

DETECTING TABLOIDIZATION OF ONLINE MEDIA IN LATVIA

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ABSTRACT

The turmoil of presidential election campaign of 2016 echoed around the world. The coverage of it spread far and wide. Even local and regional media started to follow the campaign that Americans themselves describe as divisive and unprecedented. Most likely it happened thanks to the personality of Republican Party candidate Donald J. Trump, a businessman and a television star. His personality, populist campaign and many scandals that followed him caught the attention of the world media. The scandalous news that came out of the campaign in the last few months became an interesting media tabloidization study ground. This paper talks about detecting and describing the key elements of tabloidization. Although Latvian online news sites have been running for almost two decades, there has not been an in-depth research on tabloidization of online media. Therefore, methods which could be used to identify the tabloidization of media content have not been developed yet. By using content analysis this study tries to set a base for further research on online media tabloidization and draws the attention to Latvian commercial news portals – TVNET, Delfi, Apollo and public media website Lsm.lv and the news they produced and republished concerning US presidential campaign in 2016. Findings show two major aspects – firstly, even though there is quite a lot of information about the campaign published on those media sites, this information is mostly republished from news agencies, secondly, the study has revealed that there are some indicators of tabloidization to be found in the Latvian news websites.

Keywords: tabloids, online journalism, USA presidential election, Donald Trump

INTRODUCTION

For the last twenty years virtual news consumption, or more precisely online media, has steadily been outpacing all the classical media formats one by one. As with the development and increasing accessibility of devices like tablet computers and smartphones, more and more people every day choose to use online media. According to audience research companies TNS data for the first half of 2016 – 71% of the Latvian population used internet daily, and in the same study it is noted that the 2nd most common activity in daily internet use is reading the news, losing marginally only to using social media. In January of 2017 top Latvian online media news website Delfi.lv received about 600 000 page visits, together local online media get more than 2 000 000 page visits per day.

When talking about the need for researching online media one could mention geopolitics in Eastern Europe and the topic of propaganda. Often it is stated that the best counteraction to hostile foreign information is a qualitative and professional local media content. (Institute for Security Studies et al. 2016). Focusing more on the importance of a professional online media (Everett 2011) it is important to note that people mostly prefer free content. And since there are no subscription type online news websites in Latvia, it can be assumed that many will choose to use online services instead of TV channels that require some sort of a monthly payment. Free commercial news websites have to gain earnings from advertising spaces and sponsored articles. Thereby editorial staff can be encouraged to create intriguing, loud, attention drawing content to maximize “the clicks” and get the user to spend more time online.

Online media importance can't be discussed without at least mentioning social media and the information sharing they facilitate. As it has been noted and observed, online news sharing is an important part of the social media usage (Kümpel et al. 2015), and it is also quite important when discussing the value of studying online media, we can't forget that social networks deliver vast amounts of news and because of the way these networks function it is harder for a reader to avoid tabloid news, than 100 or even 20 years ago. At that time a person could just walk by the magazine and newspaper stand where the “bad” media were, but not today, not in the virtual world of online media and social networks. So the two most popular Latvian online media user activities converge.

Of course, then the question arises: what counts as a tabloid journalism, what is a professional media content, what is soft and

hard news, and is it bad for professional journalism? Traditionally, the distinction is made by talking about hard and soft news. It should be noted, however, that media researchers are not always in agreement what exactly is hard and what is soft news (Reinmann, Stanyer 2011) and how they relate to tabloidization.

Taking into account all the previously mentioned arguments it should be clear why tabloidization – a tendency that often is grouped together with diminishing standards of traditional press – is an important and vital field of mass media studies. The intention of this analysis is to sketch one approach for further research, since there have not been any comprehensive tabloidization studies of online media in Latvia, the questions asked are – is there some sort of tabloidization in Latvian online media and can tabloidization elements be detected in a limited time period?

TABLOID MEDIA AND REPORTING NEWS

To talk about tabloidization, there needs to be a clear explanation of what counts as tabloid media. The word “tabloid” originally comes from the pharmaceutical industry (Esser, 1999) and was associated with means of drug / medicine compression so that those could be easily swallowed, from there the word “tablet” comes. But by the emergence of penny press in the early 20th century, the word was adopted as a derogatory term by which the media elite referred to the in format smaller newspapers that traditionally catered to the interests of common man, by focusing on crime reports, celebrity news, entertainment and sports (Glynn 2000; Conboy 2005). Tabloids offered news that were “easier to swallow”, they achieved it by using simpler terms, simpler language, illustrating most important stories with pictures.

