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**ATINER's Conference Paper Series
MED2016-1922**

**The Rise of Tabloidization: Decline of
Moral Values and How to Measure It**

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This paper should be cited as follows:

Vyslouzilova, K. (2016). "The Rise of Tabloidization: Decline of Moral Values and How to Measure It", Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: MED2016-1922.

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www.atiner.gr
URL Conference Papers Series: www.atiner.gr/papers.htm
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ISSN: 2241-2891
20/07/2016

The Rise of Tabloidization: Decline of Moral Values and How to Measure It

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Abstract

The tabloidization of news is a term used more and more frequently when discussing a general decline of media standards. And also when talking about the focus on the entertaining side of events or on rather simple topics in news which is a trend associated with an economic imperative and a lack of moral values in the society as a whole. There is an expectation that we can observe tabloidization in any kind of media content. The paper is focused particularly on the Czech Television representing the public service media in the Czech Republic and the evolution of its evening news regarding the tabloidization. Specific attention is paid to the operationalization of variables indicating the tabloidization. It differs quite significantly from the 'traditional' way of measuring the volume of tabloidization which is focused almost solely on topics presented in the news through the hard news/soft news dichotomy. Here the whole set of variables was defined following the current trends in research related to this field. The content analysis then showed not only trends occurring in the evening news produced by the Czech Television, but also drew an attention to methodology when comparing two different approaches to the tabloidization measurement.

Keywords: Czech Television, Media Standards, Operationalization, Tabloidization, Television News.

Introduction

The term 'tabloidization' is used more and more frequently when discussing the decline of quality and moral values in media production. Usually, it is related mostly to the emphasis on the entertaining side of events, emotive or simple content and easy-to-consume presentation.

Despite the fact tabloidization is quite a popular subject of analyses, there is no general consensus regarding its definition. What varies in most cases is not only the set of variables which are defined as indicators of tabloidization, but also the research methods used to uncover it in media content.

What is clear on the other hand, is that the tabloidization is a set of elements that are to a certain extent included in any kind of media content. So the question asked is not whether the tabloidization is or is not present in media production, but how exactly and how frequently it occurs.

The situation is not different in the Czech Republic, not even in case of the news produced by public service media. So it is precisely the evening news produced by the Czech Television that is being analyzed regarding the tabloidization using the quantitative content analysis.

The very common 'reason why' in case of the research focused on tabloidization is the assumption of its influence on audience perception of political and social events, and consequently on the way they actually behave when it comes to making political decisions. And also on their willingness to take part in any political activities themselves.

As Camaj (2014, 634) argues, considering that we can basically discuss the overall impact on the society as a whole. This is even more appealing in case of public service media, as those are believed to have the 'mission' of bringing the highest quality content and fulfilling the highest standards, being credible and diverse above all.

Colin Sparks (2000, 10–11) perceives tabloid news as those focusing only marginally on politics, economics or social problems, but paying close attention to sports, scandals or any entertaining topics. Also at those news emphasizing the private life of people, both celebrities and 'ordinary' people, at the expense of any relevant information.

Howard Kurtz (1993, 143–147) quite in a similar way then understands tabloidization as a decline in journalism standards, describing it as a reduction of the number of 'hard news', such as news about politics and economics, and rise of the 'soft news' presented, focusing on scandals, sensations or any entertaining events.

But not all of the authors perceive the tabloidization as being mostly based on the topic of the news. For instance Klein (2000, 183–187) discusses the tabloid not only as a set of changes in topics being covered, but also in the way they are covered, about the changes in attitude and discourse in media production.

The above-mentioned brings us to the idea of how to measure the tabloidization. As also Reinemann et al. (2012, 221–234) argue, in most cases the existing analyses focus on the news topic through the dichotomy of hard

news and soft news. But there are quite significant differences in understanding the concept of hard news and soft news, as many authors do not define those in their analyses clearly. The attempts to do so, as they mention, show limits of this topic-oriented approach that will be discussed later, for instance topics that are not that easy to categorize.

Regarding those findings, Reinemann et al. (2012, 232) propose to distinguish hard news and soft news based not only on the topic, but on the three defined dimensions which are (1) the subject matter covered (topic dimension), (2) the specific aspects of events or topics emphasized (focus dimension), and (3) the way events or topics are visually and verbally presented (style dimension).

Also the methodology used to evaluate the Czech Television news regarding tabloidization is based on the above-described distinctions. And to find out where are the most significant discrepancies, if there are any, between the 'traditional' approach focusing solely on the topic of the news and the more complex one reflecting also the focus and style of the news, those two will be compared in one of the partial analyses.

