

**POLARISATION OF CONTENT IN POLISH NEWS  
MAKING, AS EXEMPLIFIED BY NEWS PROGRAMMES  
OF LICENSED BROADCASTERS AND THE PUBLIC  
SERVICE BROADCASTER**

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**ABSTRACT**

The paper contains a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the news services of the three largest broadcasters and three events essential for the functioning of the state and public life in Poland. The first one was the amendment to the Supreme Court Act of July 2017. The second event was the local elections campaign in Poland (broadcasts aired on the 18th of October 2018, the last but one day of the elections campaign), while the third set of material were the news items on the murder of the Mayor of Gdańsk – Paweł Adamowicz (broadcasts aired on the 15th of January 2019, one day after the tragic event). The analysis focused on the evening news editions by the three most popular broadcasters with the highest viewership, including commercial stations (i.e. TVN's *Fakty* and Polsat's *Wydarzenia*) and the public broadcaster (i.e. the Polish Television's *Wiadomości*). In total, 43 news items of 2 hours, 20 minutes and 6 seconds were analysed. The study has revealed a clear polarisation of news content coming from the licensed broadcasters and the public service broadcaster.

**Keywords:** news, media, broadcasters, media pluralism, polarisation of media content, freedom of speech

Pluralism of the media constitutes an essential pillar of modern democracy guaranteed in Europe (Brogi et al. 2020, p. 5), its protection underpinned both by Article 10 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of November 4th 1950 (1950 Convention) and Article 11 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Charter; Klimkiewicz 2014, p. 185–193). Recital 94 of the European Union’s Audiovisual Media Services Directive (2010 Directive) states explicitly that Member States should contribute to the promotion of media pluralism, as does the Commission Staff Working Document on Media Pluralism in the Member States of the European Union. Understandably, the same policy is advocated by the Council of Europe in its policy guidelines, e.g. Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)2 of January 31st 2007 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on media pluralism and diversity of media content.

According to the Venice Commission’s opinion:

Media pluralism is achieved when there is a multiplicity of autonomous and independent media at the national, regional and local levels, ensuring a variety of media content reflecting different political and cultural views. (...) Pluralism must be achieved in each media sector at the same time. It would not be acceptable, for example, if pluralism were guaranteed in the print media sector, but not in the television. Pluralism of the media does not only mean the existence of a plurality of actors and outlets, it also means the existence of a wide range of media, that is to say different kinds of media (Venice Commission’s Opinion 2005, see: ERGA Report 2018, p. 20).

One must also concur with the view that:

Media pluralism is a concept that goes far beyond media ownership. It embraces many aspects, ranging from, for example, merger control rules to content requirements in broadcasting licensing systems, the establishment of editorial freedoms, the independence and status of public service broadcasters, the professional situation of journalists, the relationship between media and political actors, etc. It encompasses all measures that ensure citizens’ access to a variety of information sources and voices, allowing them to form opinions without the undue influence of one dominant opinion forming power (EU Media Futures Forum 2012; ERGA Report 2018, p. 20).

It is also beyond question that

Media pluralism is a concept that embraces a number of aspects, such as diversity of ownership, variety in the sources of information and in the range of contents available in the different Member States. Ensuring media pluralism implies all measures that ensure citizens’ access to a variety of information sources, opinion,

voices etc. in order to form their opinion without the undue influence of one dominant opinion forming power (ERGA Report 2018, p. 20).

It should be noted, though, that media pluralism can be understood as at least a twofold concept, namely as internal or external pluralism. Internal pluralism is when a broadcaster (e.g. a public service broadcaster) or a publisher offers a programme or periodical open to diverse views, and this is the key to building its content. It is emphasised that internal pluralism is about ensuring “a wide range of social, political and cultural values, opinions, information and interests to find expression through the media” (Secretariat memorandum prepared by the Directorate of Human Rights 1997; ERGA Report 2018, p. 22). The external dimension of pluralism, on the other hand, is about ensuring the possibility of the emergence and functioning of many different, separate media outlets throughout the market, presenting various political convictions and worldviews (Miąsik 2000, p. 94). At this point, it is worth recalling the definition according to which “external pluralism refers to the media landscape as a whole, and the requirements of external pluralism can be measured across the whole media sector or in its specific segment” (Independent Study on Indicators for Media Pluralism in the Member States 2009; ERGA Report 2018, p. 22).

It has recently been recognised in many democratic countries that media outlets favouring specific, well-defined worldviews or sets of political convictions are playing an increasingly influential role in both the dissemination and consumption of political information, leading to changing dynamics in relation to trust in journalism (Mitchell et al. 2017; Knight Foundation 2018). What is more, it has been observed that, increasingly partisan news outlets are eclipsing, replacing or transforming more traditional mainstream news outlets characterised by a pluralism of views (Mitchell et al. 2017). This often leads to the so-called polarisation of content, one of the paradoxes of external media pluralism. Speaking of polarisation in this sense, we refer to a situation where media coverage deals with the same event from different angles, albeit clearly biased. This often involves abandoning the standards of professional journalism, such as the requirement to make a rigorous distinction between information and comment or opinion. In such a case, although media pluralism is preserved *en bloc*, it is to the detriment of professional journalism and, as a consequence, of the public and the audience’s right to reliable information.

While in the case of commercial (licensed) broadcasters, one can assume that their chosen programming line, including political affiliation, is a free choice, sometimes a business strategy and certainly the owner’s right, since taking care to preserve external pluralism throughout the media market is a duty incumbent on the state, the public service broadcaster, financed to a greater or lesser extent out of public funds, is required to uphold the standards of internal pluralism. Often invoked as a benchmark, the UK model of public media is grounded in the belief that a public broadcaster’s programming practices should deliver public value, understood to encompass democratic, cultural, creative, educational, global and, finally, social and environmental aspects (Jaskiernia 2006, p. 25–29; Jędrzejewski

2010, p. 53). The pursuit of this public service mission is intended to foster social cohesion between various groups and society as a whole, underpinned by such values as tolerance and mutual understanding. Public service broadcasters should guarantee a high level of credibility, quality, and independence of the content provided; offer access to accurate information and content, host debates on issues of national interest and articulate them to a wider audience; fill in the gaps left by commercial broadcasters; foster cultural identity and the national language; promote domestic and European audiovisual production; and support the development and innovative potential of society (Jaskiernia 2006, p. 24; Tambini 2015). These principles also seem to be championed by the Council of Europe. At the Fourth Ministerial Conference of the Council of Europe held in Prague in 1994, titled “The Future of Public Service Broadcasting” (1994 Resolution), it was stressed that the distinguishing feature of such broadcasting should be to present the widest possible spectrum of political views, as well as such genres and forms of artistic expression that are underserved by commercial broadcasters. In its Recommendation to Member States on the remit of public service media in the information society of January 31st 2007 (Council of Europe’s Recommendation 2007), the Committee of Ministers defined public service broadcasting as, amongst other things, a reference point for all members of the public, offering universal access, a factor for social cohesion and integration of all individuals, groups and communities, a source of impartial and independent information and comment, and of innovatory and varied content which complies with high ethical and quality standards, as well as a forum for pluralistic public discussion and a means of promoting broader democratic participation of individuals (Jakubowicz 2011, p. 85–111; Recommendation 2007). Moreover, the judgment of the European Court of Human Rights in the case of *Manole and others v. Moldova* (ECHR judgment of 2009) states explicitly that public television authorities have a duty to provide access to impartial and diverse information, reflecting the diversity of political outlook within the country. Furthermore, they should guarantee media professionals the ability to practise their profession without any pressure or interference (Głowacka, Bodnar 2015, p. 2).

