

RESEARCH OF READERSHIP ATTITUDES TO TABLOID EDITIONS OF NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES IN RS

ISTRAŽIVANJE STAVOVA PUBLIKE O TABLOIDNIM IZDANJIMA NOVINA I ČASOPISA U RS

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Abstract

Media shape the reality perceived by readership. The readership receives information from the media in the form in which the readers tend to pass them on as their own opinions. Despite the increasing danger of such reality, no research into the perception on tabloid editions has been conducted locally. The aim of this research was to verify if there are laws in the perception on tabloids concerning the characteristics of certain segments of population. The research thus established the correlation between the increase of negative attitudes to tabloids and the higher education level in respondents. Another expectation made in initial hypotheses being of greater social significance was an extremely high level of agreement in the opinion that tabloids represent a low form of culture, that their reporting is distasteful and that they should not be trusted. The theoretical framework and the results obtained through research may be of great significance for both the media and other participants in the advertising industry - advertisers and advertising agencies. The scientific contribution of this paper is in the initial data obtained by the researchers pertaining to the readership (respondents) perception of tabloids in RS, which regard the fields of sociology, media and advertising.

Sažetak

Mediji oblikuju stvarnost koju percipira publika. Publika dobiva saznanja od njih u obliku u kome ih obično prenosi dalje kao vlastite stavove. Opasnost od ovakve stvarnosti je u suvremenom svijetu sve veća. Međutim, istraživanja percepcije tabloidnih izdanja nisu rađena na našim prostorima i zato smo bili motivirani da pokrenemo inicijalno istraživanje čiji će rezultati biti predstavljeni u ovom radu. Istraživanjem je utvrđena korelacija negativnog stava prema tabloidima spram stupnja stručne spreme ispitanika. Ono što je također očekivano potvrđeno u hipotezama i što je od šireg društvenog značaja jeste izrazito visok stupanj slaganja ispitanika o stavu da tabloidi predstavljaju nizak nivo kulture, da su neukusni u izvještavanju i da im ne treba vjerovati. Teorijski okvir, kao i rezultati do kojih se došlo istraživanjem mogu biti od izuzetnog značaja kako za same medije tako i za ostale učesnike u oglašivačkoj industriji - oglašivače i oglasne agencije. Znanstveni doprinos ovog rada ogleda se u inicijalnim podacima koje su istraživači dobili u vezi sa percepcijom tabloida od strane auditorija u RS, a odnose se na područje sociologije, medija i oglašavanja.

1. Introduction

During the twentieth century, the media became one of the most powerful forces in modern society. Their omnipresence in our lives is virtually inevitable and hence very significant for research. "It appears that media, media images and advertisements paint the reality of life, although they might just be mimicry of that reality" /1/. This opinion is shared by many recognized media theorists - from Baudrillard through Šušnjić to Bal, etc. "Under the influence of media, an identity, both on a general and personal plane, is formed". From the proclaimed cultural models to social ones, which have implications for individuals and their perception of the world, society and civilization as a whole." /2/

Media and tabloids represent one of the mechanisms enabling the society and individuals to get information and a picture of themselves, their environment and the world. "Public media use the multitude of information to paint our present on an invisible time canvas. This media image of individual and broader, social reality is framed by the quantity of information and the range of our knowledge" /3/. However, the picture formed by the media need not entirely coincide with reality. Sometimes this deviation is such that the media image and the reality are essentially different, this particularly being prominent in tabloids. In journalism it is increasingly difficult to separate truthful from simulated reports, and natural from constructed ones. Media define the reality and impose certain patterns of behaviour and opinion. In the time when we are "besieged" by media and "buried" in information, modern man oftentimes does not notice that sometimes he expresses his own opinion, and other times a generally accepted view launched through media.

No comprehensive research on readership preferences and habits in Serbia has been conducted. Tabloids have been excluded from research for different reasons the authors would not like to go into on this occasion. This paper shows initiative in that regard, and its scientific contribution is that it moves from the stalemate a wider socio-cultural significance of a very influential phenomenon in social context and may be quite dangerous for a transitional society. Furthermore, research in the field of media and particularly tabloids and their reception by the readership is important for media industry and advertising as economic and industrial categories.