Historical Foundations

Back to the 1830's: From Political to Commercial Motivations

First media format that is referred to have the characteristics of tabloid, are newspapers labeled as 'penny press' that started to occur in the United States since the 1830's (first of them was the New York Sun published since 1833). Already at that time the critics perceived penny press unwillingly as causing lowering of standards when bringing too much sensation and emotions.

It also comes to the purpose of publishing the newspaper which was different, it started to be more about selling the attention of the readers, more of a business experiment and less of a political project. Örnebring and Jönsson (2004, 288) commemorate the target group of the newspaper was also different, consisting mainly of the working class. Therefore the penny press was mostly devoted to stories of ordinary people, referring to different scandals, unmoral behavior, entertaining stories, disasters, accidents and criminality in general.

Besides a lower price and various marketing activities the most effective tool used to attract more readers back then was the easy-to-consume presentation of the news. Simple and shorter texts, more graphics and sensational headlines, those are attributes associated to tabloidization until today.

Modern Society Complicating the Situation Clarity

The situation is more difficult to read since the term tabloid naturally started to be applied also when discussing all the new media types, radio, television, and most recently also new media. Significant differences among those are making it more complicated to clearly define the term. In the course

of time, the term tabloid (or tabloidization) started to be understood as describing not a particular media type, but an overall journalism quality and anticipated media effects on the society regarding its modernization (Langer, 1998, 77-97).

Theoretical Foundations

Hard News and Soft News Dichotomy

As already mentioned above, most of the existing content analysis of the tabloidization are focused on the topic of the news. Usually dividing them into one of the hard news or soft news categories. But there is also a lack of clear definition or common understanding related to the two categories. Reinemann et al. (2012, 221–234) namely mention the intuitive understanding of the terms and missing description of the operationalization process.

News covering events related to politics, economics, science or technology are in general perceived as hard news. Contrary, the news about sports, celebrities or any human interest stories are usually labeled as soft news. According to Brookes (2000, 195) also information causing fear or even panic related to health, drug side effects, genetics or food belong to this category.

But there are other topics that are not so easy to categorize, typically those related to criminality, accidents or natural disasters. As Reinemann, et al. (2012, 224–225) mention, in case of those topics the limits of this kind of categorization are particularly evident.

When the Topic Is Not Enough

Regarding the dichotomy of hard news and soft news, the concept of framing is mentioned frequently. Framing is defined as the selection and emphasizing of certain attributes in media content or the extent to which the content of news deals with public interest (Entman, 1993, 52). In this sense, the stress on general meaning or consequences of the event and broader context indicate hard news. Contrary, the lack of context and focus on individual relevance is perceived as indicator of soft news (Reinemann et al., 2012, 225–226).

Klaus Schönbach (2000, 65–66) is one of the authors also taking more aspects than just a topic into account, mentioning the lack of context or explanation and growing number of tips, advice columns (even psychological ones), using a dramatic style, superlatives, rhetorical questions or moral appeals. Last but not least then he comments on the effort to start a dialogue with the audience through various letters to editor, surveys or photographs of the journalists working for a particular medium.

Specifically considering the television news, Andrew Calabrese (2000, 51) adds the emphasis on youthful and attractive physical appearance of moderators, especially in case of women. He mentions also the speed which

might be a crucial advantage over the competition, shorter and easy-to-follow soundtracks and heavier use of computer graphics.

Operationalization

Did the Changes in the Czech Television News Bring Higher Level of Tabloidization?

The goal of the presented content analyses was to critically reflect the evening news of the Czech Television regarding its tabloidization. Secondly, to find out what are the main discrepancies, if there are any, between the two most frequently used approaches to the tabloidization measurement.

Particularly, the two essential changes that were made in the concept of the analyzed Czech television news in 2007 and 2012 were evaluated. The stratified random sampling therefore was founded on a comparison of reportages presented in months before each of the changes and after them. 319 reportages were analyzed altogether including 1347 actors presented. The hypotheses was, regarding also the following public debate in the Czech Republic, that the changes brought a higher frequency of attributes indicating the tabloidization to the evening news.

Those attributes were then defined with respect to the complex set of factors having influence on the news coverage. Particularly, the characteristics presented here were: decline of political relevance, social relevance and framing, lower number of foreign news, presence of personal reporting, higher number of ordinary people as actors of the news and formal means used to arouse emotions among audience members.

How were the Variables Defined?

