

## CROATIAN WAR VETERANS IN PRINT MEDIA IN 1996 AND IN 2006

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### SUMMARY

**Introduction:** The media have an important role in maintaining and creating social relations and social environment. This especially refers to the war and post-war period in which the media can form a part of the prevention context, i.e., the media can facilitate the process of recovery from war trauma, but they can also contribute to stigmatization and retraumatization. Our aim was to analyze Croatian newspaper reports about Croatian war veterans and to determine the differences in ways of dealing with the subject during 1996 and 2006.

**Methods:** The data were gathered by reviewing two daily papers, *Novi list* and *Večernji list* and *Globus* weekly. The analysis included newspaper reports related to the subject of Croatian war veterans, published in the first six months of 1996 and 2006. Quantitative and qualitative methods were used to analyze both the form and the content of the reports.

**Results:** A total of 538 newspaper reports were published in the above-stated periods. In the first half of 2006 the number of reports related to the subject of Croatian war veterans dropped 6.5 percent compared to the first half of 1996. Topics prevalent at the end of the war were different from those ten years later. The 1996 articles mostly reported on activities organized by various associations, medal-awarding ceremonies, military operations etc. Ten years later the topics focused on war crimes, trials of Croatian war generals and dissatisfaction with veterans' rights and legislation. Moreover, articles relating to crime and reports about suicides and attempts of suicide increased significantly in 2006.

**Conclusion:** During the ten-year period, the media image of Croatian war veterans significantly changed, which was expected owing to different social circumstances immediately after the war and ten years later. The prevalence of topics negative in tone and a lack of proactive stories reflect, but also create, a social context which can affect the process of recovery from traumatization.

**Key words:** war veterans - print media – PTSD - social acceptance - stigma

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### INTRODUCTION

The media play an important role in modern society in terms of maintaining and creating social relations and social environment. This especially refers to the war and post-war periods in which the media can be a part of the prevention context. In other words, the media can facilitate the process of recovery from war trauma, but they can also contribute to stigmatization and retraumatization (Hight & Smith 2003). Research results indicate that PTSD-affected war veterans have a perception of an extremely low social acceptance of veterans by the general population (Ljubotina et al. 2007); in this, the media presentation of the subject of war veterans also plays its role.

#### Social acceptance and war traumatization

Maercker and Muller (2004) define social acceptance as a perceived positive reaction of society shown through social acknowledgement of the traumatic event and understanding of the difficult situation of a person who suffered the trauma. Social acknowledgement does not include emotional and instrumental support from close persons only, it also includes support from significant others, such as members of local government, the clergy, work colleagues and fellow

citizens. Furthermore, it includes impersonal opinions and attitudes about experiences of traumatized persons perceived through media reports (Maercker & Muller 2004). Traumatized persons are usually extremely sensitive to the ways others react to their issue and the way others describe the role of the traumatized person in the actual events (Johnson et al. 1997). A wider social context, which includes the media and the media attitudes toward the traumatized person, affects the way an individual or a group deals with traumatic experience emotionally and cognitively (Maercker & Muller 2004). Persons who went through traumatic experiences are often exposed to information carrying a tone of indifference, rejection and blaming of such persons for their condition. Studies that have been conducted so far indicate that a lack of social acceptance is associated with stronger PTSD symptoms (Maercker & Muller 2004, Solomon et al. 1987, Solomon et al. 1988) and perception of lower quality of life (Ljubotina et al. 2007). It has been shown that Croatian war veterans treated for PTSD who are more satisfied with the level of social acceptance use a larger number of adaptive mechanisms of coping and more often report positive outcomes of traumatic events than war veterans who have a perception of a lower level of social acceptance (Ljubotina et al. 2007).

## Traumatic experiences and the media

Two empirically unconfirmed, contradictory hypotheses about the effect of media reports on the processing of traumatic experience suggest that media reports lead to retraumatization and can complicate recovery. However, they also suggest that media reports, regardless of their characteristics, offer social recognition to victims and thereby present a positive form of support which can facilitate recovery (Maercker & Mehr 2006). The studies so far conducted about the correlation of media reports describing traumatic events and posttraumatic reactions are quite fresh and the number of such studies is still relatively small compared to the large number of media reports. It has been determined that watching television reports about traumatic experience can lead to vicarious traumatization and retraumatization, even years after the traumatic event occurred (Hilton 1997, Schuster et al. 2001, Schlenger et al. 2002, Rosen et al. 2005, Holmes et al. 2007, Collimore et al. 2008). The only research conducted in Croatia which deals with the correlation of the media and PTSD in war veterans is a clinical study which says that an increased number of suicide attempts by using self-ignition can be explained by media reports on similar suicide attempts (Braš et al. 2007).

