

The tabloidization of political discourse: The Polish case



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

KEYWORDS: political discourse, tabloidization, news programs



INTRODUCTION

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

functions. Part of the discourse of politics is covered by the mass media, which influences the communication activities of politicians and has dual receivers: direct (e.g. other politicians) and the media public. The existence of the second receiver creates a tendency to shape politicians' behavior. *Political discourse* is defined as a discourse of symbolic elites including journalists, publicists, writers, scientists, clergymen, intellectuals, experts, businessmen and politicians who are present in the media. All these groups and individuals exercise direct control over publicly available knowledge, publicly legitimated opinions and the shape and content of public discourse. Political discourse then is a discourse of symbolic elites about political issues, which is strongly connected with the media. It plays a special role in shaping a hierarchy of moral and ethical values (Czyżewski, Kowalski & Piotrowski, 1997, p. 10–19). In news programs we find a combination of political discourse and a discourse of politics: politicians appear in their political roles, while the comments made by experts and reporters can be viewed as a part of political discourse.

TABLOIDIZATION

Tabloidization is understood not only as a specific style of journalism, but also as a specific way of thinking about politics. As Frank Esser wrote, tabloidization as a micro scale process can be viewed as “a media phenomenon involving the revision of traditional and other media formats driven by reader preferences and commercial requirements”. At this level it means a “change in the range of topics being covered (more entertainment, less information), in the form of presentation (fewer longer stories, more shorter ones with pictures and illustrations) and a change in the mode of address (more street talk when addressing readers)” (Esser, 1999, p. 293). Tabloidization can be also understood as a macro scale process. In this sense it can be seen as “a social phenomenon both instigating and symbolizing major changes to the constitution of society (signs being, for example, attaching less importance to education and more political marketing, resulting in an increase in political alienation)” (ibid.).

This understanding of tabloidization has a lot to do with news and its production. At both levels, tabloidization takes place not only in the tabloid media, but in the media or their programs devoted to information about the most important events in politics, the economy or social life. Television, and especially its news programs, is a principle factor in the process of the social education of well-informed, active, responsible citizens. There are several interesting connections among various, but interdependent processes. The mutual relationship between the media and politicians has created a new type of politician oriented towards election goals, not to an ideologically stated process of solving social problems. Political programs traditionally understood as being based on an ideology have been replaced by the personality of the politician and his/her ability to attract the attention of the media and audience. The media are used by politicians to impress voters, and

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONTENT ANALYSIS OF FAKTY TVN AND WIADOMOŚCI TVP1

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

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

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

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

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

VARIABLES OF TABLOIDIZATION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

RESULTS

Themes

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

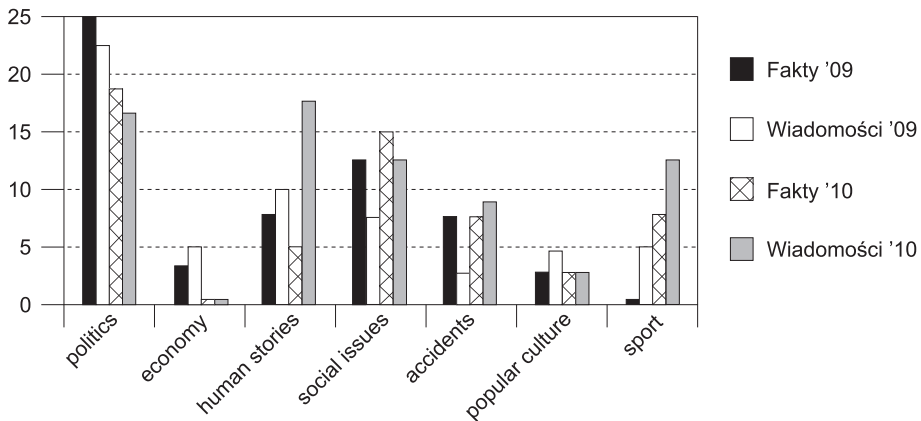


Figure 1. The distribution of themes in *Fakty* and *Wiadomości* 2009 and 2010

Source: author.