The European Union has also recognised the essential role and importance of public service broadcasting in a democratic system. The Protocol on public service broadcasting in the Member States (1997 Protocol), referred to as the Amsterdam Protocol, forming an Annex to the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997 Treaty), emphasises that “the system of public broadcasting is directly related to the democratic, social and cultural needs of each society and *is an essential factor in preserving media pluralism*” (emphasis added JS, GI). In the European Commission’s Communication of November 15th, 2001 on the application of state aid rules to public service broadcasting (Commission Communication 2001, p. 117), it is stated that:

the broadcast media play a central role in the functioning of modern democratic societies, in particular in the development and transmission of social values, and that public service broadcasting has an important role to play in promoting

cultural diversity in each country, in providing educational programming, in objectively informing public opinion, in guaranteeing pluralism and in supplying, democratically and free-of-charge, quality entertainment (Commission Communication 2001, p. 117).

It should also be borne in mind that within the Polish legislative framework (under Article 21 of the Broadcasting Act, as currently in effect) public broadcasters

fulfil a public service mission by offering, in accordance with the statutory provisions, to the entire society and its individual parts, varied programming and other services spanning information, comment, culture, entertainment, education and sport, *which are characterised by pluralism, impartiality, balance and independence*, as well as innovation, high quality and integrity of content (emphasis added JS, GI; Broadcasting Act 1992).

In the case of the Polish media market, the polarisation of content among media outlets, especially on the television market, after the ruling Law and Justice coalition won the parliamentary elections in 2015 and took control over the public media<sup>1</sup>, has reached a level evident even to those least interested in public life and state affairs. One of the hypotheses advanced is that the existing line of division between Polish TV stations goes back to that time, with TVN, known for its criticism of the ruling party, standing at the opposite pole to TVP SA, which in turn does its best to paint an impeccable picture of the current government, or where this is impossible, at least to present them in a favourable light compared with predecessors. This is how representatives of the ruling party try to explain TVP SA's bias as a kind of counterbalancing force that has restored pluralism on the market of television news making, but in doing so they forget about statutory duties imposed on the public television broadcaster. Based on another narrative advanced by representatives of the ruling party, a hypothesis can be formed that the public media essentially exhibit a fair degree of internal pluralism by fulfilling the public service mission enshrined in the Broadcasting Act, while any criticism of its conduct is motivated by a purely political agenda. This paper attempts to verify these two hypotheses.

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1 That effect was achieved by changing the method of appointing the authorities of public media companies, which have become predominantly partisan, both in the case of the National Broadcasting Council (the broadcasting regulator) and, especially, the newly appointed body called the National Media Council and, consequently, the corporate bodies of media companies, through persons strongly affiliated with a single political party.

## Methodology

Research to verify the above hypotheses focused on three events of major import to the functioning of the state and social life. The first one, in chronological order, was an amendment to the Supreme Court Act, with broadcasts aired on July 20, 2017, i.e. the day on which the amended legislation was passed by the Polish parliament, put under scrutiny. The second were local government elections (here the study focused on broadcasts aired on October 18, 2018 the last but one day of the elections campaign), while the third set of analysed materials concerned media coverage of the assassination of Paweł Adamowicz, the late Mayor of Gdańsk (programmes aired on January 15, 2019 one day after the tragic incident). The analysis focused on the evening news editions by the three most popular broadcasters with the highest viewership, including commercial stations (i.e. TVN's *Fakty* and Polsat's *Wydarzenia*) and the public broadcaster (i.e. the Polish Television's *Wiadomości*). It covered a total of 43 news items, making up 2 hours, 20 minutes and 6 seconds of TV footage.<sup>2</sup>

The analysis, examining such aspects as relative importance assigned to a particular topic, relative proportions of time given to politicians representing different sides, comments not originating from the journalist and the journalist's narrative part, has provided an insight into how media coverage is differentiated through certain features contrived by the broadcaster, and how this leads to the polarisation of news content.

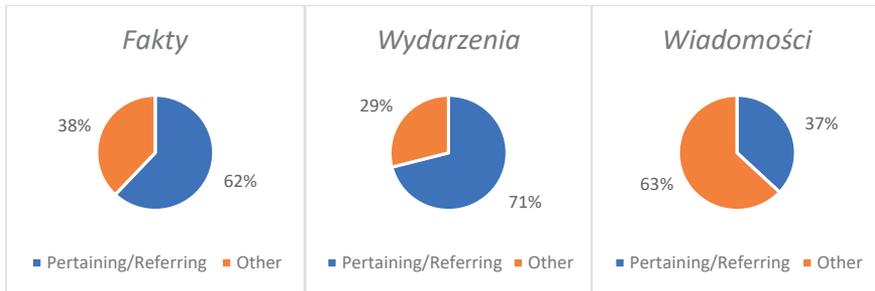
### 1. Importance Assigned

The first strategy under analysis was how importance is assigned to a topic through the length of its exposure and position within the sequence of news items. The most important topic from the broadcaster's point of view is usually featured at the beginning of a programme, its exposure consisting of several news items.

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2 Operational definitions adopted for the study: a broadcaster – the TV station broadcasting an analysed programme; a programme – see Article 4(2) of the Broadcasting Act; a news service – the term used alternatively to a “programme”; a news item – a piece of news prepared by a reporter or a report from the scene, lasting from its announcement by the presenter to the announcement of the next item; a pertaining news item – a news item in which the presenter's announcement concerns, among other things or exclusively, protests held outside the parliament and developments taking place in the parliament; a referring news item – a news item in which the presenter does not directly address protests held outside the parliament or developments in the parliament, but in its further part makes references to such events; a narrative part – a part of a broadcaster's programme containing comments by journalists responsible for its preparation.

Figure 1. Total share of pertaining and referring news items relative to the remainder of the programme



Source: own analysis

There is a discernible difference between the commercial broadcasters and public television as regards the share of pertaining and referring news items in the entire news service. Both *Fakty* (TVN) and *Wydarzenia* (Polsat) devoted more than a half of their respective programmes to the topics under analysis (almost three quarters in the latter case). In *Wiadomości* (TVP), by contrast, the total share of pertaining and referring news items was merely 37% (Figure 1). The public broadcaster devoted the least amount of time to all the three topics, but the most striking difference was noted in the programme aired on January 15th. While *Fakty* and *Wydarzenia* devoted more than 90% and just under 70%, respectively, of their time to the assassination of the Mayor of Gdańsk, unrelated news items in the public broadcaster's *Wiadomości* accounted for 80% of its total time.

