

The tabloidization of political discourse: The Polish case



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ABSTRACT: Mass media discourse about politics consists of three overlapping fields: public discourse, discourse of politics and political discourse. *Political discourse* is defined as a discourse of symbolic elites present in the media, including journalists. In news programs there is a combination of political discourse and a discourse of politics: politicians appear in their political roles, while comments made by experts and reporters can be viewed as a part of the political discourse. The main topic of the article is the tabloidization of the political discourse in Polish television news programs. According to Frank Esser's concept of tabloidization it takes place on two levels: micro and macro, and this paper focuses on the second one. The main goal of the paper is to present how the phenomenon of tabloidization of the media discourse on politics has appeared in Poland since the beginning of the 21st century. Some empirical data from different periods of time are presented to provide content analysis of news programs on commercial and public TV. Differences between the way politics is discussed in public and commercial TV are visible, but the tendency described as tabloidization is observed in both.

KEYWORDS: political discourse, tabloidization, news programs



INTRODUCTION

In sociology and sociolinguistics the term of debate or political discourse is treated as a certain field of “a sphere of public communication” or public discourse understood as all messages that are present in social circulation (Czyżewski, Kowalski & Piotrowski, 1997, p. 10), expressed through verbal and nonverbal communication. Among different types of public discourse, like daily, institutional or a discourse of “social worlds”, mass media discourse is distinguished. It consists of three, partially overlapping fields: public discourse, discourse of politics and political discourse. *Public discourse* includes all messages available publicly, *discourse of politics* describes this part of public discourse which encompasses the statements of politicians within the framework of the roles given them inside political institutions and statements of individuals belonging to power elites that relate to their political roles and

politicians are used by the media to attract readers or viewers. Commercialization of the media, both private and public, has meant they have to struggle for the attention of people who are not really interested in serious discussion. Tabloidization thus seems to be a quite natural consequence of that coincidence.

The discussion on the tabloidization of both media and political discourse applies to the “quality” media which traditionally have been seen as opposite to the tabloid press. In line with Howard Kurtz’s opinion, it can be accepted that tabloidization takes place when three tendencies occur in the quality media: an overall decrease in journalistic standards; a decrease in hard news such as politics and economics and an increase in soft news such as sleaze, scandal, sensation and entertainment; a general change (or broadening) of the media’s definition of what they think the voters need to know to evaluate a person’s fitness for public office (Kurtz, 1993, p. 143–147).

According to Sparks and Tulloch, studies on the tabloid press and broadcasting have brought four important dimensions to discussion of their social importance. At first, “scholarly studies can assist in identifying and defining the problem at stake” (Sparks & Tulloch, 2000, p. 2). There is still a problem whether all manifestations of privacy in the public sphere can be labeled by the term.

Secondly, “the phenomenon is not uniquely American, so it can be better understood by comparing it with similar media in other countries” (ibid.). Media landscapes are different in different countries, obviously, and this may cause some problems when comparing them. But on the other hand, “tabloidization means global formats and local content” (Conboy, 2006, p. 207). There is, then, a common platform for making some comparisons.

The third dimension indicated by Sparks and Tulloch is the necessity of looking at tabloidization from a historical perspective. The terms “tabloid television” and “tabloidization” do not mean the same. While it is not difficult to note the existence of the former, the changes leading to the latter have to be investigated. And a fourth dimension to the discussion of the social meaning of a tabloid media is controversy about their influence on democracy. Most scholars see threats, although there are some opposing voices who see no harm, and even much good in their activities.

In Frank Esser’s opinion, the process of tabloidization is not internationally uniform and takes place under specific cultural and historical conditions (Esser, 1999, p. 293). The interesting thing, though, would be to observe whether the process is not uniform in identical cultural and historical conditions, and that was the reason to compare — at a very basic level — two news programs offered by broadcasters of different status: public and commercial.

CONTENT ANALYSIS OF *FAKTY TVN* AND *WIADOMOŚCI TVP1*

The first examples of the tabloidization of news in Poland were seen in a tabloid newspaper that appeared in 2003. Based on the German *Bild*, *Fakt* has inaugurated

Wiadomości is the main news program of the main public television channel. It has the longest tradition, because it has been broadcast since 1956 (under different titles) at the same time: 7.30 pm. It is still the most popular news program in the evening slot, although it seldom happens that *Fakty* takes first position. The actual rates of AMR (average minute rating) and (SHR) shares of Polish news programs are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. AMR and SHR of *Fakty* and *Wiadomości* in a given period

	AMR [mln] February 2010	SHR [%] February 2010
<i>Fakty</i> TVN	4,522,441	32%
<i>Wiadomości</i> TVP1	4,469,610	29.6%

Source: SMG/KRC, February 2010, at: www.wirtualnemedia.pl. Retrieved 15 April 2010.

