DEFINING THE TABLOID: CZECH PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT:

The term tabloidisation is frequently used in both common sense public debates and media studies scholars' reflection of the trends of contemporary media development. Less frequently is the term itself explained and defined for analytical purposes. The paper attempts to reveal possibilities how to define the term and reveal differences of tabloidisation in various media systems and also provide a working definition for quantitative analysis of tabloidisation of the press.

KEYWORDS:

tabloidisation, scandalisation, news values, media systems

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Tomáš Trampota vystudoval magisterské a poté postgraduální studium oboru Mediální studia na Fakultě sociálních věd Univerzity Karlovy. Působil v odborném týdeníku Marketing a Média, ve kterém se zabýval rozhlasovým a televizním trhem České republiky. V současnosti přednáší na Fakultě sociálních věd UK sociologii zpravodajství, vývojové trendy moderních médií a mediální systémy. Současně působí na New York Univerzity v Praze, kde přednáší Introduction to Media Criticism. Je proděkanem Fakulty sociálních věd Univerzity Karlovy a členem European Communication Research and Education Association, kde působí jako předseda Central and Eastern Europe Network. Je autorem knihy Zpravodajství a spoluautorem knihy Metody výzkumu médií.

The term tabloidisation has become frequently used for description of the process of change of news media performance and the way of their representation of reality, above all changes of patterns of events selection (news values) and the way of their narration (e.g. Sparks, 2000). Tabloidisation usually refers to changes of quality and character of information media offer to their publics (Uribe, Gunter, 2004: 388), often in connection with potential negative influence of the process for the relation of media to democracy or to society. Discussion of tabloidisation as a quality change of journalistic products often overlaps with the issues of infotainment (Graber, 1994) or sensationalism (Vettehen et al., 2006). These concepts are connected with market driven journalism and media organizations seeking for an increasing attractiveness of journalistic contents.

Tabloidisation is also very closely connected with scandalisation, which represents blurring the frontiers between the private and the public sphere, emphasizing personal life of public figures while omitting their professional achievements, which are so typical for tabloidisation of media. John Thompson connects media scandals and scandalisation with „trivialization theory" and claims that the trend of scandalisation may have begun in the tabloids and the popular press, but the growing competition within the media field has ensured that the broadsheets and the electronic media have been drawn into the fray. This resulted in tabloidisation of the media and a privatization of the public sphere; the public space created by the media has been filled with a kind of generalized chat show about the private lives of politicians, and the politics itself has become increasingly indisguishable from entertainment." (Thompson, 2000: 238- 239). Examining of tabloidisation is thus closely connected with the search for the quality and character of information circulating in the public through media contents.

Tabloidisation of the press has been frequently connected with the influence of television (Langer, 1998). Ian Connel for example examines interconnections of British tabloid press agenda and "tellyland" of tabloid television (Connel, 1997). The arguments of the laments on tabloidisation are similar to those on television journalism critique; "formulaic use of a dramatic script is especially evident in television news where pressure to win ratings has resulted in the distinctions between news and entertainment becoming worryingly blurred" (Langer, 1998: 3).

Various conceptualizations of tabloidisation

The term tabloid itself is used in various context meanings. Colin Sparks distinguishes three common uses of the term:

1. „a form marked by two major features: it devotes relatively little attention to politics, economics, and society and relatively much to diversions like sports, scandal, and popular entertainment; it devotes relatively 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"

2. „ second sense involves a shift in the priorities within a given medium, away from news and information toward an emphasis on entertainment. "

3. The final usage concerns the shifting boundaries of taste within different media forms (Sparks, 2000: 10-11).

The term itself builds polarity between previous and forthcoming character of media (not only) outcomes: two ideal types which may not exist in such pure form in real media landscape and can somehow overlap. This polarity between serious and tabloid-like often put as a dichotomous polarity between good and bad overlaps with the division between popular press and quality press. Stephen Harrington gathers terms used for description of quality of the press into two antipoles of (to certain extent) synonymous signs:

Tabloid	Broadsheet
Popular	Quality
Soft	Hard
Trash	Value
Personal	Political
Private	Public
Popular Culture	High Culture
Emotional	Rational
Lay knowledge	Expert knowledge
Celebrity	Intellectual
Consumer	Citizen
Trivial	Serious
Feminine	Masculine
Profit	Service
Micro- politics	Macro- politics
Wants	Needs

(Harrington, 2008)

Colin Sparks refuses so simple binary opposition and points out that newspapers should be divided not into two, but into five types: The Serious Press (with the content concentrating almost exclusively on issues of politics, economics, and the structural changes in the world); The Semiserious Press (with high concentration on the content characteristics of the serious press, but with an increasing amount of soft news and feature articles and growing stress upon the visual element in presentation); The Serious-Popular Press (which stresses visual design and contains a large dose of scandals, sports and entertainment but with similar news values like those of serious press); The Newsstand Tabloid Press (has strong agenda of scandals, sports, and entertainment, however has some elements of the news values of serious press and actively campaigns on political issues and in elections) and The Supermarket Tabloid Press (dominated by scandals, sports, and entertainment, often has a strong element of the fantastic built into) (Sparks, 2000: 14- 15). Sparks´ description stems from the segmentation of Brit-

ish newspaper market, which may differ from democratic corporatist model markets or from newspaper markets of Central Europe. Aspects of media performance labeled as tabloid ones and aspects labeled as indexes of quality papers may mingle in real life papers and our categorization is therefore always dependent on the indexes we choose to focus on during the analysis.

Laments contra adorations

The indexical processes being perceived as part of tabloidisation could be framed positively or negatively. Critiques of tabloidisation are frequently connected with the fear of the dumbing down effect coming from the confusion of broadsheet and tabloid subjects leading to indistinguishable broadsheet and tabloid journalism (McNair, 1999: 44; Connell, 1997), fear of threat to proper working democracy by perceiving the publics as mere consumers instead of civics actively participating in public life connected with replacing socially important information by entertaining chats (Dahlgren, Sparks, 1997; Connell, 1997). According to Franklin „Tabloid journalism describes the changing journalistic mood which has seen the news media becoming part of the entertainment industry rather then being the forum for informed debate about important issues of public concern; stories to interest the public instead of stories in the public interest (Franklin et al. , 2005). Connell analyzing British tabloid press in late 1990s reflects critically: "It was not just the volume of material on show business personalities that was striking, but also its prominence. Such material was often featured as the lead item on the front pages of these papers. Public affairs stories, with which the broadsheets would have led on a given day, were often relegated to a brief mention on the front pages of the tabloids and/or to somewhat fuller treatment on other pages". (Connell, 1997: 237)

Even if negative interpretations of tabloidisation aspects are prevailing, positive or consensual interpretations could be found as well. According to some scholars (John Fiske, Stephen Harrington etc.) the cluster of tabloidisation processes is not necessarily negative in general and can be perceived as a part of democratization or popularization of media production with positive aspect of capability to address people from lower social strata and convey them at least some kind of information and information which is important for them instead of dictating them information whose dissemination is important for elites. According to Hughes, tabloid stories are natural part of demos, of city life myth telling (Hughes, 19881). John Langer labeled news about floods, accidents, celebrity lifestyles, the heroic acts of humble people, personal tragedies, which are usually connected with tabloid journalism as other news and advocates their natural position in society (Langer, 1997); "...the world of everyday life is the baseline from which 'other news' occurrences gain newsworthiness: the fire occurs in an ordinary house; the flood submerges an ordinary suburb; the explosion happens in an ordinary hospital; the star has ordinary doubts about his abilities." (Langer, 1997: 30)

Sometimes the defense of the tabloid takes the form of a celebration of its content as the site of popular opposition to the dominant order (a known proponent of this view is John Fiske in Reading the Popular); the news values and practices of serious press serve to reinforce the domination of a social elite and their control of interpretations.

There are also advocates of commercial success of tabloids sometimes accusing critics of attempting to universalize their own elite conceptions of news, and of politics, as the only valuable kind of news on politics (Connell, 1997; Fiske, 1989).