As regards the position of a topic within the sequence of news items, in each of the three analysed *Fakty* programmes a pertaining or referring news item was run as the opening story. In the case of *Wydarzenia*, the exception was the programme of October 18, 2018, in which the first news item about the local elections appeared only after a Brexit piece. Similar importance was assigned to the analysed topics by *Wiadomości*. In the case of the public broadcaster, only the October 18th 2018 programme did not open with a pertaining or referring news item, which appeared as the third story.

The question which should therefore be asked is why the news broadcasters decided on the specific exposure of the topics selected for the present study. For *Fakty* and *Wydarzenia*, the topic of the judiciary system reform was given priority as one provoking strong public emotions. In the case of the assassination of Paweł Adamowicz, the importance of the topic stemmed from the very rank of the Mayor of Gdańsk, but also from the fact that it was a politically motivated murder. For this reason, the fact that *Fakty* and *Wydarzenia* devoted the vast majority of their respective news programmes to the topic appears justified in terms of this analysis. On the other hand, the disproportionately little attention paid to the murder of the mayor of one of Poland's largest cities by the public television relative to its private counterparts, as well as almost the same exposure of the judicial reform topic, allows two conclusions to be drawn regarding the public service broadcaster. Given the

nature of the former incident, the late Mayor of Gdańsk, who was a political opponent of the Law and Justice government, could not for once be lambasted by public media materials. It is also important to remember the earlier harsh criticism of the Mayor of Gdańsk by the public TV station, and also the charges raised against the public broadcaster that its strategy may have influenced the killer's behaviour.<sup>3</sup> His assassination was therefore underplayed, featured as the most important story in the news, but only slightly more important than the Brexit deal or a terrorist attack staged in Kenya. On the other hand, in the case of the judicial reform, TVP, expecting severe criticism from private media, TVN in particular, could not afford, as in the case of its news programme broadcast on January 15, 2019, to evade the topic, as this could be seen as an act of conceding to the criticism. Meanwhile, the role of public media, according to their current programming line, is to steadfastly defend the existing government's policy, which they also did in the news programme of July 20, 2017.

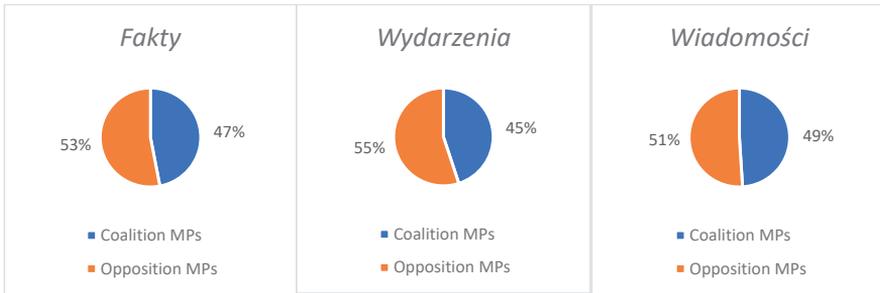
What is more, it is misleading to say that since the news item about the local elections appeared only as the third story in the October 18, 2018, programme, it proves that the public broadcaster was less involved in the elections campaign. In fact, the item was preceded by materials depicting the opposition in a strongly negative light. The first one accused the former PO-PSL coalition of being wasteful with public funds, while the other one criticised the close-down of hospitals by the then government. For the sake of comparison, in *Wydarzenia*, which also did not open with an elections-related news item, the opening material was about the Brexit deal.

## 2. *Relative Proportions of Time Given to Politicians*

Another aspect under analysis were the relative proportions of time given to the two main political groups currently sitting in the Polish parliament, i.e. members of the ruling coalition and the opposition, for straight-to-the-camera comments (so-called *hundreds* in journalistic jargon). This allowed the study to establish whether there was any notable imbalance in the exposure of comments from politicians of either group by any of the broadcasters, betraying its political leanings.

<sup>3</sup> TVP SA brought a private indictment against journalists of the *Polityka* weekly (Ewa Siedlecka) and *Gazeta Wyborcza* daily (Wojciech Czuchnowski) for alleged libel in claiming that TVP SA materials could have inspired the killer. However, the Regional Court did not share that view.

Figure 2. Relative proportions of time given to comments from ruling coalition MPs and opposition MPs



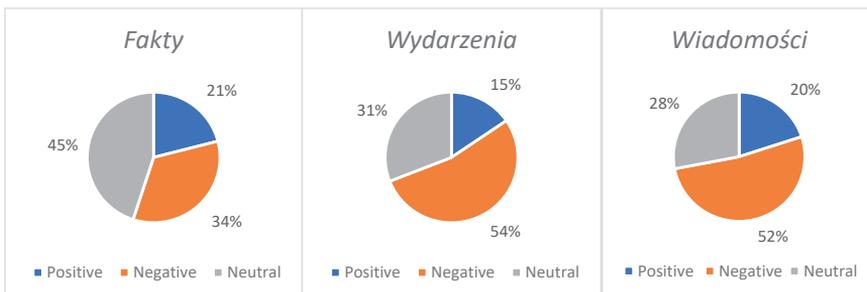
Source: own analysis

The analysis revealed the greatest disparity in the case of *Wydarzenia*. Interestingly, in *Wiadomości*, the relative proportions of comments from ruling coalition and opposition MPs were almost identical and – what is more – statements made by opposition MPs were in total 2% longer (Figure 2). This finding is contrary to the prevailing opinion that the public television sides politically with the current government. All the same it cannot serve to prove the opposite point, at most warranting the conclusion that the analysed device was not applied in creating this particular coverage.

### 3. Comments Not Originating from the Journalist

This part of the analysis will demonstrate the extent to which straight-to-the-camera comments not originating from the journalist cause material to lose its informational value, shifting towards subjective, often emotionally fraught opinions. Whether a broadcaster tends to resort to this practice is an essential factor in assessing the quality of news coverage the main role of which, as opposed to commentary, is to provide information.

Figure 3. Relative proportions between all negative comments and positive or neutral comments



Source: own analysis

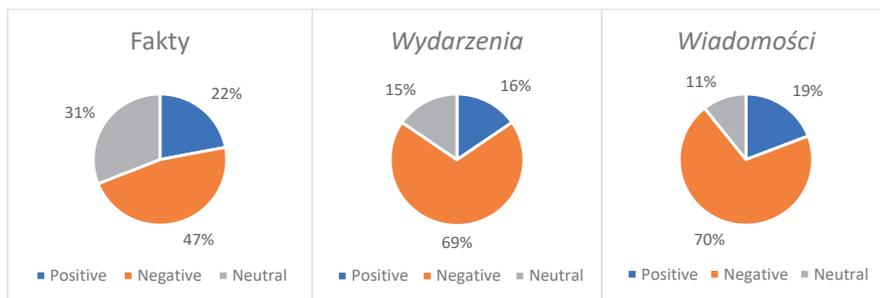
The most evaluative materials were found to be put out by *Wiadomości*, with only 28% of all comments being neutral. Definitely more neutral statements in the case of *Fakty* were mainly at the expense of negative comments, as the broadcaster also had the highest proportion of positive ones.