VARIABLES OF TABLOIDIZATION

The theme of an item was defined as the main topic/subject of the reported story. Themes were listed in the following order: politics, economy, social issues, human interest, sensation (accidents and crime), popular culture and entertainment, and sport. The social issues category related to stories which were interesting and important to the general public, and human interest stories focused on the stories, deeds and problems of ordinary individuals with little attachment to the public.

The themes defined as above, determined the type of news. A distinction was made between *hard* news and *soft* news, which is common practice. The first of these related to events of systemic significance, mainly from the political and economic areas. The second type of news consists of entertainment, accidents, sport, popular culture and problems of human interest. One should still note that not every piece of information from the political or economic realm was defined as 'hard'; there were several cases when the two types of news appeared, joined up or twinned, in one item covering politics. The assumption was made that a dominance of soft over hard news would indicate tabloidization.

Actors appearing in an item, i.e. the participants in the reported events were taken as a second dimension of tabloidization. They were grouped in the following categories: politicians (of different levels), experts, officials (individuals acting in the name of organs of administration, social organizations; lawyers, police officers, civil servants, teachers), journalists working for media organizations other than TVN and TVP (basically acting as experts), ordinary people and celebrities (figures well known because of their media presence: actors, sportsmen, others). The more frequent appearance of actors of lesser importance than so called serious actors (politicians, experts) would suggest tabloidization.

The third dimension was attached to location, understood as the place where a reported event occurred. A distinction was made between national and international (outside the country) locations depending on the main focus of the story. Dominance of domestic events would be a determinant of tabloidization of news.

The last dimension concerned the time spent on reporting an event. In the common perception there is a correlation between the time devoted to a story and its systemic importance (a longer time means greater seriousness). However, after an examination of the production techniques used in news programs this conviction seemed controversial. One needs to distinguish between, let's say, the objective or systemic significance of a particular event and the significance given to it by the media. In such a situation it is the length of time combined with the hard or soft character of an event that decides on tabloidization and this dependence can be expressed as the following: the more time given to soft news the stronger the tendency to tabloidize the news program.

The aim of the study presented in this article was to answer two research questions and confirm one hypothesis:

RQ1. Is the process of tabloidization of news programs occurring irrespective of the status of the broadcaster?

RQ2. Does tabloidization of news programs influence the discourse of politics?

The hypothesis arises as a result of an existence of connections between how politics is covered and how the discourse is conducted. Political coverage is a very important part of both political discourse and discourse of politics. The term "tabloidization of political discourse" is sometimes used, but is understood intuitively. I would argue that tabloidization of political discourse means its personalization, focus on current political affairs, framing politics as a conflict, overdramatization and fragmentation of political events, and media use of politics as a tool of attracting audiences. The general change in journalistic standards, which is at the core of tabloidization, applies to all news, political included. Confirmation of the hypothesis will open a space for further, more detailed analysis and the basis of a greater empirical material research.

HP. Tabloidization of news programs affects tabloidization of political discourse.

RESULTS

Themes

The structure of themes covered by the *Fakty* and *Wiadomości* news editions was essentially similar. Political news predominated, although it can be seen in both cases that there was even more politics in 2009 (Fig. 1). The most important news programs continue to be strongly politically oriented and to some extent also politically committed.

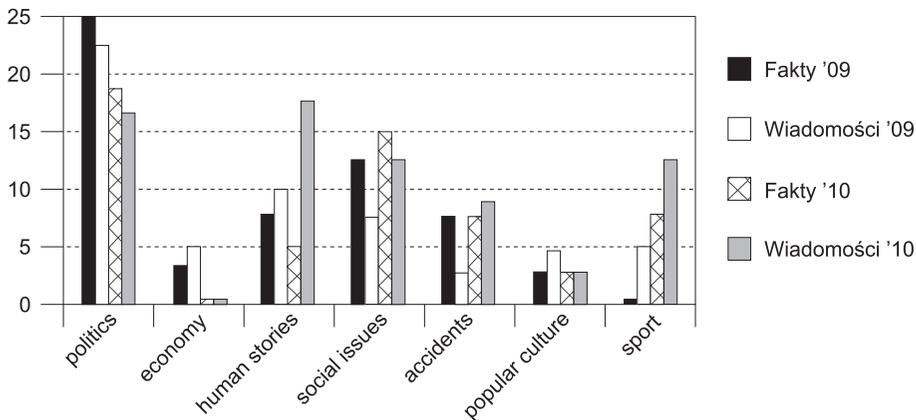


Figure 1. The distribution of themes in *Fakty* and *Wiadomości* 2009 and 2010

Source: author.

