

JOURNALISM YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW

Interview with Andrej TUŠER

ABSTRACT:

The interview presents Professor Andrej Tušer's opinions on various topics related to journalistic genres and issues modern journalism has to face, with emphasis on the press. Particular attention is paid to addressing the opportunities for independent journalism and the freedom of expression in the current socio-political situation, as well as to the impact of journalism on politicians and their behaviour. His perspectives on the rapidly changing conditions within journalism, contemporary methods of media production, competences of journalists in the age of multi-platform journalism and the development of the Internet and online journalism are also included. Professor Tušer's practical experience and theoretical expertise are reflected in a range of concepts concerning theoretical issues of journalistic production – including the meaning of genres in contemporary journalism and the position of regional and local print media. The given responses function as thorough, important and critical reflections of this patriarch of Slovak print journalism and journalism theory on the development and the current state of discursive journalism issues in connection with dynamic socio-political and technological transformations.

KEYWORDS:

journalism, journalistic genres, media independence, methods of media production, the press, regional and local periodicals



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Andrej Tušer's theoretical studies are based on vast editorial experience (*Pravda*, *Večerník*, *Železničiar*), managerial skills within the management of editorial staffs and editing activities (e.g. *Otázky žurnalistiky*, *Slovak Trade Forum* and other), as well as scientific and research activities at the Institute of Journalism Studies at the Centre for Information on Literature. His scientific interests are focused on the methods of media production, the system and typology of media, the study of journalistic genres and history of journalism. Professor Tušer pays special attention to regional and local periodicals. He has also given lectures on journalism theory and practice at the university level, has been an active participant in the development of a separate academic field of theory and history of journalism. He is the co-founder of the national competition *O Štúrovo pero* in Slovakia. Andrej Tušer has written numerous scientific studies, many news stories and Public Relations texts; he is the author or co-author of nine monographs, four university textbooks and twelve specialised manuals, for example *Ako sa robia noviny*, *Malá encyklopédia žurnalistiky*, *Typológia periodickej tlače*, *Praktikum mediálnej tvorby*, *Titulok – vizuálne avízo*. He has received numerous awards, including the prestigious Mercurius Veridicus ex Slovakia award for journalism (2010).



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Zora Hudíková is a trained psychologist and a university lecturer. Her graduation thesis was focused on the sphere of journalism theory; later she habilitated in the field of mass media studies. She has trained editors and moderators employed by the Slovak public television broadcaster Radio and Television of Slovakia for many years, especially in the areas of production and presentation of media content. She has also created a concept for training creative specialists and a system for assessing the quality of media professionals' performance. The interviewer has written, directed and collaborated on numerous programmes on radio and television. She is the author and co-author of several monographs (e.g. *Hodnota tvorcu*), university textbooks (*Praktikum mediálnej tvorby*, *Praktikum sociálnej komunikácie*, *Mediálne kompetencie: Televízia*), scientific and professional studies and journal articles, both at home and abroad. Her main areas of expertise include media psychology, the study of personalities of the creator and the recipient, the perception and effects of media content, creativity and the management of creative teams, radio journalism and socio-cultural aspects of the market environment.

Zora Hudíková (Z. H.): *Professor, you've been active in Slovak journalism for more than fifty years and your primary focus is on the press. You've experienced its development and transformations under the influence of the onset and boom of other 'classical' media, radio and television, which are today going through another major transformation as a result of the expansion of the Internet and digitalisation. The rise of each new medium was accompanied by bold proclamations of the end – or at least regression – of print media, of both daily newspapers and magazines. Despite these foreboding predictions, they remain and still are in print, even if they are currently engaged in efforts to make their content and format more eye-catching to attract recipients. What format will the press use in the near future to ensure they aren't just simplified 'shadows' of their own original counterparts?*

Andrej Tušer: I look back at my years as a student when the first information appeared in Western journalism, the information about the competitive threat that was emerging for the press – the Internet. It's come a long way since then and it's had an impact on far more than just the press. The expansion of the Internet and digitalisation occurred very quickly and in reality digital media continue to develop. Many of once major and strong print media 'players' went under due to new information technologies. The reason? They moved onto the Internet, to online editions. This competitor of the press has certainly made itself at home here. It does not mean the end of print periodicals, however.