Various tabloidness in media systems

In the case of tabloidisation we can be easily lost in translation. The Czech term bulvár/ bulvární (tabloid/ of tabloid) is not absolutely synonymous neither to the English term tabloid nor to the term popular and etymologically refers to the press being distributed on the streets and is connected with the French tradition of selling the press from 30th of 19th century on boulevards (Köpplova, 1989). Although there is still some difference between distribution of quality and tabloid press in some media systems (in the case of Czech Republic there

is higher proportion of tabloid circulation sold at newsstands than of quality press which is more dependent on subscription) distribution on the street is unique and more connected with free dailies than with tabloid papers.

The English term tabloid carries various meanings in different media landscapes. The British "red-tops" are often taken as the paradigm case of the tabloid press, but the British case is actually rather unusual, and the Czech concept of tabloidness is in certain aspects closer to democratic corporatist countries model of tabloid. There is not the same sharp class segmentation of the newspapers, as well. The British definition of tabloid often stresses the formal distinction of tabloid press; tabloid is according to Watson and Hill anything in a very concentrated form (Watson, Hill, 1997). The word generally seems to have come to refer to the format of such newspapers – compressed in size. This formal distinction is not in the case of Czech media system relevant, quality papers and semi-quality papers are not usually of different formats than tabloids.

Hallin and Mancini remark that there is distinction between media systems characterized by a clear separation between sensationalist mass press and „quality" papers addressed to an elite leadership (Britain is the strongest example) and those that lack such a stratification of the newspaper market (or where it is developed to only a limited extent), either because they lack a mass circulation press altogether or because they are dominated by newspapers that serve elite and mass readership simultaneously. (Hallin, Mancini, 2004: 25) In some media systems tabloid dailies do not exist, as in the case of some Mediterranean system countries (Italy, Spain, Portugal) or they have a very limited position or local impact; in the United States and Canada local newspapers predominate and only New York City market (dominated in readership by Daily News and Post) is comparable by its segmentation with British market (Hallin, Mancini, 2004). Reading tabloids is more strongly connected with social class position and newspapers markets are more stratified in some media landscapes than in Great Britain (ibid.). Social stratification of readership of Czech dailies is not so intense, even if there are some correlations between economic position of readers and tabloid readership, which is also connected with the fact that Czech tabloid dailies are traditionally cheaper than semi-quality papers or quality press.

Altogether basic differences of the concept of „tabloidness"in various media systems are as follows:

| Format |
| Price |
| Way of distribution |
| Use of representational codes |
| Social position of readers |
| Content political parallelism |
| Market position |
| Professional norms (objectivity) |
| News values |

Regarding the market position, in all Visegrad countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) the most wildly read daily is the tabloid one. In proportion tabloid dailies readership is not in total dominating the market (in the case of Czech Republic) in contrast to quality or semi-quality press, although the proportion of total readership of tabloids is continuously increasing at the expense of serious press (Vojtěchovská, 2009).

Tabloid news is also different regarding their narration and usage of language code. Helen MacGill Hughes in her classical analysis of human interest stories first published in 1940 connects this kind of news with the term perennials; relatively self-contained news narratives with little in the way of 'quickening urgency' but noteworthy for certain recurrent themes: 'curiosities and mysteries', life´s little ironies, 'changes of fortune', 'lost children' and 'romantic adventure'. Hughes connected tabloid press also with simple vocabulary (Hughes, 1981).

A part of the style of tabloid or popular journalism is to reject the constraints of objective reporting, and to present the newspaper as speaking for the common citizen and „common sense," often mobilizing a tone of outrage." (Hallin, Mancini, 2004: 211). „In Britain as in Germany, this most commonly takes the form of a right-wing populist stance, emphasizing nationalism, anticommunism, traditional views on gender and on many

social issues, and hostility to politicians (ibid.) British tabloids are also intensively partisan (ibid.). In Czech media system tabloids are not usually connected with openly stated political/ideological positions but with a more or less intense open anti-political stand.