1.1. Tabloid as a form and its impact on (Serbian) society

Transition is a complex process urging structural changes with the aim of achieving economic growth and increasing the state of well-being /4/. However, it is often the case transitional countries are most exposed to influences that are not always positive. This phenomenon accompanied by a high-speed pace of living has led to an emergence of a form opposite to serious analytical journalism - tabloid reporting, which the publishers placed on larger size sheets giving the name "tabloid" to the format of printed media. Media houses, editors and advertisers are compelled to join the ever so fierce and ruthless battle for readership and ratings resulting in lower quality. In this rat race run by the media which is reflected in ratings, sensational stories play an ever increasing part. The pace at which information and "hot" sensational stories are presented to the public are conditioned by the race directly increasing the audience's desire for such stories. The ethics lose its significance to this chase of ratings. The described process has been termed media tabloidization /5/.

A German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies in his capital work *The Critique of Public Opinion* in 1922 remarked that "press is a capitalist enterprise with the primary goal of making profit. The consequence of this is that writers (journalists) must act according to that goal and write about what helps increase profit and cover up the things contrary to that goal" /6/. Three years later, in his work "The City", one of the most influential American sociologists, a journalist himself, Robert Ezra Park, noted: "The first function served by newspapers is the role that countryside rumours used to have" /7/. The purpose of any sensationalist reporting is to increase or retain the level of readership which in turn attracts advertisers.

Tabloids or yellow press is a term derived from the phrase "yellow pages" which refers to a magazine printed on low-quality paper. Tabloids and yellow press are characterized by unconventional ways of obtaining information and sensationalist writing, oftentimes without verifying the accuracy of information. This results in lower focus on objective and proper journalism and higher focus on more „alluring „aspects of stories that attract a wider audience /8/. Unlike in the beginning, tabloids are now printed in formats smaller than traditional newspapers, mostly for the lack of sufficient writ-

ten material and because their price places them below standard newspaper editions. However, the most important characteristic of tabloids is the information source which is not public and often-times not reliable, hence the informative offer given in tabloids boils down to "believe it if you will". Thus the trust in tabloids is traditionally low on a global scale.

Tabloid journalism is characterized by the lack of ethics, professionalism and self-regulation. Tabloid media culture is particularly pronounced in transitional societies, which, due to the lack (or insufficient enforcement) of instruments of legislative and self-regulatory framework creates room for populist formation of public opinion void of care for public interest. Having all these in mind, some authors classify tabloids as a special category - a subgenre of "consumer magazines" rather than as a traditional printed media /9/.

Regarding domestic tabloids, they have their own specificities which greatly separate them from international ones. Domestic tabloids are a means of political struggle whose information source is often close to ruling structures. Tabloids serve to smear political opponents and assert one's own values in public. Although domestic tabloids mostly came as a result of political need, in order to expand their influence and profit through circulation, their pages are relentlessly filled with "news" or photographs of famous people, stars in the world of show business, sports and trash culture. Three quarters of regular readers in Serbia buy tabloids, hence launching new magazines does not mean expanding the audience, but rather redistributing readers between the existing participants on the market /10/. Here, we should bear in mind that the media in Serbia and in most developed countries do not see their readers as citizens, but rather as consumers. Thus crime and violence, sex, glamour, intrigue and similar content dominate the media /11/. In addition to political and cultural primitivism, domestic tabloids bring entertainment to wide masses coated in a colourful layer of kitsch and become leading creators of our media reality and media culture in a very calculated fashion.

2. Research

2.1. Research methodology

Aim

Based on the analysis of the development of tabloid journalism and empirical knowledge of the

development of tabloids in the Republic of Serbia, our aim was to initially research the citizens' opinions of attitudes to tabloids, and to determine constant parameters on the basis of which we could assess if the attitudes towards tabloids were positive/negative.

Hypotheses

- Number of household members and financial status have no impact on the attitude to tabloids
- Level of education impacts the attitude to tabloids
- Tabloid content is regarded as content of low value
- It is possible to establish constant parameters to assess if attitudes to tabloids are positive/negative

Work methodology

This is a non-experimental research, and is classified as a survey according to the applied procedure.

Research method

- Research by way of survey.

Research measures

For the purpose of this research, a questionnaire was designed about the respondents' views and attitudes to tabloid editions of newspapers and magazines

Population and sample

The population participating in this research was made up of inhabitants of Serbia, and the sample was a stratified random sample comprised of 432 respondents.

Research timeline

The research was conducted in May-June 2015 and involved direct contact with respondents.

