

Bartosz HORDECKI

Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza, Poznań

Dorota PIONTEK

Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza, Poznań

Szkoła Wyższa Psychologii Społecznej, Poznań

An ideal of a politician in Polish tabloids “Super Express” and “Fakt. Daily”¹

An ideal

A word *an ideal* sounds somehow old-fashioned, but is still used in our description of a social life. In colloquial language it is often understood as “something absolutely perfect, excellence; pattern of excellence, the most perfect specimen being a norm, a measure of things that belong to the same kind” (Szymczak, 1988: 766). *An ideal* is also “the highest aim of human aspirations, desires in some field” (ibidem). Both meanings of the word let us think that ideals direct human activities and achievements. An ideal seen as excellence, pattern of acting or things, constitutes a formal reason; an ideal as the highest aim is a purposeful reason (Reale, 2001: 401).

As reasons of the human activities, ideals are and should be the object of research of the humanities. Personal ideals seem to be especially interesting since they deal with exercising professions and social roles. One of them is to be a politician. Research on imagination of an ideal politician is a domain of political science. But as far as these imaginations are manifested by the press they become a subject of the media studies as well.

There are two kinds of ideals treated as the products of consciousness: individual and collective. Individual ideals and world-views are more coherent than collective ones. The first are build much more consciously

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than the second. It is relatively easier to observe the process of crystallization of an individual ideal, and it is communicated more openly than the collective one. An individual ideal is expressed more directly, for example in a piece of master or in a book. Collective ideals are scattered and are manifested usually by the way – in occasional statement or spontaneous reaction.

Press *ideals* adopted by a particular editorial staff are present in various, rather short articles, written by many authors, and are dealt with temporary events. One should also remember that editorial materials – preparing as products – often lose the real position of their authors. Nevertheless, such factors as strong position of an editor and an institution of a programming policy make the work of an editorial staff coherent and, despite of temporary character of news all of them may promote a consistent picture of reality. Such a picture contains evaluations based on fixed *ideals* including a concept of an *ideal* politician.

It is obvious that not all newspapers use *ideals*. It is not sure *a priori* whether a given newspaper provides any pattern of an ideal politician. Therefore the very first thing to do is to predetermine if such an ideal exists. After that one may start to describe its characteristic. The best method is to adopt the content analysis using data collected from given newspapers. Categorization key is constructed in a way which helps to catch all significant elements of an ideal, as defined by a researcher. The key itself becomes an ideal type that measures the completeness of a specific ideal shelled out of text bodies.

Ideals of politicians are easy to reconstruct when analyzing media, which major interest is focused on politics. In contemporary times, however, contrary to the turn of XVIII and XIX centuries, it is difficult to find newspapers devoted exclusively to public affairs. Even if they exist they are subject to the process described as tabloidization.

Tabloidization of the media

The development of the mass media has exerted a stamp on a way in which politics is made and a public discourse with participation of politicians is conducted. From the historical perspective, spreading a telegraph was responsible for the first turning point in that process. According to Neil Postman, a telegraph introduced a high irrelevance, inadequacy and chaos. Telegraph, as Postman wrote, legitimated in some

extant an idea of information without context, e.g. an idea that the value of information do not need to be linked to any function which is useful in social and political processes of decision making or activity. The worth of information may result exclusively from its novelty, possibility to arouse interest and curiosity. Telegraph changed information into commodity, thing which might be bought and sold, irrespective of its utility or weight (Postman, 2002: 103). A marriage of a telegraph and printed press brought about increase in amount and speed of information at expense of its functionality, and deprived it of a context. Parallel development of photography which caused, as Daniel Boorstin called it, “the graphic revolution”, brought in time a domination of a picture over a word.