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

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

Table 2. The proportion of soft and hard news in *Fakty* and *Wiadomości* in 2009 and 2010 [%]

	<i>Fakty</i> '09	<i>Fakty</i> '10	<i>Wiadomości</i> '09	<i>Wiadomości</i> '10
Soft news	68	71,4	55	78,4
Hard news	32	28,6	45	21,6

Source: author.

Comparison of the figures demonstrates a striking change that occurred in *Wiadomości*. The proportions of soft and hard news in public TV were clearly more balanced in 2009 than in 2010. One can observe that not only did public television adopt a balance which approximates that of its commercial competitor, but it also widened the gap between soft and hard news. This is surprising inasmuch as a public broadcaster is obliged to inform about official events, such as the meetings, speeches, or press conferences of prominent politicians, even if these events are not particularly significant or interesting. One of the ways to explain this difference between 2010 and 2009 is the appointment of a new head of *Wiadomości*, and his concept of the format of the program, which was to defend the editors from accusations of sympathy towards the political party then in opposition. The upcoming presidential elections are going to change this balance, however, the more so as public television is treated in Poland as a significant instrument in political struggle, and its managers are party nominees. There is, of course, a more general explanation of diminishing differences between public and commercial broadcasters in terms of proportion between hard and soft news. What McLachlan and Golding wrote about the British case (2000, p. 88) is also true for the discussed case. It is related rather to “a broader shift in the political economy of the communications and information industry than to a transient loss of professional direction in one of its occupational spheres”. Despite the status of broadcasters they all fight for the same audience.

Actors

Figure 2 shows the actors in the events covered by the media. In both programs they primarily involve politicians, ordinary people, officials and experts. It can also be noted that significant changes pertained to the public broadcaster when comparing 2009 and 2010. Over the period under analysis the number of politicians and experts present in the news significantly decreased in favor of ordinary people. Ordinary people also tended to appear in *Fakty* more frequently. The more frequent presence of celebrities, mainly sports people, in 2010 primarily resulted from their successes at the Olympic Games rather than from a planned strategy. There were no celebrities in the programs of either station on days when Polish sports people did not take part in competition. The insignificant presence of celebrities among the

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

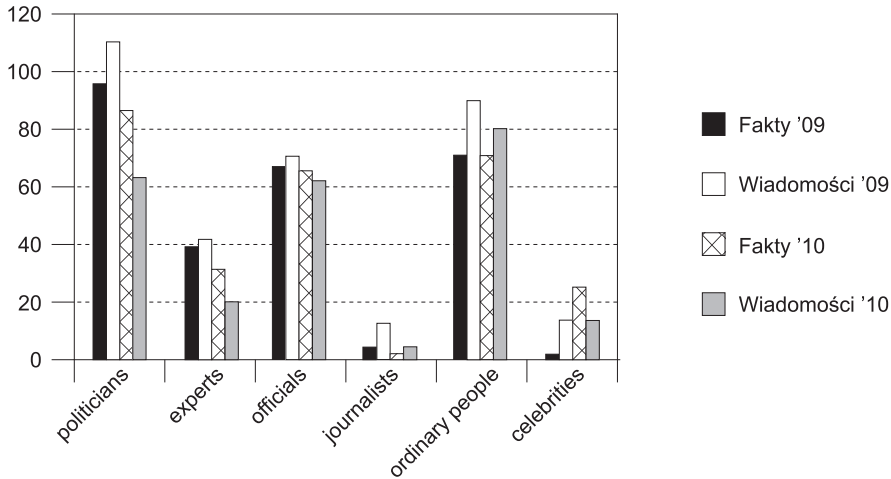


Figure 2. The distribution of actors in *Fakty* and *Wiadomości* 2009 and 2010

Source: author.

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

Location

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

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

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

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

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

Political discourse

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

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

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

focused on political issues, connected with the political process and involving politicians. It is usually treated as hard news, although the division between hard and soft news is not necessarily connected with the issue, but with the way it is reported, or with the aspects which are discussed. To collect the data required to describe the elements of discourse the following variables were used: political actors — ruling and opposition politicians, actor's position (leading vs. supportive), the object of a politician's statement (issue vs. personal), the themes of statements including politics, economy, security or international issues, and non political actors: experts, ordinary people, journalists, officials.