Tabloid style media often are characterized by the continuous path finding to the “simple” audience using themes and means of expression that are familiar to the common man, this approach was contrary to classic, elite media, which used a more formal language, and traditionally wrote about politics, social issues with a very formal approach, spending little time on so called human interest stories. “[..] From the 1880s onwards, there was an accelerating trend towards the production of newspapers and magazines which sought ever more lucrative, mass markets by appealing to wider and lower social readerships” (Conboy 2005, 3).

It must be noted that there isn't a universal definition of tabloid media that the researchers have universally accepted. Each study

describes their interpretation, although most of them are quite similar to the everyday understanding of what tabloids are. Researcher Colin Sparks offers one: “[...] the tabloid is a form marked by two major features: it devotes relatively little attention to politics, economics, and society and relatively much attention to diversions like sports, scandal, and popular entertainment; it devotes much attention to the personal and private lives of people, both celebrities and ordinary people, and relatively little to political processes, economic developments, and social changes” (Sparks, Tulloch 2000, 10).

Another description inspired by Sparks is offered by Sofia Johansson:

“Contentious features of the tabloids include the typically sensationalist and personalized news style, and blurring of boundaries between private and public, politics and entertainment, but also their populist and partisan political interventions, their celebrity-orientated and sexualized news agenda and the use of aggressive journalistic methods such as cheque-book journalism and paparazzi coverage” (Johansson 2007, 7).

British tabloid researcher Martin Conboy has described some rhetoric patterns that appear in the language of tabloids. In the book “Tabloid Britain” (Conboy 2005) he describes patterns detected in British media: word play (as in rhymes and references); familiar names (as nicknames given to people featured often in tabloid); employing colloquial expressions and slang; scripts (expressions, words that compress meaning already known to readers); metaphors; salacious storylines; normalizing their readers and emphasizing the individual; inter-textual cultural references; referring to selves; lists (as “10 things men like”).

These patterns fall in line with tabloid definitions, so there could be an assumption that there are some universal qualities that tabloids try to adhere to in language and style. Although it must be noted that, for example, tabloid media researcher Frank Esser disagrees, comparing British and German tabloids he states that there are some significant differences that come from journalist practices, legal situations and other factors (Esser 1999). And it is true that studies and research methods from other countries can't be freely applied to Latvia. Thus the problem of having no previous study background is outlined in this paper. Since there has not been any comprehensive studies on Latvian tabloidization and online media, the first steps must be made by trying to adopt other studies and research categories, just to sketch the basic field for later, more comprehensive studies.

Tabloidization sometimes is linked with the softening of the news – a trend that sees hard news taking on angles that bring those

closer to the traditionally soft news area, like talking about policy issues but focusing not on the politics itself but on one family that is or will be affected by it (Boukes, Boomgaarden 2015). More and more journalism, specifically TV journalism in US, adopts this strategy to entertain and educate (Holbert 2005).

As with tabloid media, the definition of what can be considered as soft news and what can be thought about as hard news is not universally agreed upon. Many scholars have slightly different opinions (Kümpel et al. 2015). The first classification where the division of hard and soft news is mentioned is in the paper of Gaye Tuchman (1973), where by interviewing media professionals he ascertains that soft news is human interest stories, that are not deemed newsworthy – don't concern government policy, broad social issues. Soft news stories are about interesting or entertaining events, that media could choose not to report about. Soft news tends to be more sensationalized and, as in the case of tabloid news report, focuses more on disasters and crime on a purely personal level, sometimes disregarding the broader implications. Soft news is often categorized as focused on entertainment (Baum 2002) rather than education. Often the division is made by the feeling of the editorial team (Patterson 2000, 3). And the soft news is often described as reporting on the types of events that, as noted before, are classical tabloid media topics. "[...] in contrast to traditional, hard news outlets [...] they all focus primarily on soft news themes like crime, disaster, or scandal, and they all cover political issues similarly to one another" (Baum, Jamison 2006; Jebril et al. 2013). Although the division, as often is noted, is arbitrary (Patterson, 2000) and outdated, since soft news focusing on an individual can also tell stories about policies, it is quite clear that the soft news is a type of news that would best fit in a tabloid media or hard news outlet that shifts its traditional orientation and is willing to include human interest stories. Of course, there has to be a distinction made between reporting of soft news topics and being a tabloid, using a tabloid language and emphasizing the scandalous parts.