This “graphic revolution” resulted in XIX century in outstanding development of popular press, which gave birth to tabloids. It was a direct effect of commercialization of the media, very often compelled by the pressure of advertisers to reach a wide public. This process has started about 100 years ago, when newspapers began to add sport and entertainment sections, illustrations and sensations, addressed to the mass audience. The “saleability” (see: Esser, 1999: 292) of news has become a main criterion of the gatekeeping process.

As Frank Esser wrote, the term *tabloid* originally meant *a pharmaceutical trademark for concentrated form of medicines as pill or tablet* (ibidem). In the first half of the 20th century, the term began to be used to newspapers of the smaller size that could be easily read in trains and buses (ibidem). Using the term in wider context than a change of a size of a newspaper is relatively new and in the simplest way may be defined as *a downgrading of hard news and upgrading of sex, scandal and infotainment*. This short characteristic of a tabloid was given by Marvin Kalb, director of the Shorenstein Centre on the Press, Politics and Public Affairs at Harvard University. John Street argued that processes of commercialization had contributed to reduction of news which was proved by diminishing, since the II World War, a space for columns devoted to representative assemblies, and by increase of the role of political columnists for whom politics is an entertainment. Comments on moves of politicians have replaced direct reporting of their activities. As Street said, the work of a political journalist is more similar to the work of a television reviewer than to a reporter's. Political reviewers criticize politicians' performances and amuse audience with fads of members of the parliament (Street, 2001: 38).

Medium is a message, said Marshall McLuhan. Specific technical character of the medium delivers much more important meanings than its content. According to Howard Kurtz, tabloidization of the American media has started with following tendencies:

- 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: 143–147).

Contemporary mass media are market-oriented – they have to compete for an audience attention, to earn money for investments and be financially strong enough to preserve their independence. It means significant changes in their social functioning and roles they fulfill, especially when we keep in mind expectations towards media in democracy. Nowadays they have to recon what **may be** interesting for audiences, not what **should be** interesting. It obviously influences the way in which mass media mediate politics. We should point, however, that the traditional division into “serious” and “not serious” media, informative and entertaining, does not work any longer. Media of universal program agenda offer different outlets dealing with politics and politicians (informative, journalistic, and new kinds which are results of the convergence of media genres, like political talk show), while information media present politics in the soap opera manner. Some politicians are very good in using the new style, delivering never ending screenplays full of turns, cliffhangers, and new plots.

Tabloidization of news

Tabloidization of the media is a specific triumph of soft news over hard one. Countering one type of news with another, we refer to well known typology of news made by Gaye Tuchman. Hard news refers to coverage involving top leaders, main and important problems, or events breaking the routine of everyday living and media reporting. It is traditionally seen as important to well informed and participatory citizens, to citizens' ability to understand and respond to the world of public affairs (Patterson, 2003: 3). Soft news does not have a clear connection with public affairs; it is sensational, personalized and oriented to *celebrities*. It is less time-bound, more practical, and incident-oriented (crime, misfortune); it is also defined as

a change in the vocabulary of news, which becomes more personal, more familiar and less distant and institutional.

Historically, the distinction between hard and soft news remained as a result of some institutional structures and processes, including separate divisions of news and entertainment within media organizations, acceptance of non commercial character of news (not seen as a source of revenues), routinization of programming towards hard news, limited number of tv stations, professionalization of journalists, and standardization of criteria of news worthiness (Delli Carpini, Williams, 2001: 160–181).

Structural changes in telecommunication industry and in technologies of communications, that have been taking place in recent 20 years, have caused the abolishing of barriers between traditional journalistic genres. They have also resulted in blurring differences between hard and soft news.