While there was little interest in the economy, most materials were devoted to ordinary people and social issues. The number of the latter was significantly higher in *Wiadomości* in 2010 when compared to 2009. The number of releases concerning sports events was significantly higher than in 2009, which followed from the fact that the Olympic Games were being held in February 2010 and the Polish team was relatively successful. Issues concerning pop culture were relatively sporadic in both news programs and tended to concern such significant events as an award being granted to a Polish director at an international film festival, or the death of a prominent actor. Both editorial teams showed certain differentiation in their interests which was exemplified by the sequence of preferred topics as well as by the length of time devoted to different topics. Politics and social matters clearly dominated in *Fakty*, whereas *Wiadomości* tended to handle the problems of ordinary people slightly more frequently, followed by politics and social issues. Neither program used accidents to shock the audience as each concentrated only on truly tragic events (e.g. the aftermath of the Haiti earthquake or the flood in Madeira in February 2010).

It is usually assumed that hard news concerns political and economic events. However, it sometimes turns out that the news from these two realms are actually soft when they do not concern a political or economic process but rather the human nature of the participants in the events, which is of little significance from the point of view of the political system. So it was not the area of social life but rather the theme and the manner of its presentation that determined whether the news item was classified as hard or soft. Table 2 demonstrates the proportions between soft and hard news items in both programs.

overall number of actors is likely to result from the fact that their role is being assumed by politicians (Boorstin, 1964; Marshall, 1997; West & Orman, 2002; Street, 2004), who thus fulfil the viewers' need to see famous faces. Additionally, the broadcasters try to maintain certain standards, which still differentiate news programs from gossip and sensation.

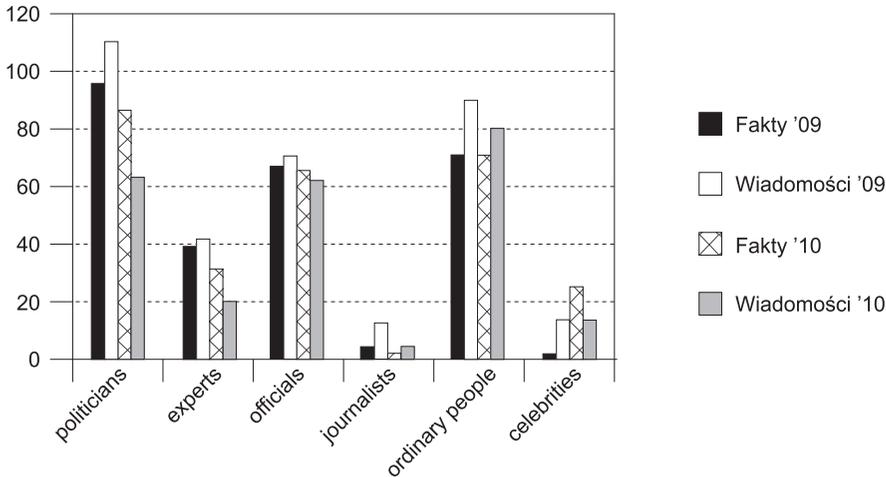


Figure 2. The distribution of actors in *Fakty* and *Wiadomości* 2009 and 2010

Source: author.

Journalists from programs other than those examined were in effect assuming the role of experts. Politicians usually took part in news items concerning current political events, whereas officials appeared in the stories of ordinary people and in items concerning social issues. The number of actors in the news items examined is so enormous because the reporters tend to quote very short and frequently forthright statements of the participants or witnesses to the events. In the case of politicians their statements are frequently inserted as soundbites.

Location

Over the analyzed period, both *Wiadomości* and *Fakty* focused on domestic events scarcely paying attention to events abroad (Fig. 3). The majority of foreign events were strongly related to domestic matters anyway. In 2009 the news from abroad was dominated by the abduction of a Polish engineer in Afghanistan, and in 2010 by the winter Olympic Games in Vancouver. Internal, local, more interesting and understandable matters that were more important for the viewers clearly prevailed. However, the events taking place abroad, particularly those potentially significant for Poles (e.g. in Afghanistan where Polish troops are involved, or in the European Union) were extensively and comprehensively presented.

of events and assuming the standards of popular journalism in doing so. Polish television programs concentrate on domestic matters, which is yet another criterion of tabloidization, alongside the manner of narration.

