and turn into accomplices.

We must agree that the media strongly influence the general opinion about corruption and the news coverage of corruption may develop a

negative image in people. However, we rather agree with József Petrétei and must distinguish between different news. News presenting specific events and facts can be true deterrents. However, general 'alarm raising' does not have such an impact, yet it may strongly deteriorate the external and internal judgement of the degree by which the country is infected with corruption.

HYPOTHESIS

According to our hypothesis, the media coverage of corruption reduces the degree of political corruption, but increases its social perception. In other words, if we ask the population or the experts to estimate the degree of Hungarian political corruption, then they will respond on the basis of the number and tone of the currently valid news.

We intend to present a short empirical research to show that corruption and its social perception differ in time, and that the revelation of corruption cases reduces the number of similar cases, but increases the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) of Transparency International (TI).

METHODS

We reviewed the 2009 and 2010 April issues of two leading political daily papers *(Magyar Nemzet* and *Népszabadság)*. With the help of Observer Media, we checked the frequency of occurrence of the following expressions: corruption, bribe, slush-fund, severance pay. The received data were compared to the TI corruption perception index, published half a year later, and the corruption ranking prepared accordingly. (The half-year difference is required to reflect the time difference between the data collection and the publication.) *(See Chart 1)*

Chart 1

CORRUPTION TOPICS COVERED BY THE TWO DAILY PAPERS
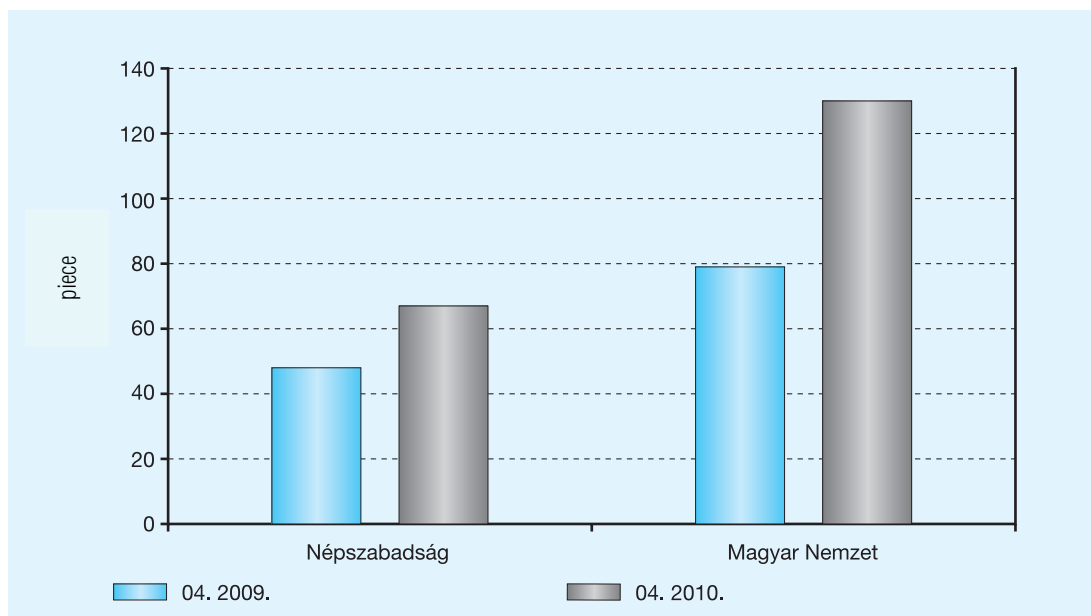
Note: Use of the words corruption, bribe, slush-fund, severance pay: April 2009 Népszabadság 47, Magyar Nemzet 64; April 2010 Népszabadság 79, Magyar Nemzet 130

RESULTS

Corruption perception

Below, we describe the TI CPI report for 2009 and 2010 based on the company's press releases.

According to the *Corruption perception index 2009*[3] press release, Hungary remained in the middle range of the corruption list. Hungary was perceived corrupt by the respondent analysts and business people to the same extent as in the previous year; our score remained: 5.1. With regard to ranking, we moved from 47th to 46th place.

Hungary fell below the regional average – Corruption index is at its lowest point. Structural government measures are required – this was the title of the press release for 2010, in which Transparency International published the 2010 results of the corruption perception index. Hungary fell below the regional average,[4] i.e. in our country the judgement of corruption is worse than the regional average; Hungary fell four places in the ranking, dropping back to the 50th place with 4.7 points according to the global survey of the international anti-corruption organisation. *(See Chart 2)*

CONCLUSIONS

Our short study confirms the hypothesis, according to which while the media reveals and presents corruption cases by performing its social task and reduces the probability of their re-occurrence, the degree of corruption perceived by the population also increases simultaneously.