## Stigma and mental disorders

Negative attitude in the media certainly contributes to stigmatization which is usually present regarding mental disorders. Stigma is a negative attitude toward a person which keeps the person at a distance, i.e., such a person is socially rejected owing to negative stereotypes and prejudice, which leads to discrimination (Arboleda-Florez et al. 2008). Stigmatization can have worse and more long-term effects than the mental illness itself (Mehta & Farina 1997) since the stigma causes mental problems to be underestimated, unrecognized and untreated (Sartorius & Schultz 2005). Moreover, stigma can change in time and can differ from culture to culture (Arboleda-Florez et al. 2008).

The most prevalent opinion about persons with mental disorders is that they pose a concrete danger to the health of society. Such a perception develops due to a fear of potential physical attack and fear of one's own "craziness". Due to the fact that persons with mental disorders are stereotyped as lazy persons who do not contribute to the society's well being and thereby burden the system, mental disorder is seen as a "threat" to the system of values shared by the dominant group (Arboleda-Florez et al. 2008). Personal responsibility for the illness and for the potential danger to others are the key dimensions in social rejection of a mentally ill person (Feldman & Crandall 2007). There is an impression that Croatian war veterans with PTSD are often presented in such way in the media.

A study conducted among Croatian high-school students indicates that these students have equally negative stigmatizing attitudes towards PTSD and

depression, but both of the disorders are less stigmatizing compared to schizophrenia (Arbanas 2008).

Steadman and Coccozza (1978) believe that the media contribute to stigmatization by presenting the mentally ill as unpredictable, violent and dangerous persons, even though only a small percentage of the mentally ill commit serious crime and their crimes are only a small portion of the acts of violence committed by the general population (Arboleda-Florez 2008). Even in reports on violent and criminal acts which are done in a conscientious way, comments about the person being "crazy", "paranoid" or "depressed" create fear in readers.

Regardless of the fact that the above-mentioned studies have not examined the ways of media reporting, a conclusion arises that the media have the power of influencing the psychological state of those who watch, read or listen to media reports and that the media affect the formation of attitudes toward someone or something.

The Croatian experience is quite specific due to the five-year war which, to a certain extent, traumatized all the citizens in this country. Moreover, the Homeland War had an epilogue affected by a series of controversies which regularly appeared in the media. Our own experience with PTSD-affected war veterans shows that these veterans often feel hurt, angry or at least anxious after seeing news reports or reading about war veterans in the newspapers. The process of therapy occurs in wider social surroundings, the important part of which is formed by the media. Therefore, we wanted to examine the frequency of contents related to Croatian war veterans in print media and to examine whether the ways in which the media report about veterans have changed compared to the period immediately after the war, i.e., whether there has been a change in the form and the content of these reports.

## PROCEDURE

The analysis included newspaper articles published in Croatia during the first half of 1996 and the first half of 2006. In order to be included in the selection for qualitative content analysis, the print media had to have a solid readership rating and they had to be issued in both of the observed periods. We selected *Večernji list*, the daily with the highest circulation, *Novi List* as the most read regional daily and *Globus*, the most read weekly magazine.

All the copies issued in the period from January 1 to June 1 1996 and from January 1 to June 1 2006 were selected from the archives. A detailed review was used to select articles relating to the subject of war veterans, i.e., the articles had to contain words such as war veteran, the Homeland War, generals, war crime, veterans' association, etc. The articles were then scanned and 10 percent of them were selected at random for categorization purposes.

Six independent researchers determined the characteristics of each article considered relevant for further research, which consisted of the comparison of articles published in the first half of 1996 with articles published in the first half of 2006. The characteristics selected for the comparison were obtained by the consensus of all six researchers.

Further analysis compared articles in two main categories: the form and the content. The comparison of formal characteristics included the total number of published articles, the size of the article, and the newspaper section in which the article was printed. Since the national daily did not have sections in the 1996. issues, and the regional daily differed in some aspects, the panel of researchers has chosen the articles according to the 2006 section format of the each daily based on the content of the article.