The language applied by the journalists in both programs examined was significantly less formal than in the past, which is confirmed by observation rather than direct statistical analysis.¹ Journalists frequently used words that were emotionally charged and implied assessments of the events or their participants (e.g. *atrocious crime, surprising behavior, unnatural mother, victim of incompetence*, etc.). They did not refrain from colloquial expressions which customarily are not a part of formal language (e.g. *be buddies, kick somebody out* instead of *dismiss, not to handle somebody with kid gloves*). Colloquial and emotionally charged language was usually employed when the journalists passed judgments in confrontations between ordinary people and politicians or various officials. The journalists were clearly on the side of the ordinary people, which is typical of a tabloid type of journalism. The journalists from *Fakty* were much more ironic in their comments on events than their counterparts from *Wiadomości*.²

In each program every news item bore a heading which was supposed to introduce the main theme of the item but also to intrigue the viewers and attract their attention. It happened sometimes (more frequently in *Fakty*) that the content of the news did not correspond to what its heading had suggested, thus a conclusion can be drawn that the function of the headings is more commercial. The reporters concluded a majority (or nearly all of them, as was the case in *Fakty*) of the items with a piece to camera which rounded the story up and also suggested an interpretation of the events. They tended to overdramatize the situations, events or decisions and to present them as more controversial than they actually were. Sometimes one could get the impression that the form of presentation was as important as the content itself, which was particularly true for the commercial station whose journalists used jokes, plays on words or references to pop culture.

The above results and observations allow us to answer the first question posed and confirm that information programs are undergoing tabloidization regardless of the broadcaster's status.

Political discourse

Tabloidization of the information media, which by their nature actively participate in political discourse, has to influence the discourse itself. Political items were analyzed once more to see whether the tabloidization process of the media produced the same tendency in the discourse of politics. A political item is understood as one

¹ Research into the linguistic style present in information programs based on a quantitative analysis of their content is planned in the near future.

² *Analiza dzienników informacyjnych Wiadomości, Panorama, Wydarzenia, Fakty*. Grudzień 2009. Press Service, Monitoring mediów 2009.

lence was quite significant in *Fakty*, *Wiadomości* showed politicians from the opposition in Parliament and outside Parliament much more frequently than its competitor.

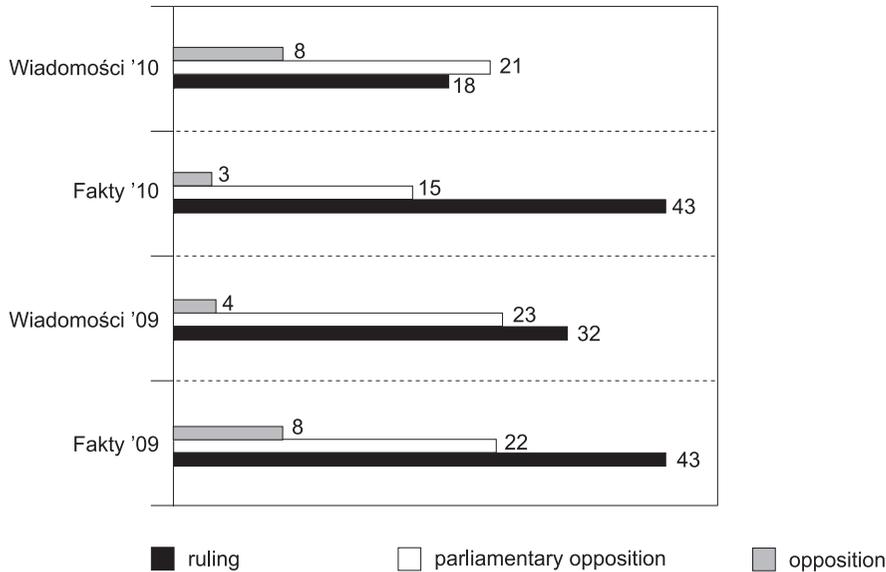


Figure 4. The number of representatives of ruling, parliamentary opposition and opposition in *Fakty* and *Wiadomości* 2009 and 2010

Source: author.