Taking a look at the list of periodicals maintained by the Slovak Ministry of Culture's web portal,¹ there were still just over 1800 of them in February of this year. New titles with more demanding designs have also appeared in the meantime. And they focus on a narrower target group. Clearly, publishers are going to have to reconnoitre the media 'terrain' in more detail and better profile their products. The same goes for those currently on the market and those just coming to the market. Daily newspapers are in the most perilous situation. Simply copying and pasting their print content online is just not enough. The character of newspapers has to change. They shouldn't focus on the news, as the Internet and other 'classic' media, especially radio and television, already deliver news stories faster thanks to updates broadcast at least once in half an hour, or continuously in case of the Internet. The starting point in this transition is the obvious superiority of the press in terms of analytical expressions, commentaries, opinions on the current events and phenomena. And the exclusivity of content, to which readers will be able to return. It is certainly going to have an impact on specific genres the print media use to present their journalistic contents.

Z. H.: *Yes, the status of contemporary journalism is a frequent topic of professional and scholarly discussions and the hybridisation of genres often comes up. Their meaning and existence are generally disputed. You yourself, in the second chapter of your book *O novinárstve*,² refer to your previously published academic studies and articles, in one of which you note that "the diversity of genres used in newspapers is declining".³ Is any genre classification still necessary? How should it be treated? What form should it take?*

Andrej Tušer: This is directly connected to your previous question. The character of periodicals is changing, and the content must change as well. Discussions about genres and their classifications have long been held in professional and non-professional circles alike. Publishers and owners of print media also offer their own entries into the spectrum of opinions. The deciding factor is the recipient or consumer of the content in newspapers and magazines. The consumers decide whether to purchase a specific title or not. The periodical's print run depends on them. It's a kind of closed loop.

You noted in your question that this is a topic, about which many professional discussions have been held. There is a plenty of evidence as to how the professional community has attempted to resolve the issues of journalistic genres. New publications appear to deliver innovative ideas based on analyses of the individual types of periodicals, their comparisons and varying interests and needs of readers. Any genre-based classification may, in my opinion, be a specific methodological starting point for differentiating between the written expressions of two different types of journalistic products as they exist, i.e. news and opinions. However, having approximately thirty different genres, especially in today's hurried world built on simplicity and operability, is surely nothing more than a source of irritation. That said, the universal term 'article' will, most likely very soon, be anchored in the lexicon of Slovak journalistic terminology, as it has been used by our Czech colleagues for years.

Z. H.: *You've identified title as a significant point of contact between the communicator and the recipient, while emphasising the need for unity at the levels of content and format.⁴ In your opinion, should it express the main*

1 *List of Periodicals, Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic.* [online]. [2018-02-21]. Available at: <<http://www.culture.gov.sk/pertlac/modul/tlac>>.

2 The interviewer's note: In English *About Journalism*.

3 TUŠER, A.: *O novinárstve. Publicistika – štúdie – rozhovory.* Bratislava: Eurokódex, 2012, p. 194.

4 TUŠER, A.: *O novinárstve. Publicistika – štúdie – rozhovory.* Bratislava: Eurokódex, 2012, p. 128.

idea of a journalistic text and take into consideration its length, genre composition and graphic form.⁵ Today, we often encounter a phenomenon where a title attracts recipients to a specific theme, about which they learn nothing new from the following material, and therefore essentially serves just to attract their attention. The reader is disappointed to find out there is no connection to the title in the article itself. Many of them argue that the text is misleading and manipulating, even in so-called serious media. How do you evaluate working with titles in the contemporary media space, in which media management is placing so much pressure on getting the recipients' attention at any cost?

Andrej Tušer: Titles have always held a great attraction for me. First as a recipient and then as their author. I take great umbrage at misleading titles which promise something that the reader simply doesn't find in the text. I've thought about ways of fighting against these inappropriate and unethical practices; once there was no publication or manual in Slovakia, no guide to creating titles, working with them, seeing the differences between them, and the like. When I decided to write a publication on this topic, first I visited various editorial offices, and then I analysed and compared titles in daily newspapers, weeklies, monthlies and other magazines, starting to focus on the differences between universal, specialised and professional periodicals. This work was published as *Titulok – vizuálne avízo* in 2009.⁶ In it, I reflected on titles in relation to their authors, recipients, the texts, editorial intentions, and then I compared various kinds of titles – those related to news, opinions, advertising, tabloids, and also technical headlines – through specific examples. So, I have mapped out this area.