The tabloidization of political discourse in information programs is assumed to be indicated by the following criteria: an increasing number of politicians appearing in journalistic materials, concentration on the leaders as persons (personalization) rather than as leaders of an ideology or a political platform, prevalence of politicians speaking about other politicians instead of addressing problems, and a decreasing number of experts in journalist materials.

In the analyzed period of 2009 seven editions of *Fakty* and *Wiadomości* each broadcast 23 and 19 political news items respectively, whereas in 2010 the respective numbers were 19 and 17.

Political actors

Ruling politicians were understood as those who represented the government and the parliamentary opposition as well as those outside Parliament. The Polish President was included among the latter.³ The numbers concerning non-parliamentary opposition are thus related to the President, whose presence in the news, and consequently in the discourse, was not excessive. The reasons for that were complex and go far beyond this paper.

Politicians' positions depend on their ability to make or to significantly influence the decisions that are important for the political process. Prominent politicians include the leaders of the main political parties and the President. Being a leader is highly correlated with media presence. Backstage politicians involve prominent members of the main political parties, or outsiders with personal authority but without a strong political background. The former are usually not independent in their opinions, and they express a view worked out by the leaders.

It can be seen in Figure 4 that with the exception of *Wiadomości* in 2010, journalist reports were dominated by politicians from the governing coalition: the representatives of the government and parliamentary coalition. Whereas this preva-

³ Political positions were determined for Polish politicians. During the time of the survey, presidential office was held by Lech Kaczyński, who died in a plane crash in April 2010. Despite constitutional provisions for the political neutrality of the presidential office, Kaczyński clearly supported the largest opposition party, whose leader happened to be the twin brother of the President. The President's clear partisanship formed the reason for classifying him as an opposition politician.

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

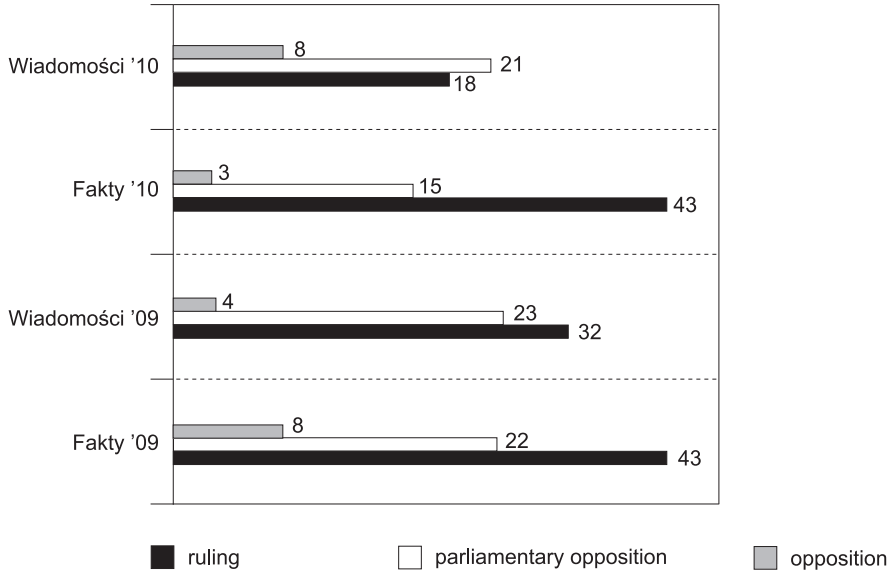


Figure 4. The number of representatives of ruling, parliamentary opposition and opposition in *Fakty* and *Wiadomości* 2009 and 2010

Source: author.

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

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

of politicians who take part in these items is not falling, which means that the time for individual statements is getting shorter. The consequence is the fragmentation and decontextualization of politicians' statements and opinions. It is the journalist who actually creates the way in which an event is presented as he/she selects and collates the collected materials.