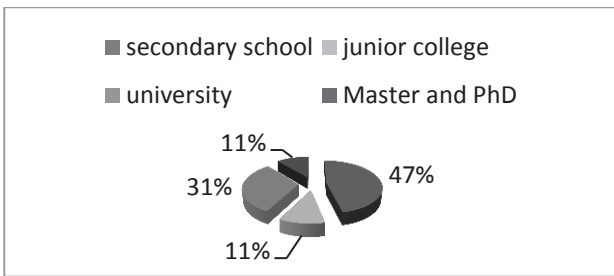
Statistics

Descriptive statistic measures were used in statistic processing: frequencies and percentages, means, deviations and significance - parameter and non-parameter; a chi-square test was performed.

2.2. Initial analysis - general data

A total of 432 respondents participated in the research, 267 male and 165 female.

Chart 1 Distribution of respondents by level of education

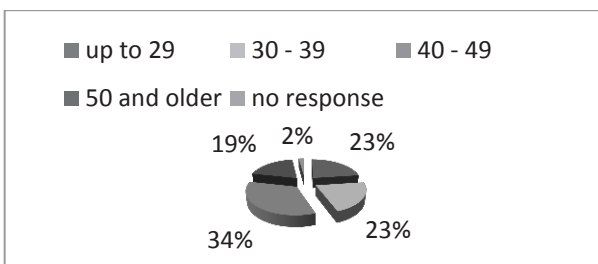


Source: Author's research

According to the level of education, the respondents were divided into four categories: secondary education (46.5%), junior college (11.1%), university degree (31.3%) and masters or PhD degree (11.1%).

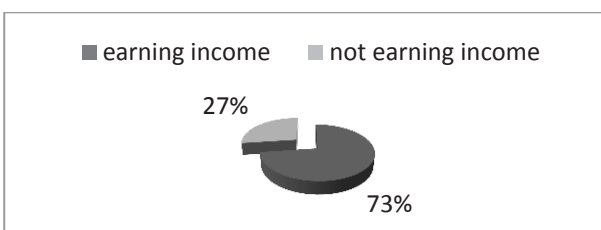
Age-wise, the respondents were divided into four categories as shown in Chart 2.

Chart 2 Distribution of respondents by age



Source: Author's research

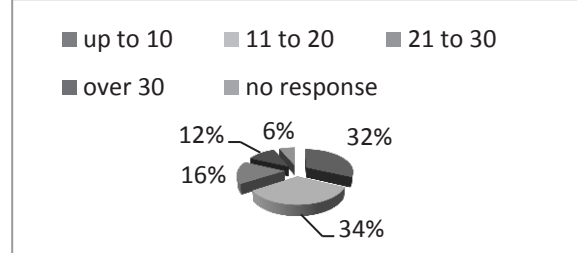
Chart 3 Distribution of respondents by income made



Source: Author's research

According to the employment status and income, the respondents were divided into two groups: respondents earning an income (72.9%) and respondents not earning one (27.1%).

Chart 4 Distribution of respondents by length of service

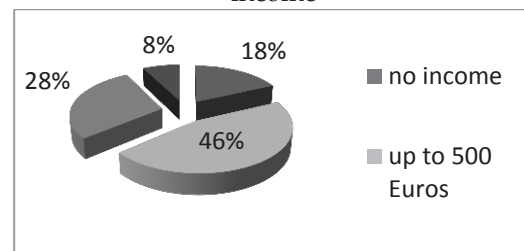


Source: Author's research

According to the length of service, the respondents were divided into following categories: up to 10 years (31.9%), from 11 to 20 (34.0%), from 21 to 30 (16.0%) and over 30 years (11.8%). A total of 6.3% failed to provide this information.

When it comes to monthly income, the respondents were put into 4 categories as shown in Chart 5.

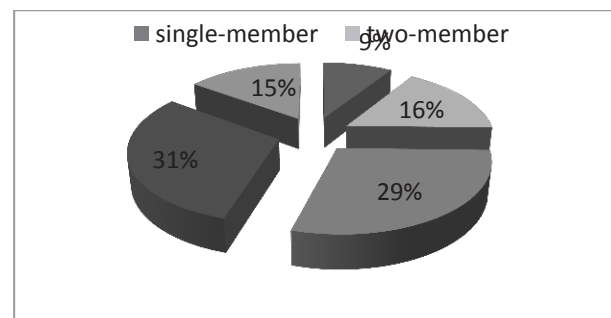
Chart 5 Distribution of respondents by monthly income



Source: Author's research

Regarding the monthly income per household, the respondents were divided into following categories: household income unknown (8.2%), income up to 500 euro (18.7%), from 501 to 1,000 (41.0%), from 1001 to 1500 (18.7%) and over 1,500 euro (13.4%).