I am convinced that the current practices in terms of titles are subordinate to the intentions of publishers and editors more than is tolerable. They do not follow any ethical standards; they are full of cliché, tacky, shocking and some of them even use vulgarities. Personally, I am strongly inclined to a uniformity of content and form of journalistic expression so that the recipient is not disappointed, so that the text delivers the content indicated by its title. I think that this option is also available to web portals and even tabloid media. They simply don't use it; rather, they 'fall back' and build upon more attractive, at all cost extravagant and more manipulative forms. I may seem to be generalising, but I have ample evidence to support my opinions. By the way, about six months ago I gave a lecture at a conference and it was titled *Od bulváru k vulgáru*.⁷ I talked about this very issue, providing numerous examples, and then I analysed the ways audiences respond to them. Believe me; I caught sight of several ashen faces...

Z. H.: *Your professional journey is connected with professional (Bratislavská dráha, Bratislavský železničiar, Západoslovenský železničiar, Železničiar) and local (Večerník) periodicals and it's where you began to gain your practical experience. In your Habilitation thesis,⁸ you reflected on the issue of regional and local periodicals; moreover, you continue to focus on this topic even today. You emphasise their integrative function. Many cities and towns only have a simple website, or they just publish local news online. What kind of perspective do you see for regional and local periodicals in the age of Internet media?*

Andrej Tušer: Regional and local periodicals, including those involved in corporate and business activities, have been a common area of interest for me throughout my career. I've lived through the tremendous boom related to these periodicals and later have seen their great decline. I have examined the individual social systems in this subsystem of periodicals from various perspectives. During the totalitarian regime, they had relatively large print runs, because the driving force in the society at that time, the Communist Party, saw them to be a major aid in influencing the activities and opinions of people at the 'bottom', i.e. those working in factories and living in towns and cities. They were mostly used to socially legitimise the Party's agenda. Company and corporate periodicals were transformed after 1989 and many of them simply 'died out'. It can be said, however,

5 TUŠER, A.: *O novinárstve. Publicistika – štúdie – rozhovory.* Bratislava: Eurokódex, 2012, p. 129.

6 For more information, see: TUŠER, A.: *Titulok – vizuálne avízo.* Trnava: FMK UCM in Trnava, 2009. Note: English translation of the title would be *Title – A Visual Advice*.

7 The interviewer's note: In English *From Tabloid to Vulgar*.

8 See also: TUŠER, A.: *K problematike regionálnej a lokálnej tlače.* [Habilitation Thesis]. Bratislava: Faculty of Arts, Comenius University, 1991.

that nearly every town or local community in Slovakia has its own newspaper, many of which are referred to as ‘town hall’ publications.

Their reach is expanding immensely in the Internet age. Their potential associated with ‘traditional’ print forms is perhaps at risk, but these publications won’t completely disappear, since Internet penetration in Slovakia remains incomplete. I’ve currently taken a significant step towards mapping out these publications in collaboration with my students working on their Bachelor’s theses about such periodicals published in different districts or regions. I’ve acquired some rather interesting information about these media’s activities, about their content and the organisational and personal structure of their editorial staffs. There are still significant differences between individual staff members, as they possess various levels of qualification and professional training, and the quality of the content in these periodicals directly depends on this. The fact that this subsystem is ‘under the watchful eye’ of Transparency International Slovakia, which has evaluated more than 90 of such ‘town hall’ publications while fulfilling its long-term goals and mission, should be highly appreciated. The ‘town hall’ periodicals are much more than just ‘loud voices’ of the local mayors. The results show that the situation is not as dire as expected; however, there are a few cases where mayors also function as editors-in-chief of local or town newspapers.⁹ I don’t have any fears for this subsystem. It fulfils an extraordinarily strong integrative function in cities and on the countryside alike. It is likely that most of these periodicals will move towards the online environment; after all, our society as a whole can’t stay in one place. Sooner or later, the Internet will be the driving force of many related society-wide changes.