Content comparison included categories of topics the article dealt with, that is, topics emphasized in the article. The following categories of content were obtained:

1. Celebrations of anniversaries (commemorations, celebrations of military operations, medal-awarding ceremonies); Ex. *“Medals “Operation Storm” awarded”, Novi List, 7.3.1996.*)
2. Activities of associations founded during or after the Homeland War; Ex. *“Together in the war and afterwards”, 01.02.1996. Večernji*
3. Veteran rights and legislation (veteran status eligibility, benefits, pensions, compensations, housing allocation); Ex. *“Houses and apartments for invalids”, 16.06.1996. Večernji*
4. Programs for the veterans (employment, sports activities, donations); Ex. *“Eighty competitors from six brigades participated”, 20.05.1996. Novi List*
5. War crimes; Ex. *“When I asked general Blaškić whether he is responsible for the crimes committed by his soldiers in Ahmić, he answered yes!” 01.03.1996. Globus*
6. Trials of generals; Ex. *“Croatia extradites General T.Blaškić to Hague”, 23.02.1996. Globus*
7. The veterans' dissatisfaction with their status and rights; Ex. *“A voice for protection of embittered Homeland war veterans” 25.06.1996. Novi List*

8. Suicides (suicides and attempts of suicide); Ex. *“Killed himself with explosive” 16.06.1996. Večernji*
9. Crime articles (felonies and criminal acts); Ex. *“Killed neighbour with pistol shots” 27.06.1996. Večernji*
10. War stories (descriptions and analyses of combat events or personal stories of war participants); Ex. *“Unmistakable wings of the Operation Storm” 24.01.1996. Večernji*
11. Politics (the war and the veterans in the context of parliament or political activities). Ex. *“Veterans are not property of political parties” 14.01.1996. Novi List*

## RESULTS

### Form of articles

The review of all copies of the selected newspapers in the 1996 period shows that the national daily published 127 articles dealing with the subject of war veterans; the regional daily published 136 such articles, and the national weekly published 15 articles on war veterans. In 2006, the regional daily published 104 articles related to the subject of war veterans, the national daily published 144 articles and the national weekly published 12 such articles.

Table 1. shows that in both of the observed periods brief reports were the most prevailing form of articles on war veterans, these included somewhat more than 30 percent of all published articles on war veterans. The second most prevailing form of article was an article covering a quarter of a page. There were 30.6 percent of such articles in 1996, and the number dropped to 23.9 percent in 2006. Articles covering half a page were almost equally prevalent in both of the observed periods, i.e., 20.1 percent in 1996 and 22.7 percent in 2006. The change is evident in the number of articles filling the entire page. There were 7.9 percent of such articles in 1996, but the number increased to 11.5 percent in 2006. In 1996, there were 6.5 percent of articles filling several pages, while in 2006 the percentage increased to 9.6 percent.

**Table 1.** The size of articles on Croatian war veterans in 1996 and 2006.

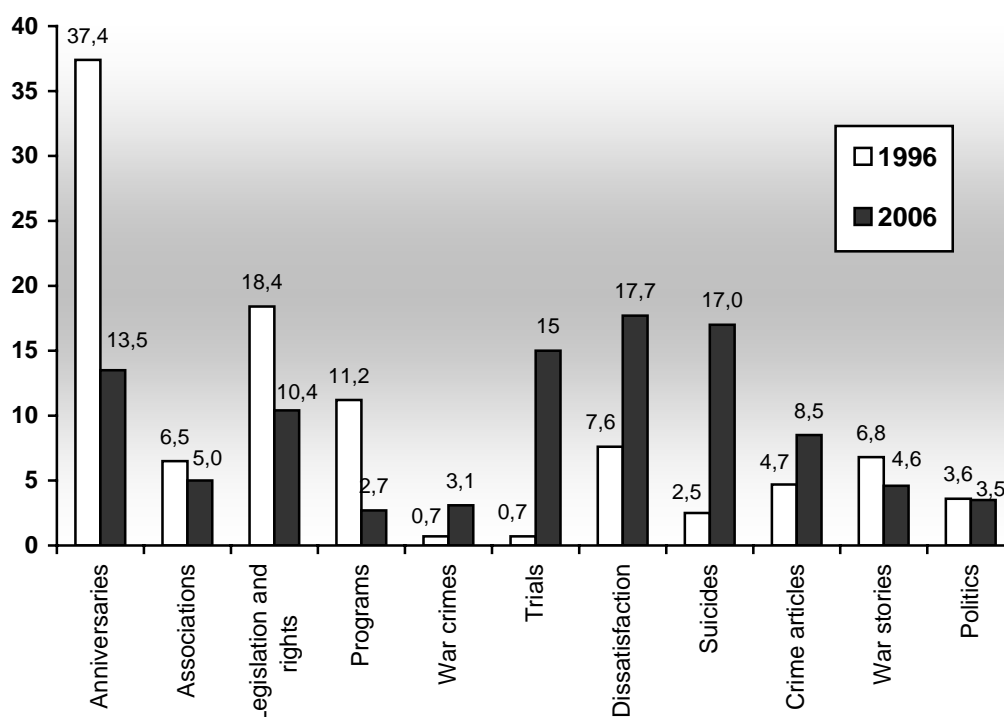
	1996	2006
brief report	97 (34.9%)	84 (32.3%)
¼ of a page	85 (30.6%)	62 (23.9%)
½ of a page	56 (20.1%)	59 (22.7%)
1/1 page	22 (7.9%)	30 (11.5%)
2 or more pages	18 (6.5%)	25 (9.6%)