Building on the foundations of the Reinemann et. al study (2012, 237), the political relevance was analyzed through the presence of the following aspects:

- 1) two or more societal actors or decision-making authorities that are involved in societal issue (e.g., two parties, a party and an NGO, voters and politicians, employers and trade unions).
- 2) The substance of a planned or realized decision, measure, programme that relates to the issue.
- 3) The persons or groups concerned by the planned or realized decisions, measures, programmes.

Regarding the social relevance, again based on Reinemann et al. (2012, 237), the focus of a news item was coded, related to the accentuation of personal (stressing the personal, private meaning or consequences of the incidents) or societal relevance (stressing the general, overall meaning).

Then, based on both Reinemann et al. (2012, 238) and Patterson (2000, 25), the context of the news was evaluated. Those news presenting an issue through a specific example or case study were coded as having episodic

framing, those placing issues into a broader context were coded as having thematic framing. Both the social relevance and context of the news were evaluated on a five-point scale.

Among the other variables indicating tabloidization were: ratio of domestic and foreign news, presence of any personal impressions, interpretations, points of view or opinions of the journalists and presence of ordinary people as actors of the news. By ordinary people here were meant the people who do not have any representative function, vox populi, employees, parents, customers, students or eyewitnesses (Hardy et al., 2010, 10).

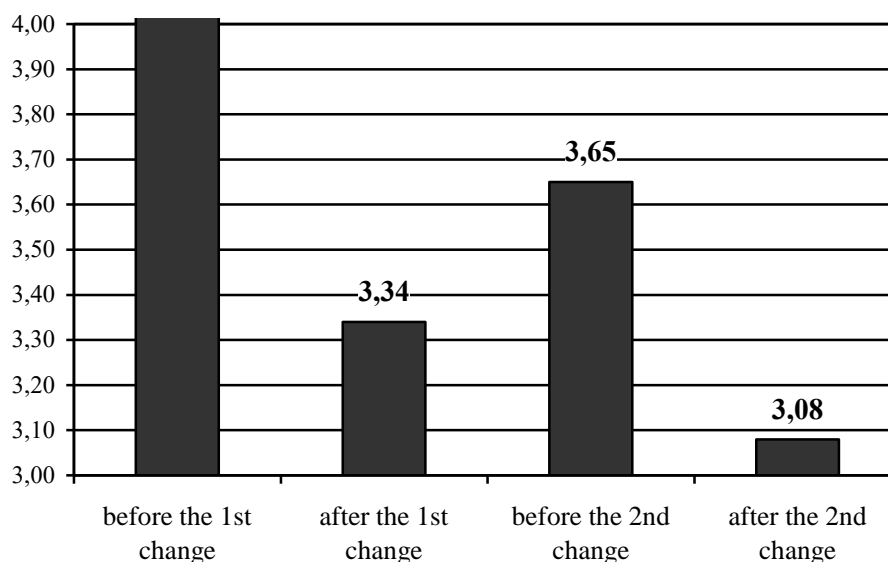
Lastly, the formal means possibly influencing the emotions and overall perception of information were analyzed. Particularly, those were background music, sensational camera movement techniques (zoom, multiple images in one scene or any kind of significant postproduction), graphics and illustrative shots.

Key Findings

Common Patterns

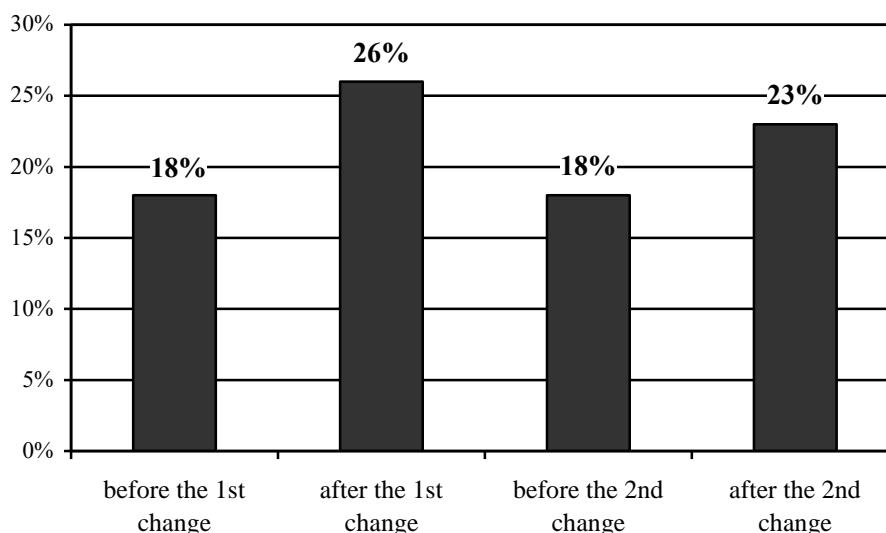
In case of both of the changes, the difference between the news presentation before and after was observed in the social relevance (see Graph 1). After the changes, events were more frequently presented through personal stories, with less focus on their general consequences.