Z. H.: *You’ve held various positions in several editorial staffs; from executive to managerial, in local magazines as well as professional journals, and you have a wealth of experience. There are numerous factors involved in the management process, such as the drive to be the first to publish information on the media market, the interests of media owners, the readership indicators, the pressure from politicians and the efforts to run operations as inexpensively as possible. The important news values in journalistic production, seriousness, truthfulness, timeliness and objectivity, are pushed away, somewhere in the background. Can a proper managerial and organisational scheme help an editorial staff deliver quality journalism, especially today?*

Andrej Tušer: Being the first to present information on the market is a natural ambition of all media. There is an even greater goal to reach – to publish a news story faster than other typologically similar or related periodicals, for instance rival daily newspapers, weeklies and monthlies. It is as much about the competition for readers as it is about the professional prestige. A similar rivalry or ‘fight’ for recipients can be seen inside the media sphere from the perspective of technological advancements; public service and commercial radio stations compete for listeners and public service and commercial television stations compete for viewers. The natural extension of this competition now includes their web portals and accounts on online social networks.

It is necessary to underline that if we used the defined set of terminology, journalism, which recognises the value-based criteria, would appear to be a commercially marginal sphere of media production. However, to reach such a clear conclusion that “the important news values in journalistic production, seriousness, truthfulness, timeliness and objectivity, are pushed away, somewhere in the background”, as you said, a rigorous and serious analysis would be required. It should be carried out by an impartial research institution with true experts specialising in the scientific, theoretical and practical aspects of media production. Of course, the first impression from reading, watching or listening to media tends to confirm your assertion. That being said, in addition to the existing general Code of Journalistic Ethics,¹⁰ most media institutions, editorial staffs and other actors maintain their own codes of ethics... I’ll answer your question with a question: Where or what is the problem?

9 *Radničné noviny, Transparency International Slovensko.* [online]. [2018-02-21]. Available at: <<http://transparency.sk/sk/tag/radnicne-noviny/page/2/>>.

10 *Etický kódex novinára, Slovenský syndikát novinárov.* [online]. [2018-02-21]. Available at: <<http://www.ssn.sk/eticky-kodex-novinara>>. See also: GREGUŠ, L., MINÁRIKOVÁ, J.: News Values in Slovak Television News. In *Communication Today*, 2016, Vol. 7, No. 2, p. 78-89.

Z. H.: *Journalists are often called ‘the defenders of democracy’. They should be free to express their opinions while in the same breath they are dependent on their employers, the media owners. Is it even possible to apply the freedom of expression to the highly competitive environment of commercial media?*

Andrej Tušer: This question is very up-to-date. And not just in Slovak media environment. I am interested in this matter as well. That is why I’ve gotten involved in a research project called *Sloboda prejavu v kontexte moderných technológií*.¹¹ It works with a basic assumption that media content is becoming increasingly harsher, and tabloids are becoming more aggressive and vulgar, affecting their target groups and the overall social climate, including national and linguistic culture. I’ve got the research strategy in front of me, so please allow me to give you a taste of what I am talking about. I’m convinced that it is about the broad context and a general societal issue: “Mass media in today’s age produce a tremendous amount of content, the truthfulness of which is questionable. Critical reading of media content reveals that articles and audio-visual works of a fictitious nature and unverified materials containing misleading, partly untrue or openly false information are being presented to the audiences. Readers are educated to be critical when receiving information, but the extent, to which the rights of citizens are protected if their lives or social positions are put at risk by untrue information or if they are deliberately misled, remains questionable.”

Despite the proclaimed freedom of expression, as I have noted above, journalists are quite dependent upon owners and publishers and therefore publish materials that are not always acceptable to them intrinsically. Media owners should not disrupt the veracity of information and the ethical framework of journalists’ opinions. I’d like to remind journalists that their freedom of expression, with respect to their activities in media production, is guaranteed in the Constitution of the Slovak Republic and in the 1993 Resolution of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on the ethics of journalism. There is a clause that gives journalists the right to refuse to act against their own conscience and the right to demand compensation if they resign from their editorial positions as a result of a request to significantly edit or change their work.¹²

Z. H.: *The problem of ‘tabloidization’ of politics and so-called serious media resonates in the media discourse very often. In your opinion, do the media have a significant impact on political communication and public behaviour of politicians?*