Summarizing, it can be concluded that the tabloid is a media outlet, traditionally printed press, that devotes more attention to crime, scandals, sex, sports, celebrity news, promoting them through loud headlines written in a more accessible language, akin to how people talk "on the street", and this type of stories can be also most of the times referred to as the soft news.

But in the case of this paper where the aim is to start the process of creating a base for tabloidization detection and research, the division will be made by taking into account the classical sense –

soft news will be understood as personal, entertaining stories, focused on interesting quotes or scandals, all other stories that are focused on policy or broad social issues will be classified as hard news stories.

ADOPTING TABLOID VALUES AND POPULARIZING THE NEWS

The process of media adopting tabloid values and storytelling elements is often referred to as tabloidization. It must be noted that in the academic field (Anderon 2013) more attention traditionally has been paid to the printed press as it changes physical size, which of course by itself does not mean sensationalistic journalism (Sparks 2010). “[...] tabloidization is a term for the alleged deterioration of the informational and intellectual content of the news media that accompanies their shrinkage to a smaller size and different format” (Gans 2009, 17.) Frank Esser writes that tabloidization is a process that often happens as a direct results of advertisers to reach wider audiences (1999). Necessity for profit “forced” some of the media to introduce additional segments devoted to sensationalism, sports and entertainment, attracting a wider audience. When regarding the commercialization pressures, it is interesting to compare public media, in countries where it is possible, to commercial media. Researchers have also found a link between commercialization, tabloidization and “serious news” decline, because such messages are less profitable. For example, in the early 2000s, when the Greek electronic media witnessed the impact of commercialization there was a decrease of stories that concerned parliament and government, resulting in more soft news materials (Papathanassopoulos 2001).

Tabloidization sometimes is described as convergence of “quality” newspapers towards the values characteristic of tabloid newspapers, which can be identified by personalization and sensationalism, and the adaptation of linguistic features through which these values are represented (Lefkowitz 2016).

Although it must be noted that in the modern media landscape talking about tabloidization has received some criticism for being elitist. One of the authors, drawing attention to the elitist approach of tabloidization is Herbert Gans. He prefers to talk about the popularization (Gans 2009), indicating that it is a process that takes place with a variety of cultural and information spheres. He notes that when concerning difficult subjects, for example in the science communication, the popularization works in a positive way, because it introduces complex ideas in a way a reader with no special education

can understand the significance of them, the same could be said for politics. Policy issues can be described in a way that a reader or a viewer can grasp the idea and evaluate the impact the policy will have on him

The best example of tabloidization not being so easily applicable is perhaps in the online media field (Lecheler, Kruike-meier 2016), since the format, technological and social media aspect allow and even call for more content which can't realistically be all serious traditional hard news. Secondly, the format allows to create sub sections devoted to serious news and pages that are devoted to entertainment and soft news.

Tabloidization can happen for several reasons and in a few different ways, but the main force behind it is economic drive to reach more audiences (Herman, Chomsky 2002) by catering to their needs. But it must not be viewed only as a negative tendency, and it should be carefully studied if the tabloid style stories are added or they are replacing the "hard" news stories. It could be speculated that online media, thanks to the unlimited space and no format constrictions do both. So by reaching larger audiences the media can further disseminate serious information.

DETECTING TABLOIDIZATION IN HARD NEWS FORMAT

It is not always easy to describe in an accurate way what tabloidization entails and it makes for a harder detection for a researcher. But the main goal of this paper was to look for a simple way that could be applied to a broader research on online Latvia media tabloidization. So there must be first steps on a way to a working description, which can be made use of in further studies. It was determined that the best way would be to use a qualitative content analysis that would help to sort and analyze news.

The questions given before the study were: is there some sort of tabloidization in Latvian online media and can tabloidization elements be detected in a limited time period analysis?