Politicians and their consultants are aware that there is a growing number of citizens who are not interested in politics, ideologies, programs, who negatively evaluate political elites, and who do not want to listen to and watch chaotic radio and television debates. That is a reason that the role of popular media not associated with serious political journalism is growing up. Such media may be very effective in shaping *social ideal* of a politician. Tabloidization of the media and increasing of their competitiveness exert an economic pressure on news editors. It influences on the mediatization of politics mainly through its personalization. Politicians are present in the media more frequently than political parties, more attention is paid to personalities of politicians than to ideology they profess. Content is covered with form, with style of behave, with communication skills. It is a market to rule the supply of information, not traditionally understood obligations of the media. As Jacek Żakowski, one of the most prominent political journalists in Poland, said analyzing political debate in Poland, a tabloid style has started to dominate in this debate: “every day there must be a new victim, a new enemy, a new hysteria – and it seems to fit perfectly to the style of political thinking and acting of main actors on the political stage. It creates a feedback which degenerates political debate and political life in Poland. The tabloid logic of the dominant media awards politicians who use tabloid language, and by constant delivering juicy, personal, and scandalous content still drive further tabloidization of the media, which are greedy of everything which, by its simplicity and unambiguity, is able to draw attention of audience seeking for entertainment” (Żakowski, 2006).

Personalization of politics

Personalization of politics leads to another new phenomenon: a birth of politician celebrities. Political celebrities are supplements of the phenomenon of celebrities in popular culture. According to David Marshall (Marshall, 1997: 65), the emergence of celebrity politicians (or political celebrities, as we named them earlier) was a consequence of the domination of popular culture by those who “were known for being known”. It forced the political world to create its own heroes and stars. Celebrities, as Marshall defined them, are public figures whose private lives are as important and widely reported as their professional achievements. If the public, and especially the tabloid media, are not interested in somebody’s private life, such a person does not gain a status of a celebrity.

A status of a political celebrity may originate from different situations. Darrell West and John Orman specify five different types of celebrities: political newsworthies (politicians and handlers skilled in public relations and self-promotion), legacies (children or spouses of former politicians), famed non-politicos known in fields outside of politics who run for elective office, famed non-politicos who act as lobbyists or issue spokespersons, and event celebrities (West, Orman, 2002: 2–6). Street distinguishes two categories of celebrity politicians: a traditional politician who engages with the world of popular culture in order to enhance or advance their political functions and goals, and an entertainer who pronounces on politics and claims the right to represent peoples and causes without seeking elected office (Street, 2006: 437–438).

Tabloidization of the media may be defined at the micro and the macro level. At the micro level it is understood as a medial phenomenon resulting in a revision of traditional press and other media formats, driven by the audience’s preferences and commercial demands, and it means *a change in a 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: 293).

At the macro level tabloidization means *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* (ibidem). This understanding of tabloidization has a lot to do with news and

its production. As Esser wrote, empirical research has to consider several assumptions:

- tabloidization is a process, which means that it has to be examined for a long time perspective;
- tabloidization means a spill-over of tabloid news values from the popular to the quality press; therefore the quality press has to be examined as well tabloids;
- tabloidization should be examined in a context of cultural and historical dimensions, because it is not internationally uniform process;
- tabloidization is a vague concept that should be examined with multi-dimensional approach (ibidem: 293–294).

Polish tabloids and their ideal of a politician

Considering all reservations mentioned above, and considering the fact that empirical research on tabloids and tabloidization (in micro and macro sense) are at their beginning in Poland, we decided to make an attempt to analyze an *ideal* of a politician in Polish tabloids. The goal of the project was to answer a question whether there were any ideals of politicians in “Super Express” (“SE”) and “Fakt. Gazeta Codzienna” (“*Fact. The Daily*”; “Fakt”), and if so, what kind of ideals were being promoted by the newspapers. In a case of positive answer for the first question we assumed following hypothesis:

- H.1. Ideals (if they are) used by given tabloids are constructed on a basis of simplified cognitive heuristics.
- H.2. Ideals are constructed on a basis of private life of politicians and on character/personalities of political actors.
- H.3. Given tabloids do not propose alternative models of an ideal of a politician.