Graph 1. *Social Relevance of the News. Mean on a Five-point Scale, (N=319)*



Also the number of ordinary people presented as actors of the news was higher after both of the changes (see Graph 2) which relates to the above-mentioned presentation of the events through personal stories naturally.

Graph 2. *Percentage of Ordinary People as Actors Presented in the Reportages, in %, (N=1347)*

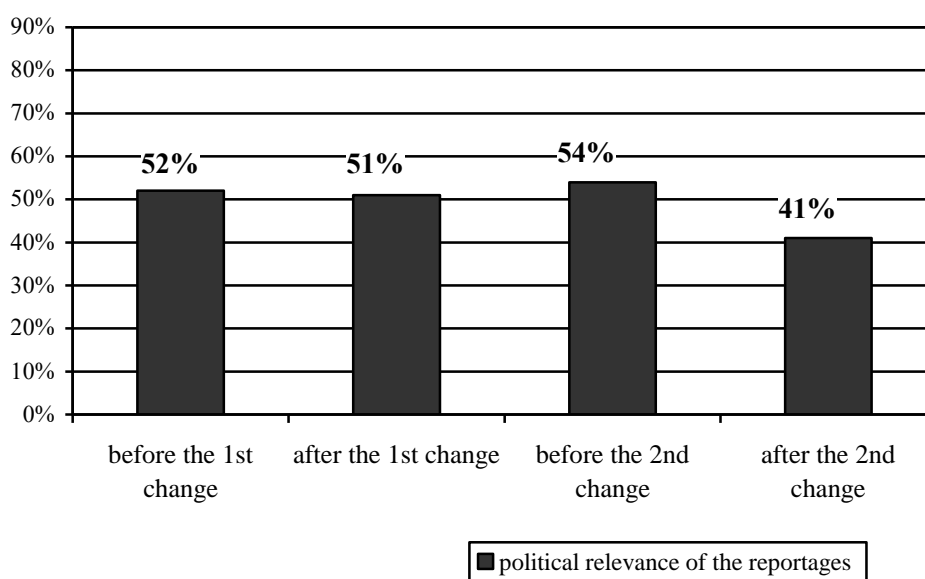


Individual Differences

The trends observed in development of the other monitored variables was not so clear though. In case of the first change (2007) the presented context of the news decreased (mean 2.84 to 2.45) and the presence of graphics used in the reportages which is also perceived as an indicator of higher level of tabloidization increased (by 10%). Contrary the political relevance of the news remained the same and the number of foreign news even slightly increased (from 25% to 33%).

Mentioning the political relevance, we move to the most significant shift in case of the second change observed (2012). The political relevance of the news decreased by 13% after the change (see Graph 3). Which means there were fewer political actors or institutions, fewer planned or realized decisions or measures and fewer persons or groups concerned by those measures presented in the reportages.

Graph 3. *How Many Reportages were Evaluated as Being Politically Relevant? in % (N=319)*