M. Conboy (2005) describes these patterns more thoroughly talking about different aspects of British tabloid media, but it can be assumed that these patterns would be at least partially detectable also in other countries and other type of media, because similar patterns have been recognized in American tabloids, as well as in German and British (Esser 1999), Australian (Mules 1998), Nigerian (Olokotun 2000) media, and they always fall in line with the tabloid

definition mentioned before. So it could be assumed that in some ways they are almost universal and could be used in this case for Latvian online media study, as part of the ongoing trend of tabloidization.

Based on the tabloid media, tabloidization definitions and description in previous chapters, for the study of Latvian online media a qualitative content analysis matrix was developed.

It must be noted that a lot of foreign news in Latvian media comes from news agencies LETA and BNS. So, firstly the authorship of each story was established – whether it was from news agency, or it was the online website or a specific author. If the author was credited as news agency, then the headline and the body were compared to the original to determine whether it had been changed in some way. The original materials were analyzed to comprehend the main idea of the story. Specific attention was paid to the word and rhetorical devices mentioned by M. Conboy. Looking at the text of the news, a special attention was paid to any words or phrases that suggest a certain attitude or “colors in” some sort of an opinion or a judgement. For example, when one of the websites wrote about D. Trump’s leaked tape scandal, then describing D. Trump’s comments they used a word that in the Latvian language signified media’s disbelief, skepticism about what he was saying, and there are several examples like these.

The purpose of this analysis was to carry out a test study for a further tabloidization research; accordingly, the selected period of time was relatively short – from October 1, 2016 to November 8, 2016, still there was quite a large body of news stories. The selected period was end of the election campaign, when the major party candidates participated in debates. The chosen period gave the opportunity to observe news stories about candidates, debates and two important events – a surfacing record with Donald Trump talking about women, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation announcement that they are looking into the case of Hillary Clinton’s deleted e-mails once again. For the media this period was quite intensive, and offered plentiful opportunities to demonstrate tabloidization. All the stories published in the previously stated time period were added to the body for the analysis, if they contained information about the US Presidential election campaign, and candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. The study used three of the most visited Latvian online media – Delfi, TVNET, and Apollo, as well as the public broadcasting media online website Lsm.lv that does its own journalism and also publishes news stories produced by Latvian public television and Latvian public radio.

In total 331 news stories, opinion pieces and other type of media materials related to the US presidential elections were selected. Most of publications about this event were in TVNET, but the fewest, as is expected, in the public media news site Lsm.lv. Delfi and Apollo offered almost the same quantity of the news stories.

TABLOID STYLE REPORTING IN PUBLIC AND COMMERCIAL MEDIA

One of the most important tools for tabloid media, as mentioned, is the language they use to draw in readers. Analyzing the material in the four chosen media sites, the first finding that marked a sharp contrast was the quantity and quality of news stories in commercial media and public broadcasting news website Lsm.lv. Commercial media stories on the chosen topic of the US election campaign had more than 90% of stories republished from news agencies LETA and BNS, but the public media site Lsm.lv had only about 3% (from 44 entries devoted to the topics only 6 were prepared by the news agency) not original stories. In principle it can be explained as another aspect of tabloidization – tabloids often tend to take national position in support of the local characters and images. Paying less attention to foreign policy is understandable as those stories are hard to localize and remake in soft news style. So this can be viewed as a sort of a signifier for tabloidization. It is not incomprehensible that not spending limited resources on creating news about US presidential election is a decision that has been made taking in account financial reasons.

The difference between public media website Lsm.lv and the three most visited commercial media websites is quite broad. As mentioned before, public media for coverage of presidential election campaign used only small amounts of news agency content, although it must be mentioned that there are only few stories written by the website journalists, most of it comes from Latvian Public Radio and Latvian Public Television. There is also a difference in the quantity of the news stories about the same topic. Although the underlying story is largely the same, public media website chose to make broader stories, while commercial media published each little part of the story under a separate headline. Commercial media reported on evolving stories more often while public media chose to create broader compilations of an event not dividing each new development in a news story of its own.

Between three commercial media websites in the coverage of US presidential pre-election campaign there were no major differences.