The clear predominance of negative comments in the case of *Wydarzenia* and *Wiadomości*, as well as their lower but still significant share in *Fakty*, may serve to confirm the practice whereby the audience's interest is built around evoking negative emotions. It is also worth looking at the distribution of these proportions for each programme separately.

#### (a) Programmes of July 20, 2017

In the programmes aired on July 20, 2017, the observed practice escalated in the case of all the three broadcasters (Figure 4). While the percentage of positive comments remained virtually the same, the number of neutral ones fell significantly. This in itself does not imply that the piece of news concerned lost its informational value. Only the finding that the reform of the judiciary was not commented on by any legal experts in the case of both *Fakty* and *Wiadomości*, meaning that nearly 100% of all comments came from active politicians or from random people approached on the street by a reporter, allows us to conclude that the informational value of the material was indeed compromised. *Wydarzenia* stood out this time from the competitor programmes, having aired four expert statements, which is still not a satisfactory tally, given that they represented barely 7% of all straight-to-the camera *hundreds*.

Figure 4. Relative proportions between total negative comments and positive or neutral comments



Source: own analysis

While the analysis so far shows that one of the key objectives sought by the broadcasters is to raise the emotional temperature of their news content, its further part also confirms that such content is intended to serve as a tool in the political struggle.

In the case of *Wydarzenia* and *Fakty*, 65% of the negative comments were targeted at the government coalition and the reform of the judiciary, but a vast majority of them (almost twice as many in the case of *Fakty*) were a direct assault on the Law and Justice government. This goes to show that criticism of the ruling party during their notorious reform of the judiciary took precedence over criticism of the

reform they were pushing. In *Wiadomości*, the corresponding proportions were distributed in a more balanced way (Table 1).

Table 1. Objects of negative comments

Object	Number of comments in percentage terms		
	<i>Fakty</i>	<i>Wydarzenia</i>	<i>Wiadomości</i>
Ruling coalition	43	38	25
Reform of the judiciary	22	27	15
Opposition	22	13	21
Judiciary system	13	9	12
Andrzej Duda	-	7	-
Donald Tusk	-	4	9
European Commission	-	2	-
Judges appointed following the reform	-	-	3
Palikot Movement	-	-	3
Tomasz Lis	-	-	9
Working conditions in England	-	-	3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: own analysis

Positive comments in *Fakty* referred mainly to the parliamentary opposition, only 9% of them directed at the ruling coalition. In *Wydarzenia*, a reverse proportion was recorded. As many as 60% of those speaking expressed approval of the government, 10% of them were in favour of the reform of the judiciary, while only 20% of positive comments concerned the coalition (Table 2).

The proportion of positive comments fully revealed which side of the political divide the public television stood on, with 100% of them directed at the government and its actions. In addition to defending the reform of the judiciary and the government coalition, *Wiadomości* materials tended to positively highlight other achievements of the government, such as the country's vigorous economic growth or overall situation in Poland, benefiting the lives of ordinary people and conducive to large investment (Table 2).

Table 2. Objects of positive comments

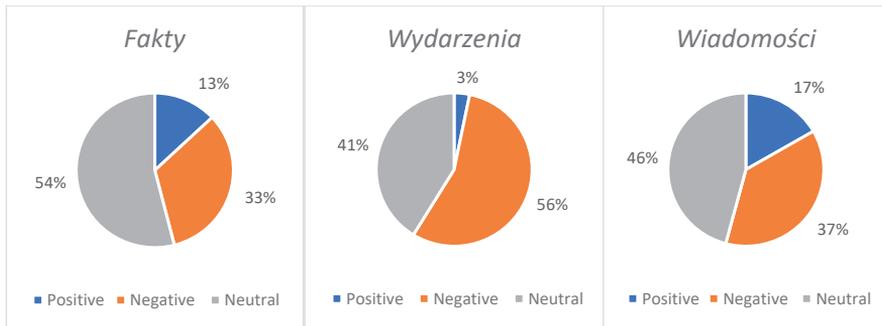
Object	Number of comments in percentage terms		
	<i>Fakty</i>	<i>Wydarzenia</i>	<i>Wiadomości</i>
Reform of the judiciary	–	10	34
Opposition	82	20	–
Judiciary system	–	10	–
Parliamentary Committee on Justice and Human Rights	9	–	–
Overall situation in Poland	–	–	25
Situation in Polish economy	–	–	33
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: own analysis

**(b) Programmes of October 18, 2018**

Analysing news items in the programmes aired on July 20, 2017, one could observe how their emotionality and politicisation were built by means of straight-to-the-camera comments. While the discrepancies in reporting on the judicial reform between the public television and private broadcasters could be explained by the former's concern for the ruling party's interests and the latter's concern for the general public good and the rule of law, the findings on how the TV stations concerned reported on the local elections do not leave an equally wide scope for interpretation. This is due to the nature of the event being reported, which – involving the political sphere of the state's functioning – means that taking sides is tantamount to taking a political stance. Especially that it is more difficult to find experts who could express impartial opinions on the situation of Poland's local governments. Therefore, the only expert comment found in any of the programmes was one in *Fakty* by Wojciech Hermeliński, former chairman of the National Electoral Commission (serving in that position until 2019), who spoke in favour of the possibility of the Mayoress of Łódź Hanna Zdanowska's standing for re-election.

Figure 5. Relative proportions between total negative comments and positive or neutral comments



Source: own analysis

The first noticeable difference in the case of the analysed news items concerning changes in the judiciary system was a much higher share of neutral comments on all the three TV stations. Moreover, in *Fakty*, they exceeded the total of evaluative statements. This time the news programme with the highest share of negative comments was *Wydarzenia*, whereas *Wiadomości* aired the most positive statements (Figure 5). At this stage of the analysis, given the greater neutrality of the news contents, their bias seems less pronounced.

Table 3 Objects of negative comments

Number of comments in percentage terms			
Object	<i>Fakty</i>	<i>Wydarzenia</i>	<i>Wiadomości</i>
Ruling coalition	50	48	22
Opposition	25	16	22
Admission of refugees	–	4	33
Public prosecutor's office	12.5	–	–
Journalists	12.5	–	–
Polish society	–	4	–
Politicians	–	4	–
People choosing not to vote in political elections	–	–	23
Other (not relevant to the purpose of this study)	–	24	–
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: own analysis

On the other hand, taking into account the targets of negative comments, the previously detected trends remained unchanged. In *Fakty*, 60% of such comments were directed at representatives of the ruling coalition or its subordinate institutions.