This is a consequence of the previously mentioned reasons for the political involvement of public media. They are supervised by a management appointed with the approval of opposition politicians who are closely related to the President, and are supposed to fulfil certain political tasks in creating the news. It is both natural and necessary that the media primarily present the politicians currently in power and those opposition members who play a significant part in the political process. However, a certain imbalance in the presence of these two groups can be noted, which could suggest that the media have abandoned the principle of fair representation of both parties (ruling and opposition) involved in the political discourse, which is particularly the case of journalists in *Fakty*. Yet the more balanced presence of politicians of either party in *Wiadomości* does not follow from the journalists' greater diligence but rather from using the information program for propaganda and promotional purposes.

News items devoted to politics in both programs, particularly in *Fakty*, presented numerous statements by politicians. These statements were not made exclusively for a given information program, but were recorded by journalists in the course of the day. The time devoted to political news is shortening, but the number

sonal emotions and animosities. Politicians hold a belief, which is fully confirmed by the experience of recent years, that the excessive presence of leaders in the media results in their decreased ranking in terms of popularity as public opinion perceives them to be embroiled in current disputes. Polish voters, like foreign ones, like to support a heated political game but they do not like to take part in it. The journalists from both programs can be described as active, yet those from *Fakty* are closer to the active-neutral type, whereas those from *Wiadomości* are more of an active-advocate type (Donsbach, Patterson, 2004, p. 266).

Objects of statements

The analyzed information programs observed the principle that nothing is more attractive to viewers than conflict, and they emphasized those statements by politicians which were personal in nature (Fig. 6). The personal nature of a statement means that it concerns the intentions, motivations and personalities of other politicians (habitually of political opponents), or polemicizes with their opinions. This polemic does not pertain to the content, but undermines, or even questions, the opponents' ability to make an 'accurate' judgment of reality.

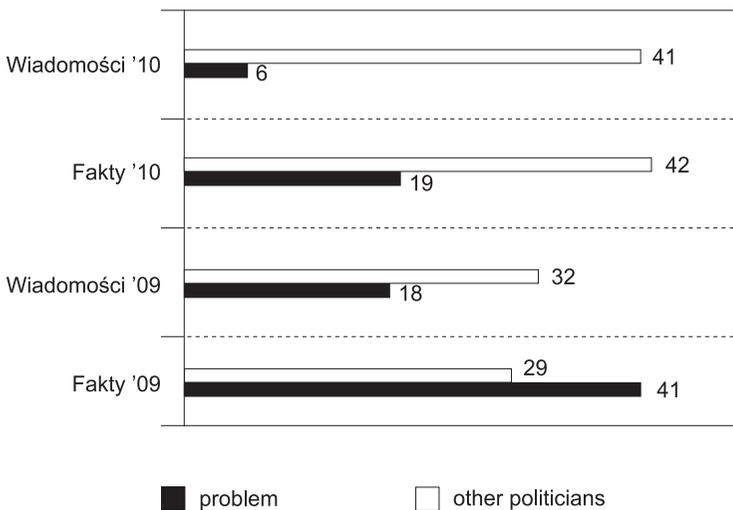


Figure 6. The objects of politicians' statements of themes in *Fakty* and *Wiadomości* 2009 and 2010

Source: author.

Fakty illustrates the change in the selection of quoted statements particularly well. In contrast to the public broadcaster, in 2009 its editorial staff primarily quoted statements concentrating on the issues of current politics. In 2010 the imbalance between statements concerning personal remarks and those concern-

If we were to reconstruct media political reality, this is what it would look like: politics has a personal dimension, concerning individuals and their mutual relations rather than the issues and decisions pertaining to the system. Politics is in principle a closed circle and mainly present in Warsaw, the viewers — citizens, take part in it only as judges or supporters. Politicians do not get involved in discussions on complex issues, they do not explain the circumstances of difficult decisions, and instead they quarrel about the issues that are understandable for the citizens, but are of little importance for their everyday life. The politicians present in the information programs seem to be self-sufficient to the effect that they do not need others to have a good time and others do not need them to live. Journalists are the only exception here, although they are less and less interested in reporting politics in a traditional manner.

Personalization, focusing on personal conflict, predominance of domestic politics, fragmentation and decontextualization, overdramatization of ordinary events, the analysis of emotions rather than events and the emphasis of differences between politicians are the features of leading Polish information programs. The progressing tabloidization process of these formats clearly influences the manner in which they stimulate and conduct political discourse regardless of whether they are created by a public or commercial broadcaster.

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