As for the newspaper section in which the articles were published, only the dailies were taken into consideration, since the national weekly does not have such formal categorisation (Table 2). Furthermore, the two observed dailies were different regarding their

formal appearance and names of the sections. Each daily underwent some changes over the years. For example, the national daily in 1996 did not have names for sections in which most of articles on Croatian war veterans were published.

**Table 2.** Frequency of published articles according to newspaper sections in the national and the regional daily in both of the observed periods

	1996		2006
national daily		events	100 (69.5%)
events	104 (81.9%)	region	22 (7.6%)
region	14 (11%)	crime articles	11 (15.3%)
crime articles	7 (5.5%)	other sections	11 (7.6%)
other sections	2 (1.6%)		
regional daily		news	74 (71.2%)
news	59 (43.4%)	city	6 (5.8%)
city	32 (23.5%)	crime articles	13 (12.5%)
crime articles	2 (1.5%)	region	5 (4.7%)
region	28 (20.6%)	other sections	6 (5.8%)
other sections	15 (11%)		



**Figure 1.** Frequency of content categories in all of the three observed media in 1996 and 2006, shown in percentages

Owing to differences in layout and editing, clear comparisons between the dailies could not be made. However, it is obvious that the number of articles relating to crime increased significantly from 1996 to 2006. The number of crime articles in the national daily increased by 50 percent in 2006, while the number of crime articles published in the regional daily increased as much as seven times. The number of articles in the regional daily's sections with topics relating to the city and the region dropped markedly in 2006.

### Content of articles

The biggest difference between the first half of 1996 and the first half of 2006 is in the frequency of content related to anniversaries and commemorations, the percentage of which dropped three times within ten years. Content relating to activities of associations was

almost equally frequent in both of the observed periods, i.e., 6.5 percent in 1996 and 5 percent in 2006. In the first half of 1996 there were 18.4 percent of articles reporting on the veterans' rights and legislation and 2.7 of articles on veteran programs. On the other hand, in 2006 there were 17.7 percent of articles dealing with the subject of the veterans' dissatisfaction with their rights and the legislation, while in 1996 there were only 7 percent of such articles. In 1996, there were 0.7 percent of articles reporting on war crimes, and the number increased to 3.1 percent in 2006. The category of content dealing with trials of generals almost did not exist in 1996 (0.7 percent), compared to as much as 15 percent of articles on the subject in 2006. Furthermore, content dealing with suicides increased from 2.5 percent in 1996 to 17 percent in 2006. There were 4.7 percent of crime articles in 1996, compared to 8.5 percent in 2006. Personalized war stories were covered in 6.8 articles in

1996, but dropped to 4.6 percent in 2006. The number of articles related to the veterans and politics is almost the same in both of the periods (3.6 percent and 3.5 percent).

## DISCUSSION

The analysis of articles dealing with the subject of Croatian war veterans showed that the subject is equally present in the media considering the fact that the number of such articles is almost equal in both of the observed periods (278 in 1996 and 260 in 2006). The aspect that changed over ten years, in accordance with our hypothesis, is the content and certain formal aspects of the articles.