In *Wydarzenia*, almost a half of those asked to comment spoke in negative terms of the government. The reverse was the case in *Wiadomości*, where 55% of all comments referred negatively to the opposition, for instance by suggesting that if its representatives won the local elections, they would start admitting refugees contrary to the Polish government policy (Table 3).

Table 4. Objects of positive comments

Object	Number of comments in percentage terms		
	<i>Fakty</i>	<i>Wydarzenia</i>	<i>Wiadomości</i>
Ruling coalition	34	100	50
Opposition	66	–	25
Admission of refugees	–	–	25
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

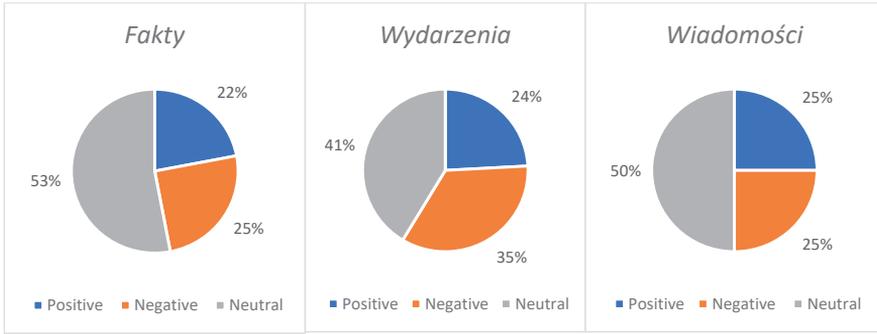
Source: own analysis

As in the case of negative comments, what transpires from this analysis is also a political polarisation of the content. Predictably, the majority of positive comments in *Fakty* were directed at the parliamentary opposition, while those in *Wiadomości* – at the ruling coalition. In *Wydarzenia*, 100% of the positive comments were directed at the government, a continuation of the trend seen in the news service of July 20th 2017. However, they were of marginal importance in the overall content structure, representing only 3% of the total. (Figure 5, Table 4).

### (c) programmes of January 15, 2019

Only the broadcasts of January 15, 2019, one day after the assassination of the late Paweł Adamowicz, broke the pattern identified in the case of the two previously examined topics. Rather than heralding a shift in the political sympathies of any of the broadcasters, this was attributable to the “centre of gravity” in evaluative statements shifting from Paweł Adamowicz’s political opponents to the late Mayor himself and factors that had contributed to his murder.

Figure 6. Relative proportions between total negative comments and positive or neutral comments



Source: own analysis

An especially notable finding is a significant number of neutral comments aired by all the three broadcasters (Figure 6). It is characteristic of the January 15th programmes that they featured more expert comments, with only a negligible number of MPs speaking. Most of them appeared in *Fakty*, where five statements, including three neutral ones, came from MPs. None of them spoke in *Wiadomości*, while in *Wydarzenia* only two (neutral) statements came from coalition or opposition MPs. This gives 7%, 0% and 3%, respectively, of MP comments, against 25%, 35% and 17% of expert contributions.

Table 5. Objects of negative comments

Object	Number of comments in percentage terms		
	<i>Fakty</i>	<i>Wydarzenia</i>	<i>Wiadomości</i>
Assassination of Paweł Adamowicz	39	30	–
Hate-mongering	17	60	20
Ruling coalition	17	–	–
Security at the Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity event	5.5	–	40
Nationalism	5.5	–	–
Public prosecutor's office	5.5	–	–
Paweł Adamowicz	10.5	–	–
Polish society	–	5	–
Stefan W. (the attacker)	–	5	40
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: own analysis

In the case of the private broadcasters, the majority of negative comments referred to the murder itself or to the practice of hate-mongering. The difference between coverage of the incident by *Fakty* and by *Wydarzenia* lied in pinning the blame. While *Wydarzenia* did not indicate a party they thought was to blame, *Fakty* pointed the finger at the government coalition and nationalist movements, citing their actions as one of the reasons behind the attack. This again seems to have skewed the news content in favour of one political side. A similar bias, albeit in the opposite direction, can be detected in *Wiadomości*. This time one of the reasons behind the assassination, according to those asked to comment, was the charity event's slipshod organisation. However, most of the negative comments were directed, in equal measures, at the late Mayor's killer and the practice of hate-mongering (Table 5).

Table 6. Objects of positive comments

Number of comments in percentage terms			
Object	<i>Fakty</i>	<i>Wydarzenia</i>	<i>Wiadomości</i>
Paweł Adamowicz	44	64	100
Jerzy Owskiak	44	21	–
Gdańsk	6	–	–
Residents of Gdańsk	6	–	–
Polish society	–	15	–
TOTAL	100	100	100

Source: own analysis

Most positive comments in the case of the private broadcasters were voiced in favour of the late Paweł Adamowicz and Jerzy Owskiak, founder of the Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity. As for *Wiadomości*, 100% of those who commented spoke in positive terms of the late Mayor of Gdańsk. In the case of the public service broadcaster, this confirms the earlier hypothesis that criticism of the late Paweł Adamowicz was replaced by marginalisation of his death (Figure 1, Table 6).

The analysis carried out so far indicates that in the case of *Fakty* and *Wiadomości* a political context, through the use of various devices, always permeates the content to a greater or lesser extent. By comparison, *Wydarzenia* emerges as the most objective news service, although the key message it conveys is much closer to that of *Fakty*. This confirms the already established division line between private and public media, in which *Fakty* and *Wiadomości* are situated at extreme poles.

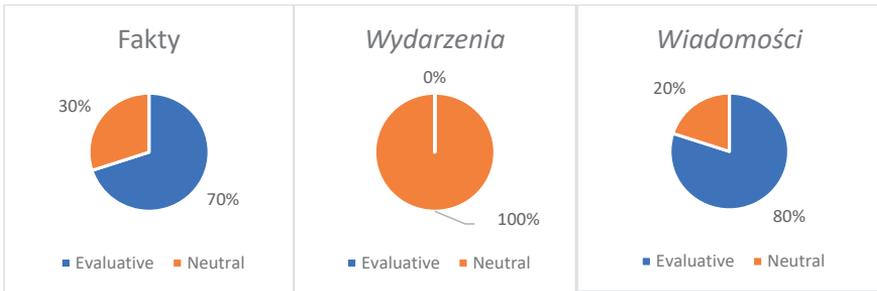
#### 4. Journalists' Own Narrative

The analysis so far has probed into how coverage is created by assigning importance to a topic, airing politicians' comments and providing it with an emotional quality. However, the findings relate either to the length of a news item and its position within the sequence, or to an element only partially within the programme authors' control, namely straight-to-the-camera comments.

This time, the analysis focused on that part of content over which the journalist responsible has full control, i.e. the one consisting of his or her own commentary, which taken together, may form the narrative of a news item or service. It is only by examining this element that final conclusions can be drawn as to how strong the political polarisation is among broadcasters, and to what extent journalists put political persuasion over informational value.