Andrej Tušer: As we tend to say, the media are one of the greatest social powers. This cannot be denied. It’s much more dangerous when one social actor holding a great amount of power uses or rather abuses this power to realise own intentions or promote the interests of someone else. Perhaps this is based on deciding whether a media organisation can be seen as an independent institution. I am convinced that the terms ‘privately owned’ and ‘independent’ cannot be connected. Once upon a time there was a periodical in Slovakia that was published with the subtitle *Noviny závislé od čitateľov*.¹³ Can a heterogeneous public be independent? I indirectly ‘touched’ the issue of tabloidization of politics and so-called serious media in my last answer. It simply reflects trends in the contemporary social climate. Politics and media are closely related. Through media coverage, public statements and behaviour patterns of politicians are presented to the recipients, and they respond. Of course, it is important that politicians’ media statements are presented authentically, literally... However, we know of many examples from the media practice when editorial staffs or journalists lost legal disputes or lawsuits as a result of their insufficient, superficial or twisted interpretations of statements made by politicians and were forced to pay financial settlements. Consistency on the part of the media in such situations really pays off. Accuracy in media content, as a synonym for truthfulness, is the prerequisite for politicians to act more responsibly in front of the public.

11 The interviewer’s note: In English *The Freedom of Expression in the Context of Modern Technologies*.

12 *Rezolúcia Rady Európy o etike žurnalistiky, Ústavný súd SR.* [online]. [2018-02-21]. Available at: <<https://www.ustavnysud.sk/rezolucia-rady-euroopy-o-zurnalistike>>.

13 The interviewer’s note: In English *A Reader-dependent Newspaper*.

Z. H.: *Much has been discussed as to whether journalists should have journalism/media education or whether journalism can be practiced by persons without such a specialised educational background, or without any university-level education whatsoever. Doesn't the quality of journalism suffer? What is your opinion?*

Andrej Tušer: We are witnessing more and more frequently that media hold their own auditions for editors and other staff members. You are right that these are, very often, just simple 'castings', especially in television, and the level of the candidates' education is not the deciding factor; it's about the level of interest they express in the given medium itself... At present, it's not so important whether someone holds a degree in journalism or media studies specifically. What should be necessary, however, is a university degree. No matter what anyone thinks, university doesn't teach students how to write or create, at least not necessarily; what is important is to teach them how to think. Media need well educated and thinking people; university education always brings up the level of their journalistic and media outputs, mostly in relation to content and argumentation, also linguistically and stylistically. The paradox, of course, is that some media do not want to employ such educated people... Well, it's easier to manipulate an uneducated person because they'll do as ordered... Moreover, the low quality of outputs created by journalists directly influences their audiences. I think that the commonly mentioned idea of presumed truthfulness along the lines such as "yes, of course it's true, I read it in the newspaper or online, I heard it on the radio, I saw it on TV..." no longer applies. The quality of media content decreases proportionally, to correspond with the intellectual level of their readers, listeners and audiences. In short, the linguistic and cultural level of the whole society is declining.

Z. H.: *For many years, you have passed your experience on to students, and educated hundreds of journalists having different specialisations and working in different media. The current younger generation is raised on short messages and brief chats. They are ostracised for not reading enough, for responding more to images than words, and for lacking critical thinking skills. How do you see young people today? What is important for their journalistic training?*

Andrej Tušer: Yes, I am in a position to judge. However, I can say that I've always liked young people and I've tried to counsel and help them. Both as an editor in various news media and as a university Professor. No generation has it easy. Maybe the current one, Generation Y, aged 17 to 33, which is now studying at universities or working in media, stands out a bit more than their predecessors, although it is emerging more gradually. Available characteristics show them to be exceptional, flexible and fast-living; they listen to the same music, watch the same films, dress the same way, like to travel and fun is more important for them than work. With respect to modern technology, they watch less television but spend more time with computers and portable communication devices. One survey showed that owning smartphones and having access to Internet connection were more important for many of them than buying a car. They often seek information on social networks and shop online. They are a modern and flexible generation, for which any engagement in the media process should be relatively simple. However, this is that drawback you mentioned in the question. They don't like to read, i.e. they 'just Google it', and there is a significant deficit in critical thinking skills. All of this is closely related.

Practical media education is not enough; they need cultivating subjects that belong at universities and that give young people the fundamentals of conduct, the basics of history, philosophy, sociology, psychology, economics and linguistics. All in all, university should give them the essentials an educated person needs. Well, and I also think that journalists and people in media should be educated above all else.