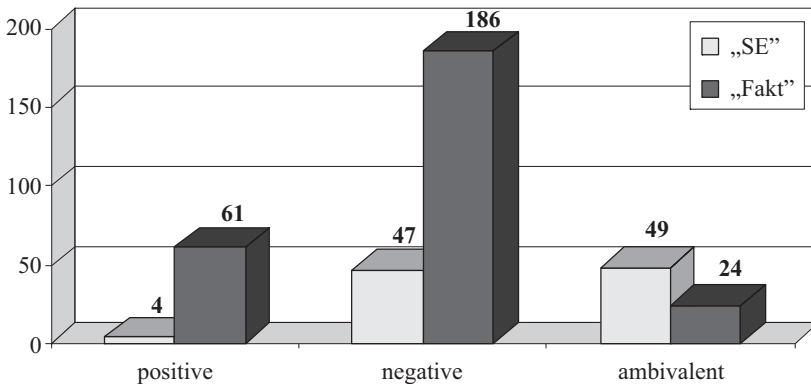
Method

“Super Express” and “Fakt. The Daily” are the most popular tabloids in Poland and that is why we had decided to examine those newspapers. The first research was made in July and August, 2007, and the content analysis was used. At that time the code book with 27 specific questions was elaborated (Piontek, Hordecki, 2009: 391–412). The same code book

served in the recent research carried on January, 19–25, 2009. In both researches the basic item was a politician – an actor of an article. Examined data was related to persuasive texts written by journalists, not by politicians.

In 2007 both tabloids focused on leading politicians, providing much more soft news than hard one. Hard news related to current political process, justice and security, and social issues. Soft news treated about family/friends, corporeality, non-political competences, and temper of politicians. The attitude of journalists toward described politicians was different in both tabloids: “SE” was more ambivalent about politicians than “Fakt”, especially in hard news (see figure 1 and figure 2).

Figure 1. Attitude of journalists of “SE” and “Fakt” towards politicians



Source: Authors.

Both tabloids saw politicians as competitors rather than those who wanted to cooperate to solve major political and social problems. Justice apparatus was perceived by politicians, according to opinions of journalists, as a tool of repression, and preferred way of problem solving was to extend the state control and engagement. Politicians’ relations with their families and friends were valued positively, but politicians themselves were seen as not much interesting individuals.

The analysis of data collected in July and August, 2007, brought following conclusions common for both tabloids:

- they delivered more hard news than soft news;
- they exposed leading politicians, mainly from the ruling coalition;
- current political process and justice apparatus were major interests of journalists;

- Polish politicians manifested competitive attitude rather than cooperative one;
- politicians were basically not treated as celebrities, and their private life was not much interesting for tabloids, which was surprising when relating to general features of tabloidisation; although there was a little interest in moral scandals and politicians were perceived basically as dull and common guys, both tabloids focused on their behaving, acting, personal attributes and separated events, not on announced and implemented political programs and policies;
- women in politics were portrayed not as politicians, but as women, playing stereotyped role of a supporter rather than an individual with personal ideas and position;
- politics was reported in a simple language understandable for uneducated readers, but still enough to make their own estimations and evaluations of politicians and politics (Piontek, Hordecki, 2009: 410).

The most interesting, however, were unexpected differences between both leading Polish tabloids, which proved that the category is not homogenous. Journalists of “SE” were usually ambivalent and negative in their opinions about politicians, while journalists of “Fakt” were much clear in their negative or positive evaluations of politicians not avoiding to take their position. “SE” did not give any deeper analysis of political activities of politicians and reported political process as a fight of “alpha males”. “Fakt” took an effort to explain the complicated political and social issues, although those explanations were superficial and not deepen. Politicians were described as diversified group of various personalities with different worldviews and wide range of attitudes and motives. But the most significant difference between “SE” and “Fakt” laid in the fact, that “SE” neither construct nor use any ideal of a politician, while “Fakt” did create such an ideal and consequently used it as a measure in specific situations and towards specific people. This ideal is fragmentary and shallow, but important and proves that “Fakt” sees its role in reporting and commenting public affairs quite different than “SE” (Piontek, Hordecki, 2009: 411).