##### (a) programmes of July 20, 2017 – news item 1 (pertaining)

Figure 7. Relative proportions between evaluative and neutral statements



Source: own analysis

The most evaluative narrative was identified in the case of *Wiadomości*, with only 20% of all statements not including a direct opinion or using expressions intended to evoke a particular opinion. Similar, albeit slightly less evaluative, narrative was put out by *Fakty*. Standing out from its peers was *Wydarzenia*, in which the journalists' narrative did not contain any persuasive components (Figure 7).

Considering what kind of opinions were formulated in *Fakty* and *Wiadomości*, their general drift can be described as unequivocally negative. All the evaluative statements coming from the journalists of *Fakty* were critical of the authorities, one of them directed at its specific representative – Deputy Prime Minister Jarosław Gowin. The narrative of *Wiadomości*, on the other hand, focused on criticising the opposition. This is how the three broadcasters presented the fact that the Deputy Prime Minister's reaction was different from that of the other government coalition members just after the Supreme Court Act had been passed by the parliament.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Krzysztof Skórzyński (*Fakty*): "There was one member of the government who didn't stand up and clap his hands at the moment. But that was it. Jarosław Gowin did support the bill,

This example shows that only the coverage put out by *Wydarzenia* was purely informational. The clearly judgemental description of Jarosław Gowin's attitude by *Fakty* and the use of pejorative terms such as "hyperactive" and "attacked" in relation to MP Borys Budka by the journalist of *Wiadomości* imply that in the case of these broadcasters the main objective was not to inform but to persuade.

Political involvement is also manifested in that opinions voiced by figures of authority are used to build up a narrative and make it more credible. In their narrative the journalists of *Fakty* twice cited representatives of the parliamentary opposition, whereas<sup>5</sup> the narrative of *Wiadomości* contained opinions coming from both sides of the political spectrum.<sup>6</sup> Although the journalists of *Wydarzenia* did not formulate their own opinions, they also referred to opinions voiced by others.<sup>7</sup> In this case, too, there is no doubt as to which political sides the contents of *Fakty* and *Wiadomości* are designed to support. Both broadcasters invoked mainly the opinions of one side, the parliamentary opposition or the government coalition, as the case may be. In *Wydarzenia*, on the other hand, opinions came solely from institutions that have no interest in criticising the authorities, which is inherent in the political tug of war between parties.

All three of the broadcasters presented the likely effects of the newly enacted reform of the judiciary. For *Wydarzenia*, it was the loss of judicial independence. The TVN journalists warned of the threat of politicised judgments, while disproving the claim that the reform would streamline the work of courts.<sup>8</sup> *Wiadomości*,

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voting for the law designed to make courts dependent on political decisions (...) Jarosław Gowin chose to behave loyally towards the ruling party. It was nothing but a show, preceded by such calls". Marcin Tulicki (*Wiadomości*): "Today, the hyperactive Borys Budka attacked Deputy Prime Minister Jarosław Gowin". Grzegorz Kempka (*Wydarzenia*): "From this footage, taken just after the vote, it is clear that not everyone was expressing joy. Jarosław Gowin was a case in point, despite having voted aye".

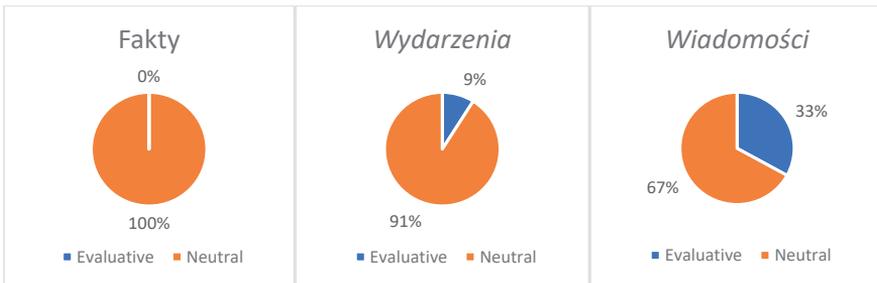
- 5 Justyna Pochanke (*Fakty*): "This is a sad day for Poland. The Supreme Court Act has been passed, allowing the Law and Justice party to replace all judges. As the opposition says: the party rules, the party administers justice (...)" Krzysztof Skórzyński (*Fakty*): "Nothing was achieved by street protests or by appeals from the European Commission, a host of Polish institutions and courts, not to mention the opposition".
- 6 Krzysztof Ziemięć (*Wiadomości*): "Shortly past 3 p.m., after all the opposition's amendments had been rejected, the Polish Sejm passed the new Supreme Court Act. Supporters of the changes are speaking of the symbolic end of post-communism, while the opposition are grieving over the end of democracy (...)" Marcin Tulicki (*Wiadomości*): "This is a success for the reformers, for whom it marks the symbolic end of a post-communist era in Poland".
- 7 Grzegorz Kempka (*Wydarzenia*): "The Polish Ombudsman recalled the opinions of the President of the European Council and the President of the European Parliament, who regard these changes as the end of judicial independence in Poland".
- 8 Krzysztof Skórzyński (*Fakty*): "The so-called real-life examples were to demonstrate what was hidden behind the slogan of "judicial reform". They were invoked by all those who had been raising alarm for weeks. The new pieces of legislation passed by the Law and Justice majority won't solve any of the existing problems. They won't make the courts' work faster or more efficient, as lengthy court procedures are in fact the biggest malaise. They will simply allow politicians to purge the judicial staff and install loyal judges".

citing the opposition, informed their viewers that representatives of the government coalition would be imprisoned after a change of power in Poland.<sup>9</sup>

As shown above, the analysis of the narrative element also highlights the division between private media and the public television broadcaster. Both *Fakty* and *Wydarzenia* warned of the possible loss of judicial independence as a consequence of the reform, while *Wiadomości* took the opportunity to try and create a negative atmosphere around the parliamentary opposition. What distinguishes the private broadcasters from each other is that only one of them, namely Polsat (*Wydarzenia*), did not build a politically conditioned narrative.

(b) Programmes of October 18th 2018 – news item 1 (pertaining)

Figure 8. Relative proportions between evaluative and neutral statements



Source: own analysis

The way in which the local elections campaign was covered by TVN and by the public television was definitely different from that seen in the case of the judicial reform. This time, the programmes of all three broadcasters were characterised by the prevalence of neutral statements, but only accounted for 100% of the total in *Fakty* (Figure 8).

The material broadcast by *Wydarzenia*, which was fully neutral on July 20th 2017, this time lost its neutrality because of a single statement by Bogdan Rymanowski. However, he only quoted representatives of the two political forces – the government coalition and the opposition.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Marcin Tulicki (*Wiadomości*): “The Civic Platform has resorted to an unprecedented practice of trying to frighten their political opponents. They have threatened to amend the Penal Code so that politicians who voted in favour of the new Supreme Court Act might be imprisoned in the future”.