Z. H.: *Various personalities in Slovak journalism have been formed by journalistic work in the past. The influence of political and societal processes such as 'journalists from the former regime are not welcome', the consequences of the transformation of media into the private sector where the preference of a cheaper labour force over quality outputs often exists and the excessive use of human resources result in strong fluctuation among experienced journalists. Their decisions to leave for other work in the private sector mean that we are now missing these personalities in contemporary journalism. This affects the quality and credibility of Slovak journalism overall. Do you think this is a permanent situation or is there something that can be done?*

Andrej Tušer: You raise an interesting question. A reporter, a journalist, they were personalities once upon a time. You just have to tap into history. It was relatively common for them to become authors. They were called 'the engineers of the human soul...' A reporter seen in the same light today no longer exists. Numerous publications have been focused on this theme within theory of journalism, and it is primarily associated with psychology. The term 'personality' is characterised precisely. I am glad that a real personality is not linked with the profanity of a celebrity. A media personality bears human, moral and educational values and appears to the public as an example or a role model shaping their demeanour and their work. A couple of years ago we organised an international conference on the issue of personality and a number of renowned scientific authorities attended actively. An anthology was even published, titled *Otáz(ni)ky osobnosti*.¹⁴

It is necessary to say that contemporary journalism is not influenced by personalities; if they exist, they belong to the generation 'fifty years ago' and now we send our students after them to complete their theses on them in an effort to bring their knowledge and experience into public awareness and into historiography. It is a foundation of true seriousness, responsibility, stylistic clarity and a broad variety of genres. Given what we've been talking about today, about the level and quality of contemporary media and especially journalistic content, I cannot imagine such a versatile journalistic personality. That does not mean, however, that we lack capable journalists, reporters or media professionals. It is especially important to appreciate those who are trying to help solve social problems through investigative journalism and investigative projects.

Z. H.: *Professor, you yourself are the author of many journal articles, professional studies, monographs and university-level textbooks. You've also written your own collection of poetry, *Veršovanie s prvou láskou*,¹⁵ which your granddaughters illustrated. These publications are based on very different creative methods. Today, many different kinds of people write prose, poetry and blogs. What recommendations would you give these authors, as creators, to create a quality piece of work?*

Andrej Tušer: I don't consider my collection of poems to be a work of art because it's more a reminiscence to youth. I also wrote the novel *Listy od N*¹⁶ under a pseudonym. I haven't ever felt quite up to a real work of prose as my mind and work are primarily occupied with professional matters related to different areas of media production. I've tried to cover the subjects I lecture in study materials so that students have something to rely on and can draw from them. And the recommendations for creating a quality piece of work? So long as it doesn't look too immodest, please let me cite the words of Professor Jiří Pavelka from the Czech Republic, one of the reviewers of fourth edition of my publication *Ako sa robia noviny*, with the sub-title 'Úspešná kniha':¹⁷ *"In the field of professional and popular scientific literature, as opposed to belletriy, very few books are reprinted in new editions. These works are foundational, synthetic or innovative. The theme is well-chosen and concerns the attractive and, for a common consumer, enticing and mysterious world of newspapers. The author focused on the broadest possible reading public and is able to explain the complex problems of the media market in an understandable, clear and compelling way..."*¹⁸ So, a suitable and attractive subject, comprehensible language and engaging style. That's the guide. And the answer to your question.

The interview took place at the Faculty of Mass Media Communication of the University of SS. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Slovakia on 28th November 2017.

Prepared by Zora Hudíková

14 See: MACKOVÁ, M. et al.: *Otáz(ni)ky osobnosti*. Bratislava: Eurokódex, 2015. The interviewer's note: In English the publication would be titled *Questions (or Question Marks) of Personality*.

15 For more information, see: TUŠER, A.: *Veršovanie s prvou láskou*. Bratislava: SOFA, 2011. The interviewer's note: In English the publication would be titled *Rhyming with the First Love*.

16 The interviewer's note: In English *Letters from N*.

17 The interviewer's note: In English *A Successful Book*.

18 See for example: TUŠER, A.: *Ako sa robia noviny*. Bratislava: Eurokódex, 2010.

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