Tabloidness also means different concepts of news values, above all the stress put on negativity, personification of stories, different conception of elite people and elite nations (tabloids usually emphasize home news and therefore the nation within which they are produced). "The places where public affairs stories would be found in broadsheets were in the tabloids occupied instead by human interest stories and stories about personalities whose public visibility had been occasioned by some dubious behaviour, often of a sexual kind." (Connell, 1997: 239)

Tabloidisation analysis

Although tabloidisation is a frequent theoretical concept of media studies literature, there is only a limited scope of practical application of the concept for research purposes. Common research design of media tabloidisation uses a quantitative content analysis employing the long term perspective. For revealing the progress of tabloidisation, quantitative content analysis usually combines analysis of time samples covering a long time period with examining the increase of proportion of indexes perceived as a manifested representation of tabloidisation. Such perspective has been applied for example by McLachlan and Golding (McLachlan, Golding, 2000). Similar approach was used by Rodrigo Uribe and Barrie Gunter for the analysis of Tabloidisation of British Tabloids using a three-level operational characterization of the tabloidisation process: range, form and style. Range has been defined as a decreasing proportion of space devoted to informational items as compared to other items, hard news in respect to soft news (sport, entertainment, crime, show business etc.) and foreign news stories compared to home news). Range as an indicator of tabloidisation has been used also by a number of other studies (Graber, 1994). Form means a less proportional space dedicated to the text and more to headlines, pictures and other visuals, it means increasing visuality of dailies as an index of tabloidisation. Style is defined as more space to stories including personification and private sphere of public figures. As Uribe and Gunter notes, style of coverage has not been very frequently used for analysis until their work, even if the factor of increasing depiction of public figures through the issues of their public life is frequently discussed as a form of tabloidisation in a wide range of literature (e.g. Thompson, 2000).

Although indexes used for detection of tabloidisation in mentioned studies are usually quoted features of tabloidness, there may not reveal all aspects of tabloidisation and could lead the research to a blind alley of self-fulfilling prophecy. A quantitative content analysis in connection with examining the tabloidisation of news is capable to reveal only a part of the issue. There may be another important indexes of tabloidisation (of a qualitative character) which are not involved into a tabloidisation analysis so frequently; wording of headlines, simple language (more expressive, smaller vocabulary), more fictional patterns of narration of the stories, higher subjectivity, strengthening polarization and conflicting narration of depicted events etc.

Tabloidisation does not mean only a continuous change of character of selected events and their representation in media contents, but also a change of journalistic practice and the way journalists gather information and proceed it, including different patterns of work with information sources and the way of re-narration of their statements, shifts of the meanings, level of de-contextualisation of reality etc.

Analyzing only media contents within the tabloidisation research could be misleading and simplifying. Tabloidisation regards also other parts of the mass media communication process; media organizations practice and media consumers practice. The frequent shortage of tabloidisation analysis is focused on sampled dailies and their contents regardless the analysis of the whole segment of the daily press and a changing position of the tabloid dailies. Tabloidisation is thus a process concerning at least two levels:

- *level of daily press audience market* and proportion of serious and tabloid press. According to data on readership of the Czech dailies, the readership of the tabloid press is continuously increasing in expand to serious press (Vojtěchovská, 2009);
- *level of daily press contents* and shift from serious journalism to the tabloid one.

Those two levels should not be separated in research projects and analyses of tabloidisation should interconnect them. Tabloidisation is going far behind mere media contents, connected with a productive phase and a consumption phase of media communication; with changes of professional journalistic values, changes of general concept of news and newsworthiness and changes of publics´ aesthetic codes and audience expectations.

Deconstruction of tabloidisation indexes

Mentioned tabloidisation indexes used by Uribe and Gunter can be interpreted also in a different interpretative paradigm than within the concept of tabloidisation. Colin Sparks claims that „there are no absolute standards in the social world: just about everything can be shown to have been different at different times or in different places"(Sparks, 2000: 17). Therefore the used indicators of tabloidisation could be part of more general communications or social changes. Range as the increase of entertaining soft news could be perceived also as a shift of modus operandi of media from setting function (revelation of important events) to supply function (what the publics want) and also as a possible redefinition of functions of old media as a respond to forthcoming dominance of new media. A form index could be more neutrally perceived as a part of continuing visualisation of communication in general. A style index could perhaps even partially reflect continuity of society individualisation as a part of a paradigmatic shift from socialist collectivity to capitalist individuality (in the case of CEE). Focusing on more detailed level of tabloidisation indexes can sometimes shade more general and important changes of communication patterns.

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