Chart 6 Distribution of respondents by number of household members

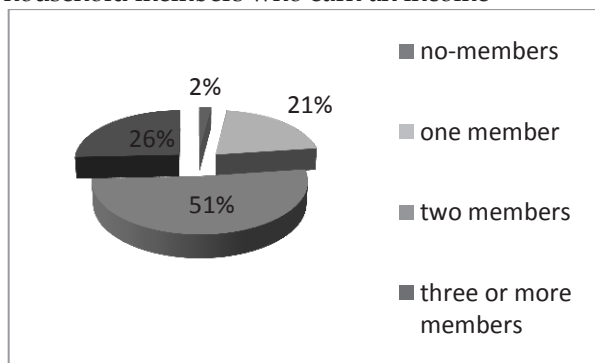


Source: Author's research

The number of household members as shown in Chart 6 through the following categories: single-member household (9.0%), two-member household (16.4%), three-member household (29.1%), four-member household (30.6%) and households with five or more members (14.9%).

According to the number of household members who earn income, the respondents were divided into the following 4 categories as shown in Chart 7.

Chart 7 Distribution of respondents by number of household members who earn an income



Source: Author's research

2.3. Results

2.3.1. Attitudes to tabloids

The respondents assessed the extent of their agreement with statements about tabloids using a five-point Likert scale. The first point on the scale shows total disagreement, while the fifth stands for total agreement. The respondents assessed four statements about tabloids. The first statement referred to the fact that tabloids have the best sources of information. The responses yielded a mean of 1.84 and a standard deviation of 0.84. The second statement was worded as follows: "The ruling establishment and various interest groups use tabloids to launch the information they desire." Here, a mean of 3.71 and a standard deviation of 1.02 were obtained. The third statement quoted that the purpose of tabloids is sensationalism, with the mean being 3.81 and SD 1.01. The final statement was worded as follows: "They offer a low level of culture and distastefulness in reporting", with the obtained mean of 4.80 and standard deviation of 1.07. Such breakdown of results shows

that respondents mostly do not find the information source of tabloids to be valid, while holding a view that they present a low level of culture and are distasteful in reporting. Moreover, it appears that respondents think that tabloids are sensationalist to a great extent and serve the interests of the ruling establishment and various interest groups. In the end, mean results were calculated by averaging the respondents' responses to all four questions, recoding the response to the first question, which entailed a positive respondent's attitude to tabloids in order to calculate the mean value. Higher scores on a newly-obtained five-point scale indicate more negative attitudes toward tabloids. The mean value obtained in this way was 3.94 with SD of 0.71. Such result shows that respondents have quite negative attitudes to tabloids.

2.3.2 Demographic variables and attitudes towards tabloids

A single factor analysis of variance was used to compare the differences in response means regarding the four questions about tabloids, i.e. the evaluation of negative features of tabloids according to five categories of the variable "number of household members". Significant differences were shown to exist in the evaluation of negative features of tabloids depending on the number of household members $F(4, 427)=3.91, p<.01$. It was also shown that with the increase of the number of household members, the evaluation of negative features of tabloids drops.

The obtained results indicate that the evaluation of negative features of tabloids differs significantly depending on which of the five categories regarding the number of household members the respondent belongs to.

A single factor analysis of variance was used to compare the differences in the evaluation of negative features of tabloids depending on the four categories regarding the number of household members with an income, whereby it was demonstrated that there are no statistically significant differences in the evaluation of negative features.

Furthermore, a single factor analysis of variance demonstrated that there were no significant differences in the evaluation of negative features of tabloids depending on the four categories regarding the amount of monthly income.

T-test for independent samples was used to examine the differences in the evaluation of negative

features of tabloids between men and women, whereby no statistically significant differences were established.

A single factor analysis of variance was used to compare the differences in the evaluation of negative features of tabloids between five categories of the variable "household income". Significant differences were shown to exist in the evaluation of negative features of tabloids $F(4, 427)=4.20, p<.01$. Furthermore, this analysis demonstrated that with the increase of household income the evaluation of negative features of tabloids also rises. Such breakdown of results indicates that the evaluations of negative features of tabloids differ significantly depending on which of the category regarding the household income the respondent belongs to.