<sup>10</sup> Bogdan Rymanowski (*Wydarzenia*): “The Law and Justice strike a blow at the Civic Platform with a party election broadcast about refugees. It warns that Muslim pockets will spring up within Polish cities if the opposition win the elections. The outraged Civic Coalition members respond by calling the broadcast disgusting manipulation. With only 29 hours to go before the pre-election silence, refugees are not the only topic of the ongoing campaign, but certainly one that ignites emotions.”

The analysis of the *Wiadomości* narrative led to more complex conclusions. The proportion of evaluative statements in that news service, although no longer predominant, remained the highest, comprising – in addition to quotes from politicians – negatively biased personal opinions of the journalist.<sup>11</sup> Piotr Pawelec’s comment about Grzegorz Schetyna, chairman of the Civic Platform, which at first glance could be considered a piece of information, was in fact an opinion, according to which the opposition leader had devoted the major part of his speech to criticising the ruling party. However, only one statement critical of the authorities was cited in support, which makes it impossible to verify the journalist’s claim.<sup>12</sup> The statement quoted in the footnote clearly suggests a link between a candidate in the local elections put forward by the Civic Coalition and the then Mayor of Warsaw, who refused to appear as a witness before the reprivatisation fraud commission (full name and explanation in the footnote). Moreover, it was also meant to belittle Rafał Trzaskowski’s electoral offer, especially when juxtaposed with another comment, this time concerning Patryk Jaki, his main contender for the seat of Mayor of Warsaw.<sup>13</sup> Patryk Jaki was shown as a dynamic candidate, with plenty of ideas for the future development of Warsaw, while all the viewers could learn from the same material of Rafał Trzaskowski was that he planned to build educational playgrounds. The ensuing part of the public broadcaster’s programme showcased the benefits that could be gained if the local government elections were won by United Right candidates, stemming mainly from close cooperation with and support they would receive from the central government.<sup>14</sup>

The most persuasive coverage of the elections campaign has turned out to be the one in *Wiadomości*. Although the public broadcaster aired fewer negative opinions on that occasion, it is still apparent that it conveyed a pretty straightforward

11 Piotr Pawelec (*Wiadomości*): “The fight in the local elections campaign is also about political advertising. Patryk Jaki one-ups Rafał Trzaskowski by pointing out his lack of experience in the local government.” Piotr Pawelec (*Wiadomości*): “When campaigning in Białystok, Grzegorz Schetyna also focused on criticising the Law and Justice party.”

12 The same is true of another persuasive statement: Piotr Pawelec (*Wiadomości*): “Rafał Trzaskowski is promising to build educational playgrounds in every district of the capital city. As the campaign is drawing to a close, the candidate of the Civic Platform and Modern is also trying to cut himself off from the current mayor Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz.”

13 Piotr Pawelec (*Wiadomości*): “With the campaign in the home stretch, not a moment can be lost. Patryk Jaki will spend 36 hours straight on his feet. The United Right’s candidate for the mayor of Warsaw will visit various places around the capital city, unveiling his ‘36 impulses’ programme.”

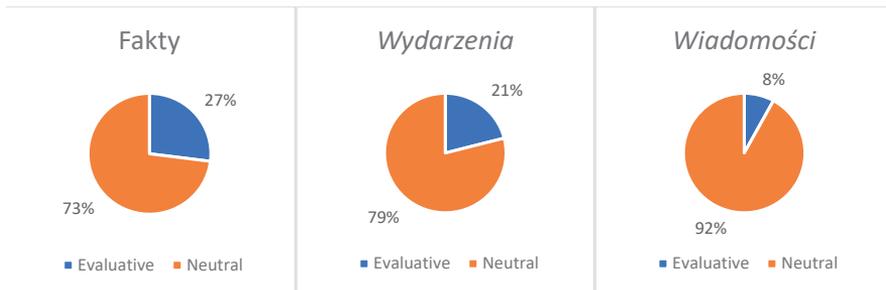
14 Piotr Pawelec (*Wiadomości*): “Members of the government are on the campaign trail, supporting candidates of the United Right in many places across Poland. In the village of Karczewie, the Minister of Internal Affairs and Administration Joachim Brudziński spoke of levelling out the disparities between regions.” Piotr Pawelec (*Wiadomości*): “In Częstochowa, the Minister of Maritime Economy Marek Gróbarczyk, side by side with the United Right’s candidate for mayor, spoke of flood safety in the city.” Piotr Pawelec (*Wiadomości*): “Small municipalities stand to gain from road infrastructure projects. Minister Andrzej Adamczyk has signed a contract for the construction of the Iłża ring road, near Radom. He also noted the government’s planned spending on local roads, which was in excess of PLN 6 billion.”

narrative, consisting of criticising the opposition on the one hand and promoting United Right candidates on the other.

Once again, the division line between the public television and private stations is in full view. Neither *Fakty* nor *Wydarzenia* attempted to build a politically committed narrative. However, whilst in the case of Polsat this can be considered another proof of the broadcaster's greatest neutrality, in the case of TVN it should be borne in mind that the poll results from the last but one day of the campaign, showing that Rafał Trzaskowski was set to win by a wide margin, might have rendered such narrative no longer necessary.

(c) Programmes of January 15th 2019 – news item 1 (pertaining)

Figure 9. Relative proportions between evaluative and neutral statements



Source: own analysis

The analysis of the news programmes aired one day after the death of the Mayor of Gdańsk Paweł Adamowicz has revealed further changes in the structure of the journalists' narratives. This time it was *Wiadomości* that was free from any politically committed narrative (Figure 9). The only evaluative statement turned out to be the one condemning the murder of the late Paweł Adamowicz.<sup>15</sup>

In this case, the coverage of the event by *Wiadomości* can be compared to that created by the *Wydarzenia* staff on October 18th 2018. Both news items were found to contain no narrative part due to the negligible proportion of the reporter's evaluative comments and because it is socially desirable to condemn a murder regardless of whom the victim was.

Another element not previously encountered in the analysis is a narrative based exclusively on positive evaluative statements, as produced by the *Wydarzenia* team.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Jakub Wojtanowski (*Wiadomości*): "More and more candles are being lit at the scene of that heinous crime."

<sup>16</sup> Bogdan Rymanowski (*Wydarzenia*): "Flowers, candles, black-ribboned flags – this is how Gdańsk is bidding farewell to its president. Thousands of the city's residents have paid tribute to Paweł Adamowicz, who died yesterday, turning the local Avenue of Victory into an avenue of mourning. Those who knew him personally say he was open and outgoing, which makes it even more difficult to accept his passing. Let's move to Gdańsk. In front

In each of the quoted journalist statements, the positive evaluation of the late Mayor of Gdańsk was based on opinions coming from other people. In the first and second ones, their authors were mentioned by the journalist, while the third opinion, paraphrased by Stanisław Wryk, came from then Deputy Mayor of Gdańsk Aleksandra Dulkiewicz.