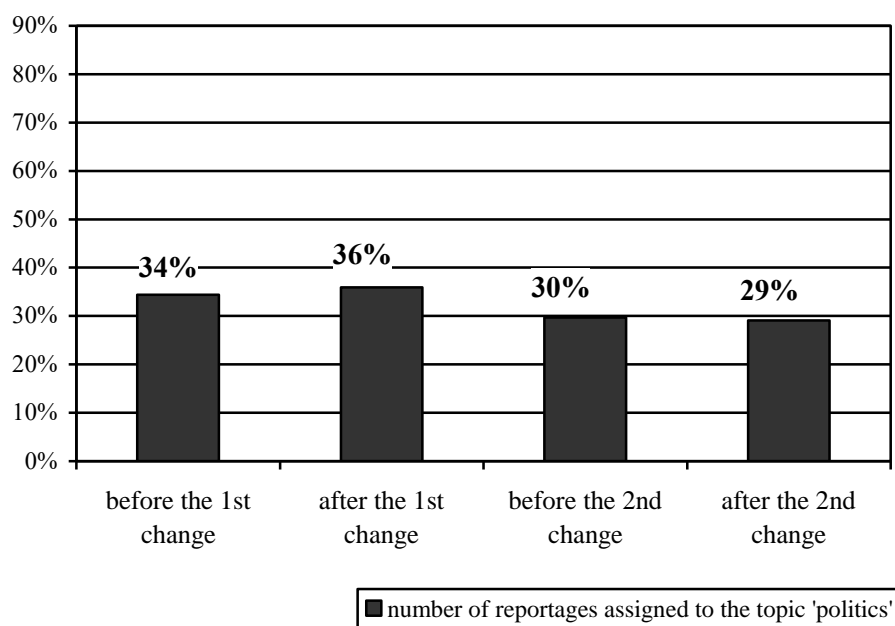
The Tradition Approach Comparison

On this place the comparison to the 'traditional' approach to the tabloidization measurement was applied. As shown in Graph 4 below, the number of reportages which were categorized as covering a topic related to politics remained the same after the second change. It clearly shows the gap between the two approaches indicating the validity of arguments describing the solely topic oriented analyses as not sufficient when looking for the tabloidization indicating characteristics.

The conclusion of the analysis conducted in the traditional way would be the denial of the trend of growing tabloidization in the Czech Television news, at least regarding the presentation of political news. The more complex approach used in the content analysis indicates the opposite.

This finding is perceived as the crucial observation potentially having a strong influence on the debate of the tabloidization of news and related concepts (commercialization, personalization, and infotainment). It clearly shows that the discourse in which the trend of tabloidization is being discussed deserves to be refreshed reflecting the attributes playing role in the categorization of the news, especially those specific for the new media formats.

Graph 4. *How Many Reportages were Covering Topic Related to Politics? in % (N=319)*



Conclusions

There is an expectation in the media studies discourse that we can observe tabloidisation in any kind of media content, which includes also the news produced by the public service media, particularly by the Czech Television. It is also the evening news produced by this television that was analyzed regarding the tabloidization in this paper using the quantitative content analysis.

The motivation of the analysis was to uncover the trends occurring in the news produced by the Czech Television. This is the reason why the main emphasize of the analysis was placed on the two essential changes that were made in the concept of the evening news in 2007 and 2012. Those changes are perceived as crucial when predicting further development of the news. So the goal of the analyses was to critically reflect those changes regarding their influence on the tabloidization of the news.

The variables indicating the tabloidisation were defined slightly differently from the traditional approach that is perceiving the topic of the news as the main indicator of tabloidization. The characteristics presented here were: decline of political relevance, social relevance and framing, lower number of foreign news, presence of personal reporting, higher number of ordinary people as actors of the news and formal means used to arouse emotions among audience members.

Regarding that we move to the second motivation of the analyses, which was the comparison of this more complex approach to the traditional, solely topic oriented one.

In the reportages analyzed we can observe there is actually an influence of the above-mentioned changes on the news in the Czech Television regarding tabloidization. But not regarding all of the characteristics. Each of the changes had their specifics.

In case of both of them the social relevance of the news was lower in the period after the change which means the events were more often presented through personal stories, not showing their social significance. Also the number of ordinary people presented as actors of the news was higher in both cases.

In the case of the second change in 2012 we can observe significant decrease of the political relevance of the news. So there were fewer political actors or decision-making authorities presented, smaller number of planned or realized measures related to the issue described. And fewer links to individuals or groups concerned by the planned or realized measures.

On the other hand, there were also variables that did not validate the hypothesis of the changes having clear impact on growing tabloidization. Most significantly in case of the second change (2012) which brought higher numbers of reportages incorporating the broader context of the covered events and lower number of those including the formal means used to arouse emotions among audience members (number of those including any computer graphics decreased by 14%). So unlike the public debate relate to the changes assumed, the change's influence on the tabloidization of news was not so clear and definite.

Even more appealing conclusion came from the comparison of the two different approaches to the tabloidization measurement. The approach referred as the traditional one (focusing solely on the topic of the news) did not indicate any change in the reporting of political news, while the more complex analyses primarily used in this paper indicated a significant decrease in political relevance of the news in case of the second change (2012).

As already mentioned that brings us to the need of greater clarity regarding the definition of tabloidization, as the literature review has shown as well. The commonly shared definitions and approach to operationalization would bring the desired increase of comparability which seems to be complicated in case of significant differences observed in selected studies. It would also bring an important empirically founded arguments to the currently active debate over the direction of media in the commercialized world which is associated to the tabloidization and decline of moral values related to it as well.

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