T-test for independent samples was used to examine the differences in the evaluation of negative features of tabloids between employed and unemployed respondents. Such analysis showed that there were no significant differences between the two groups regarding the evaluation of negative features of tabloids.

A single factor analysis of variance was used to compare the differences in the evaluation of negative features of tabloids depending on the four categories regarding the respondent's length of service, whereby it was demonstrated that there are no statistically significant differences in the evaluation of negative features depending on this variable.

A single factor analysis of variance was used to compare the differences in the evaluation of negative features of tabloids depending on the four categories regarding the respondent's level of education, which indicated the presence of significant differences $F(3, 428)=3.67, p<.05$. It was also shown that with the increase of educational level, the evaluation of negative features of tabloids rises. This indicates that the evaluation of negative features of tabloids differs significantly depending on which of the categories regarding the educational level the respondent belongs to.

Finally, a single factor analysis of variance was used to compare the differences in the evaluation of negative features of tabloids depending on the four categories regarding the respondent's age which indicated the absence of any statistically significant differences

2.3.3. Predicting attitudes towards tabloids based on demographic variables

Multiple regression analysis was used to predict the degree of negative attitudes towards tabloids based on demographic data. Therefore, the average extent of agreement with all four statements on the scale of tabloid items was predicted. This analysis demonstrated that the degree of negative attitude towards tabloids may be successfully predicted using a set of demographic variables, $R^2 = .03, F(9, 392) = 1.24, p < .01$. Moreover, it was shown that the following demographic variables make a significant individual contribution to such prediction: household income, $\beta = .13, t = 2.06, p < .05$ and the number of household members, $\beta = -.12, t = -2.00, p < .05$. Such results indicate that there is a significant correlation between negative attitude towards tabloids and demographic variables, and that based on demographic variables, the degree of negativity of such attitudes may be predicted to a smaller extent. Furthermore, the results show that the best predictions may be made based on household income and the number of household members.

3. Conclusion

The expansion of tabloid editions of newspapers and magazines is particularly present in societies undergoing transitional processes. Starting from the assumptions that there are certain laws in the characteristics of population and their attitudes towards tabloid editions, the initial research was conducted on a properly stratified sample.

The first hypothesis regarding the attitude to tabloids based on the number of household members and the monthly income was partly confirmed, and partly rejected. According to research results, household income has no impact on negative attitude towards tabloids. However, using the same method, a single factor analysis of variance, we obtained the results indicating that the negativity towards tabloids significantly decreases as the number of household members increases. This part of research certainly deserves further sociological investigation, although the author's preliminary conclusion is that tabloids could use this for broader promotional activities. Despite the ingrained opinion, tabloids could present themselves as an ideal media for family entertainment and thus boost sales.

The research established the increase of negative attitude towards tabloids which rises with the

respondents' level of education. This correlation was expected as it emphasizes intellectual preferences and the ability of more educated individuals to appreciate media and their content in a better way, which supports the second hypothesis thus confirmed.

The third hypothesis was also confirmed as the research indicated a great degree of agreement in the opinion that tabloids represent a low form of culture, that they are distasteful in their reporting and that they should not be trusted. Moreover, it appears that the respondents believe that tabloids are sensationalist to a great extent and serve the interests of the ruling establishment and various interest groups. Still, despite all these, tabloids are still widely read, which could be the subject of other further sociological research. "It appears that nothing can be done anymore regarding the media content that offers blood, sex, intrigue and primitivism, as if a modern day society and individuals crave to express the most primitive urges, hence the media help in their sublimation to an extent." (Perić, Krasulja, Radojević, 2011:25).

The fourth hypothesis that refers to constant parameters for assessing positive/negative attitudes towards tabloids was processed using multiple regression analysis, whereby the average degree of agreement with all four statements on the scale of tabloid items was predicted. The analysis demonstrated that the degree of negativity of attitudes towards tabloids may be successfully predicted based on a set of demographic variables, and this prediction can best be made based on the household income and the number of household members.

The authors believe that this paper and the initial research may serve as a starting point for wider research of perception of tabloid and other similar media forms in the Republic of Serbia and could make a contribution in the field of sociology, media and advertising.

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