Standing in contrast to the narrative by Bogdan Rymanowski and Stanisław Wryk was the negatively slanted coverage by *Fakty*. Here, once again, the narrative took on a political hue, its aim being to put the blame for the death of the Mayor of Gdańsk on the atmosphere of hatred created by specific political and ideological circles. In order to demonstrate the effect of the journalists' efforts to make the content persuasive, it was necessary in this case to also quote straight-to-the-camera comments. However, the coverage opened with a statement by Grzegorz Kajdanowicz, which was the key element of the entire narrative.<sup>17</sup> The statement quoted above bears no reference to further parts of the material.<sup>18</sup>

The narrative was thus built by comparing two dramatic incidents that have left their mark on Polish history. However, the key point was that the assassin of President Gabriel Narutowicz was a person with a nationalistic background. When additionally a straight-to-the-camera comment was aired, which was no less than a "fiery, political speech" (albeit such speeches, according to Grzegorz Kajdanowicz, were absent on that day), one can conclude that they were directed also at the conservative ruling party.<sup>19</sup>

The weight of the accusation indicates how much importance the authors of the material attributed to emotions, especially negative ones. This becomes even more apparent on comparing the form in which the problem of hate-mongering was

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of the town hall, where a memorial rally is being held, there is Stanisław Wryk." Stanisław Wryk (*Wydarzenia*): "The Avenue of Victory has turned today into an avenue of mourning. Whichever way we turn, there are city flags bisected by black ribbons. And candles. Here at the Golden Gate, where he was murdered, in the Long Market, and here in front of the Town Hall. From his secretary we have heard that he started every day with a cup of green tea, that there were no barriers between town hall employees and their mayor." Stanisław Wryk (*Wydarzenia*): "This is the legacy left by Paweł Adamowicz – a city free from violence, intolerance and hatred."

<sup>17</sup> Grzegorz Kajdanowicz (*Fakty*): "There were no fiery political speeches, divisions or disputes. There was pensive mood and historical reflection during spontaneous marches and demonstrations against violence, held in dozens of Polish cities. The one in Warsaw started on the Parade Square and ended at the Zachęta Gallery."

<sup>18</sup> This is how Maciej Knapik referred to the situation at that time: Maciej Knapik (*Fakty*): In Warsaw, also in winter, 100 years will soon have passed since the first time a president was killed, then the president of Poland. Now, people have gathered in front of the Zachęta Gallery building, where that assassination took place. Earlier, a poem by Julian Tuwim was read out, decrying political hypocrisy."

<sup>19</sup> A woman: "You wore a cross on your chest and carried a Browning in your pocket. They were in alliance with God, and in cahoots with a murderer."

presented in *Fakty* versus *Wydarzenia*. For this purpose, reference should again be made to the above quoted statement by Stanisław Wryk.<sup>20</sup>

The analysis of the last day shows that the division between the private and public TV stations was maintained. Both commercial broadcasters based their coverage on a narrative, while the Polish Television tried to remain neutral. This time, however, the difference between the coverage of the event by *Wydarzenia* and *Fakty* was much more pronounced. The one put out by TVN was designed to pin the blame for the tragic incident, i.e. the murder of the Mayor of Gdańsk. *Wydarzenia*, on the other hand, sought to portray the late Paweł Adamowicz in the best possible light, without mentioning his achievements as the city's mayor, but only quoting statements that described him in terms of his relations with other people and the system of values he upheld. The former could be regarded as a tool in the political struggle, the latter – an attempt to pay tribute to the late Mayor of Gdańsk.

### Conclusions

The study has revealed a clear polarisation of news content coming from the licensed broadcasters and the public service broadcaster. While this could attest to the fact that external pluralism is preserved in Poland, it should be remembered that the duties of a publicly funded service broadcaster are entirely different. In this case, the European standards explicitly require that pluralism be ensured in its internal dimension. Verifying the first of the advanced hypotheses, one can conclude that TVN's *Fakty* is indeed much more critical of the ruling coalition than Polsat's *Wydarzenia*. On the other hand, TVP SA's *Wiadomości* tries to paint an impeccable picture of the ruling party, or where this is impossible, at least to present them in a favourable light compared with predecessors. Thus, as regards the hypothesis put forward by representatives of the ruling party and mentioned first in this paper, it can be concluded that in fact the news content of TVP SA conveys a substantially different message, definitely favourable to the ruling party, and is thus biased, but in a way that counterbalances TVN's narrative. However, this is a fundamental misunderstanding. It should be borne in mind, after all, that programmes of a public service broadcaster should comply with the duties of internal pluralism and the so-called public service mission, as stipulated by Article 21 of the Broadcasting Act. This provision prescribes that such content should be pluralistic, impartial, balanced and independent. Therefore, with regard to the second hypothesis, the analysis presented above has clearly demonstrated that the public media did not fulfil these criteria. What is more, the commercial broadcasters certainly covered the analysed topics in a less biased manner than TVP did. It is true that TVN's programmes were more critical of the ruling party than Polsat's *Wydarzenia*. In fact, it should be acknowledged at this point that the

<sup>20</sup> Stanisław Wryk (*Wydarzenia*): "This is the legacy left by Paweł Adamowicz – a city free from violence, intolerance and hatred."

news services broadcast by Polsat most closely adhered to the principles of professional journalism, which were much more often breached by *Fakty* and *Wiadomości*. Similar conclusions were arrived at in an earlier study carried out in 2020 by the Society of Journalists (Report of the Society of Journalists 2020). Finally, it needs to be admitted – as the analysis has found – that the news content of all the three broadcasters was often, to varying degrees, based on negative emotions. It seems that these features of news reporting, among others, may be a factor behind the growing polarisation of Polish society.

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## STRESZCZENIE

### **Polaryzacja treści serwisów informacyjnych w Polsce na przykładzie programów informacyjnych nadawców prywatnych i publicznych**

Artykuł przedstawia wyniki ilościowej i jakościowej analizy serwisów informacyjnych trzech największych nadawców oraz trzech wydarzeń istotnych dla funkcjonowania państwa i życia publicznego w Polsce. Pierwszym z nich była nowelizacja ustawy o Sądzie Najwyższym z lipca 2017 r. Drugim wydarzeniem była samorządowa kampania wyborcza w Polsce (analizowane były programy z 18 października 2018 r., przedostatniego dnia kampanii wyborczej). Trzecim wydarzeniem, relacjonowanym w analizowanych serwisach (15 stycznia 2019 r., dzień po tragicznym wydarzeniu), było zabójstwo Prezydenta Gdańska Pawła Adamowicza. Analiza skoncentrowana była na wieczornych wydaniach informacyjnych programów trzech najpopularniejszych nadawców o największej oglądalności, w tym stacji komercyjnych (tj. *Fakty* TVN i *Wydarzenia* Polsatu) oraz nadawcy publicznego (tj. *Wiadomości* TVP). W sumie przeanalizowano 43 materiały trwające 2 godziny, 20 minut i 6 sekund. Badanie ujawniło wyraźną polaryzację treści informacyjnych przekazywanych przez nadawców prywatnych i publicznych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wiadomości, media, nadawcy, pluralizm mediów, polaryzacja treści medialnych, wolność słowa