In the analyzed periods *Fakty* quoted a noticeably larger number of politicians' statements. The standard structure of a news item involved the anchor's introduction to the topic, passing it on to the reporter, who was frequently a kind of a 'broker' of information (Donsbach, Patterson, 2004, p. 261), or rather of politicians' opinions. In principle, the reporter collates the statements he/she has gathered and concludes on them in the roundup made in front of the camera. What is much more frequent in *Wiadomości* is that the journalist collects and edits materials that involve politicians and relates the event off-screen presenting it in a certain manner. Therefore the number of politicians quoted is smaller. It should also be noted that all these quoted opinions are actually delivered by the twenty to thirty most prominent politicians. These are the political leaders or individuals appointed by the parties (not to be confused with press spokesmen) to present the standpoints developed by the leaders or the tight circles that run a party's everyday activities. First-rank politicians were quoted less frequently than in 2009 (Fig. 5). This is the consequence of a communication strategy adopted by political parties to protect leaders' images in difficult times (economic crisis) and not to assign too much importance to everyday political events by providing them with commentaries from the leaders. Polish politics is highly conflicted, politicians are oriented to fight rather than cooperate when solving social problems, and they also fill public debate with per-

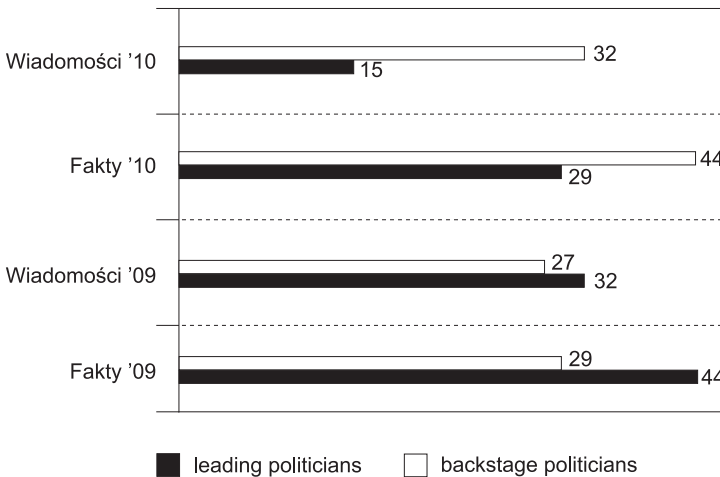


Figure 5. The number of quotations of leading and backstages politicians in *Fakty* and *Wiadomości* 2009 and 2010

Source: author.

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

Objects of statements

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

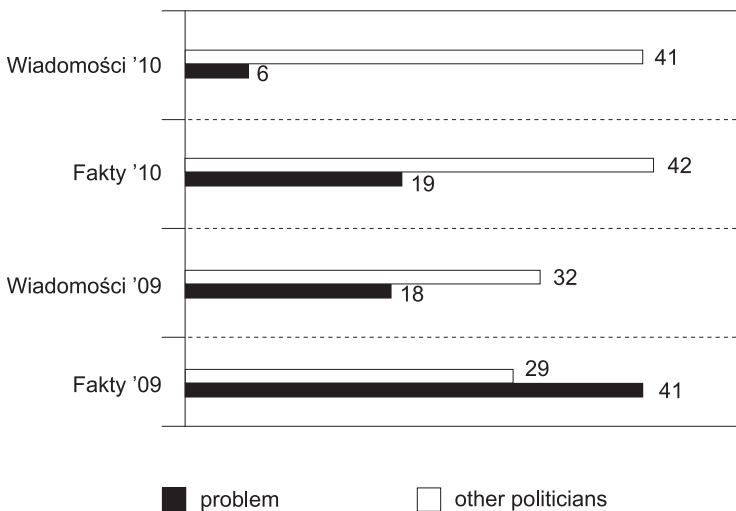


Figure 6. The objects of politicians' statements of themes in *Fakty* and *Wiadomości* 2009 and 2010

Source: author.

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

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

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

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