Noémi Alexa, managing director of Transparency International Hungary explained the decline in the same way as indicated above. "Corruption is more perceived because of the corruption scandals of the recent past and the publicity of the retorsive actions, and due to

Chart 2

HUNGARY IN THE CORRUPTION LIST
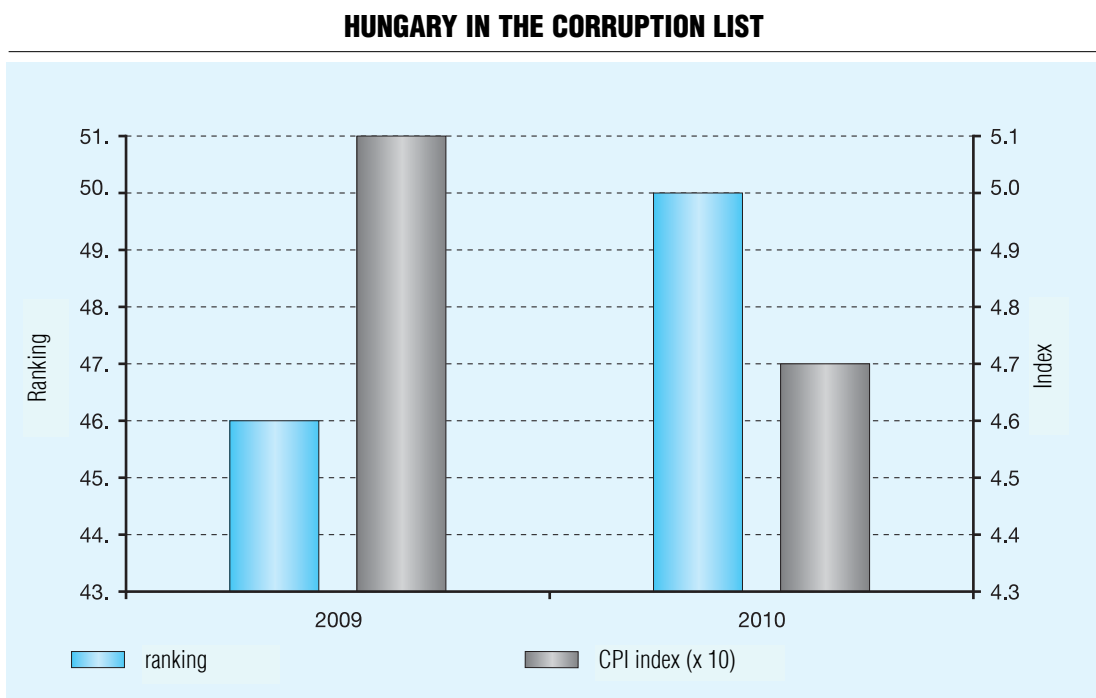
Note: Hungary dropped 4 positions in the corruption ranking and the CPI index increased by 0.4 points between 2009 and 2010.

this the index also deteriorated."[5] Unfortunately, the title of the press release – *Hungary fell below the regional average – Corruption index is at its lowest point. Structural government measures are required* suggests the opposite and the same suggestion was also adopted by the Hungarian papers. "More money for bribes" – writes Metropol on its cover page, and also on pages 6–7. "Corruption: the situation has deteriorated", and "We have become more corrupt" – states Index, just to mention the two most widely read media.

All this means that while Hungary successfully combats corruption (detection and sanctioning of the corruption cases of previous years), the domestic and international perception of Hungary's infection with corruption has worsened significantly.

In order to manage the situation, we need fair information, which does not confuse the deterioration of corruption perception with the deterioration of the extent of corruption. Researchers of corruption are responsible for highlighting this difference.

NOTES

[1] Peters, Bettina (2003) The media's role: covering or covering up corruption? In: Global Corruption Report, p. 48

[2] József Petrétei (2007): A korrupció jellemzői és az ellene való küzdelem lehetőségei [Characteristics of corruption and opportunities to combat it.] Romanian Hungarian Legal Sciences Gazette. Page 29

[3] TI press release on the 2009 CPI index (without a date)

[4] TI press release, Budapest, 26 October 2010

[5] TI press release, Budapest, 26 October 2010

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