They used almost the same amounts of news agency materials and original stories. Even most of the original stories were similar. From the three only Delfi published a few opinion pieces that touched upon the pre-election.

Another aspect that the news content analysis indicated was that commercial media sometimes will take a story from news agency, but they will change the headline to emphasize some part of the story, usually that will coincide with values that tabloid media are known for – they would make it more scandalous and intriguing. The study also found that there was a disproportional amount of news that was focused on Donald Trump, there were only few stories in each of the websites that concerned Hillary Clinton only or were focused on her. Most of the stories dealt with D. Trump and persons or events surrounding him.

There are a couple of examples that can be brought up to illustrate tabloidization tendencies where the headlines, since most of the news text comes from agencies, are especially revealing:

“Eminem’s New Song Decries Trump” / “Eminems jaunā dziesmā nopeļ Trampu” (*Apollo* October 20, 2016);

“Eminem also has Something to Say about Donald Trump” / “Arī Eminemam ir kas sakāms par Donaldu Trampu” (*TVNET* October 20, 2016).

Both of these stories come from news agency LETA. Apollo decided to keep the original title, that is very clear and explanatory – a famous hip-hop artist is being critical about one of the candidates. But TVNET chose to alter the title so it would offer some mystery and intrigue, because it is not immediately clear whether the famous artist supports Donald Trump or he is being critical of the Republican Party’s nominee. Further changes in the text were not made.

Another example, that M. Conboy also mentioned, is about using condensed information and common Latvian sayings or expressions:

“Trump: Russia Broke the Agreement on Syria, and does not Respect the US Leaders” / “Tramps: Krievija “lauza vienošanos” par Siriju un neciena ASV liderus” (*Delfi, TVNET* October 5, 2016);

“Trump Throws Fur to the other side: Criticizes Russia” / “Tramps “met kažoku uz otru pusi”: Tiek kritizēta Krievija” (*Apollo* October 5, 2016).

In this example Apollo used a popular Latvian expression – “throw the fur on the other side” that represents changing opinions.

By using this expression, Apollo says that it indicates that Donald Trump has changed his opinion on Russia, noting that previously he has not criticized and maybe has even praised Russia. One could argue that this form offers even more information than the unchanged news agency LETA title that Delfi and TVNET chose not to alter. As in the previous example – the rest of the text has not been altered:

“Trump on Sexual Allegations for Women: I’m the Victim” / “Tramps par seksuāla rakstura apsūdzībām sievietēm: es esmu upuris” (*Delfi* October 15, 2016);

“Robert De Niro is Ready to Punch Trump in the Face” / “Roberts de Niro ir gatavs Trampam iekraut pa seju” (*TVNET* October 8, 2016);

“I don’t Care that You are Dying! – Trumps Absurd Call to Turn to the Seriously Ill” / “Man vienalga, ka mirstat! – Tramps ar absurdu aicinājumu vēršas pie smagi slimajiem” (*Apollo* October 6, 2016).

These headlines are for original materials that were created by the media, not taken from news agencies. As the study has revealed, the commercial websites will write and translate news stories when they see a way to create a relatively loud, appealing article. Delfi example highlighted a seeming absurdity where a sexual abuser sees himself as the victim. In turn TVNET news talks about violence and demonstrates the unusual case where the film actor threatened a politician, it is also expressed in the language of “common man”. By contrast, the Apollo demonstrates an apparent absurdity and dissension from the politician. Commercial websites will spend their resources on creating stories that are easy marks for tabloidization, namely they chose stories that were so absurd, unusual or strange, that they were almost guaranteed to draw crowds. But if the story was more about policy on the candidates’ debate outcome, the commercial media sites would just copy the story from the online news agencies, while if there was a scandal, like in an example of D. Trump’s vulgar speech tape leak, the media would write the stories themselves emphasizing the scandalous or salacious nature of the event, being quite obviously skeptical of Trump’s explanations.

The stories were not always scandalous, in some cases they were more like a unique event, in case when media outlets, which traditionally remained neutral, decided to speak against Trump. Local online media translated and compiled those stories quoting media outlets which called Trump a xenophobic and sexist. These parts were quoted and emphasized to make the story more interesting, more unprecedented, thus raising the interest of the reader.