In 1996, the number of articles reporting on commemorations, anniversaries, medal-awarding ceremonies and veterans' rights legislation was significantly higher. However, there were not so many articles dealing with real needs of the veterans and psychological disorders and PTSD. Even though we did not examine the veterans' reactions to the newspaper articles, we may presume that in 1996 there was a certain level of social recognition described by Maerck and Muller (2006) and Ljubotina et al. (2007). Ten years later, a relative social rejection of the war veterans can be noticed, given the fact that topics related to the veterans mostly deal with war crimes, trials of generals and numerous political affairs related to the veterans' rights. The stigmatization is intensified by the fact that ten years after the end of the war, the number of crime articles increased, and the number of articles in the sections relating to topics from the city and the region, which mostly included affirmative articles (association founding, housing allocation, etc.) dropped.

Retraumatization has still not been fully defined in psychotraumatology. Experts agree that "retraumatization leads to a strong emotional response from the defense cascade that activates the *traumatic fear* network and may lead to its consolidation" (Elbert et al. 2006) The assumption is that any content related to the Homeland War can trigger PTSD symptoms, which is confirmed by the Hilton example (1997), where the symptoms appeared after a media report on the World War 2 (we assume the report was affirmative). Maercker and Muller (2006) point out that persons suffering from PTSD are prone to perceiving media reports as more negative. A study (Maercker and Muller, 2006) conducted on victims of crime showed that two thirds of respondents believe the newspaper report is accurate, but they perceive it as mostly negative and in 66 percent of the cases, the perception is accompanied by feelings of grief. Crime victims who believe the article on their subject is not true feel exposed and angrier. Due to the specificity of the war and post-war events, clinical experience showed that Croatian war veterans are rarely satisfied with the way they have been presented in the media, which is in

accordance with the low levels of perceived social acceptance described by Ljubotina et al. (2007).

A special subject in the analysis is the subject of suicides among Croatian war veterans. In 2006 the number of articles dealing with the subject of suicides, attempts at suicide and suicide threats rose 10 percent from 1996. According to data obtained so far, approximately 1,800 Croatian war veterans have committed suicide since the end of the war, so the increase in the number of such articles is not surprising and it shows the importance of the tone of reporting about such topics. Braš et al. (2007) in their research on veterans' suicides by self-ignition speak about Werther Effect, according to which media-exposed cases of suicide serve as role-models to other suicidal persons. There have been various recommendations on how to report about suicides; these recommendations are available in our country as well (Koić et al. 2006).

Negative context of reporting about the veterans as in the 2006 articles leads to an increase in stigmatization of the veterans both with and without PTSD. The mention of the PTSD diagnosis in reporting about violent and criminal acts of individuals links the disorder with violence, which causes fear and negative attitudes in the general population. PTSD-affected veterans who attempt to commit suicide pose a danger to themselves and potentially to others. This characteristic is generalized to all members of the group, i.e., to all veterans suffering from PTSD.

The main task of journalism is to pass on relevant information. However, the way the information is presented is also important. The media are often close to and have greater influence on the traumatized population than experts and can therefore provide information which can act as prevention or affect mental health improvement. Maercker and Muller (2006) suggest that the media should be more attentive in selecting persons for interviews or persons they plan to write about after a traumatic event. Friedman (2005) stresses the importance of the media in periods after terrorist attacks in terms of providing extra information about psychological reactions. Friedman also stresses the importance of cooperation between journalists and the journalist's imperative to present objective information in cooperation with mental health experts.

Clinical work with persons suffering from PTSD cannot ignore the social context of an ongoing therapy. Prevalence of mostly negative topics and a lack of proactive stories can negatively affect the process of recovery from the effects of traumatization.

Limitations of this study primarily include the selected sample which consists only of two dailies and one weekly magazine and the six-month period of only two years, which narrows down the representative quality and the possibility of generalization. In addition, it would be important to examine the veterans' reactions to certain events, but due to the frequency and quantity of news reported every day, it would be almost impossible to select an event and its media presentation.

## CONCLUSION

The media interest in the veteran population is equally intensive in both of the observed periods, but the media image of the veterans changed significantly from 1996 to 2006. Ten years after the end of the war, topics carrying a negative tone and articles relating to crime increased significantly. Sometimes the sensational style of reporting and a lack of proactive stories can act as components of stigmatization, which produces long-term negative effects on the process of recovery.

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