The language chosen by the media, even sometimes by the news agencies material, indicated strong deviations from classical, formal, “uninterested” style of reporting hard news. The public media in some news stories also were guilty of this. One explanation for this could be the general softening of online news, but since this most often appeared in the stories about D. Trump, another explanation might be the fact that the general public sentiment in Latvia was against D. Trump, because his policy seemed to be against Latvian national interests, so the traditional dispassionate reporting naturally shifted in line with the general Western world opinion about the candidate.

In general, strictly looking at the news reported by all four websites it can be said that more than half of those stories can be attributed to soft news. The public media websites have fewer materials in quantity, but commercial websites often strive for stories about the election that involve celebrities, sex or D. Trump’s strong language:

“Wall Construction, Russian Spies and Conflicts of Interest – Look Back at the last US Presidential Debate” / “Sienas celšana, Krievijas spiegi un interešu konflikti – atskats uz pēdējām ASV prezidentu debatēm” (*Lsm.lv* October 20, 2016);

“Info Graphic: What to Expect from the Next US President – Trump or Clinton?” / “Infografika: Ko gaidīt no nākamā ASV prezidenta – Trampa vai Klintones?” (*Lsm.lv* October 22, 2016).

Interestingly, in the commercial media stories there were no attempts at popularizing the US politics in the time under analysis. *Lsm.lv* did that only a few times – if we assume that popularization is striving to make the complex political or social news stories more comprehensible for the reader, either by explaining it in a simple manner or by using visual aids. In the public broadcast media website *Lsm.lv* from the 44 news stories there was one info graphic that was published together with explanation on what the major policies of both candidates are. As well there were three pieces that were published as opinions, but they were more as a recap and explanation on the three debates where both candidates participated. So these could also be seen as a way of popularization where a journalist spent time to summarize and explain what happened in the debates.

Returning to the beginning of this chapter it can be noted that the headlines are the most revealing material, since there is quite little of the original text to analyze as most of the news is directly taken from news agency, but the text, being an original material,

shows some tendencies of softening or, to be more precise, of tabloidization. And almost every rhetorical aspect mentioned by M. Conboy (2005) can be found there too. Of course, there is little of media outlet presence or talk about the reader, but that could probably be attributed to the fact that this is foreign news from a country quite far and does not have any immediate importance.

CONCLUSION

Tabloids sometimes have been called also as headline journalism, and this study shows it to be partially true, because since the most of the stories were coming from the news agency only with changed headlines, a cynical view would say that the media do not need to work more, because the reader will “click on the headline”. As the examples show there are signs of tabloidization and some small and rare occurrences of information popularization, which, if not proves, then nudges in the direction of tabloidization research. This paper showed how the study can be done. By taking certain event coverage and comparing it to a public media and news agency material, differences can be seen, and by adding the understanding of tabloid values and what these types of media try to accentuate, researchers can find a pattern. Although it must be noted that the chosen time period was not long enough to take a comprehensive look at the issue, because before the study it was underestimated how extensively online media in Latvia use news agency materials in covering foreign news. So, by taking a larger sample and possibly concentrating on news more important locally, it would be possible to have a clearer picture of tabloidization tendencies in Latvian online media. Also it could be recommended to work on the whole spectrum of news, possibly everything that the media publish.

The findings about the stories that were created by the journalists of the four chosen media revealed also that there are quite a clear sign of tabloidization in a form that has been described by foreign authors, consequently, a further research can be done on assessing whether there could be some universal tabloid language or form of expression and whether the scandalous news format defies language and cultural borders.

The next step in Latvian online tabloidization research could be starting to explore the signs of local Latvian tabloidization, rhetoric language patterns and ways of highlighting news preferred by the media. Since there have not been many studies about online media news there are a lot of questions that remain still unanswered and

are not reflected in literature. Another interesting issue demonstrated by this paper is the heavy reliance, in at least foreign news area, on news agency information. The research on the changes in language in Latvian online media might also be of considerable interest, since the initial findings in this study showed some general deviations from traditional hard news language even when talking about policy issues.

The research on tabloidization and information softening is quite important, since as mentioned – the easy accessibility and high penetration on online news thanks to social media make online journalism a vital part of the information intake, and if the vast majority of it focused on interesting and scandalous tidbits, there is a risk of not fulfilling one of the media functions – educating.

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