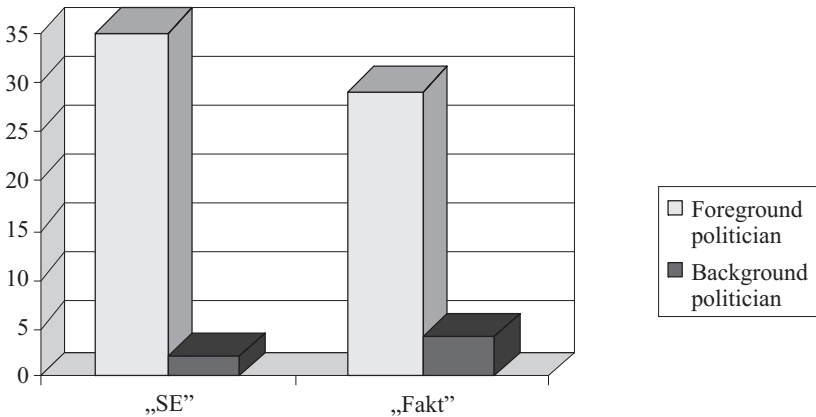
When starting with the research, we made three hypotheses. The first one assumed that tabloids based on simplified cognitive heuristics if they used ideal types of a politician. This hypothesis was confirmed for “Fakt”, and failed for “SE”. The second hypothesis about ideals constructed on a basis of private lives of politicians and on characters/personalities of political actors was forged for both tabloids. In the reconstructed ideal present in “Fakt”, public activities of politicians dominated and were much

more important than their private lives. The third hypothesis of non-alternative models of an ideal politician offered by the Polish tabloids could not have been either confirmed or forged, because of a lack of an ideal in “SE” (Piontek, Hordecki, 2009: 412).

In January, 2009, second research on ideals of politicians in the Polish tabloids was conducted. The major goal of this repeated search was to verify conclusions made on a basis of previous one. We checked six editions of “SE” and “Fakt” in the period of January 19–25, 2009. In given time politicians were actors of 55 articles in “SE” and 75 articles in “Fakt”.

Both tabloids gave their attention mostly to leading politicians from the ruling coalition and the stronger opposition party (see figure 2).

Figure 2. Presence of leading and supporting politicians in coverage of “SE” and “Fakt”



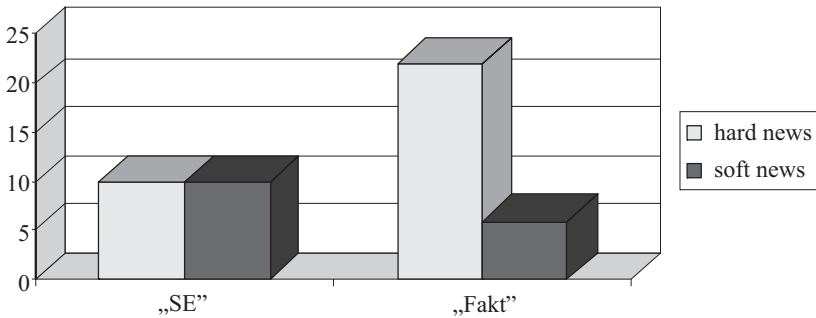
Source: Authors.

There was a tremendous domination of Polish politicians in articles of both tabloids: they seemed to be not interested in foreign affairs and foreign politicians. The only foreign political figures mentioned by “SE” and “Fakt” in given period were Barack Obama (most frequently), George Bush, Julia Tymoszenko and Vladimir Putin.

The difference was observed in relation between soft and hard news, published by both tabloids (see figure 3).

“Fakt” is the tabloid engaged in current political debate and has clear political bias. That is a reason that this newspaper offers more hard news related to political process than “SE”, which is (at given time) politically indifferent. The attitude of journalists of both tabloids towards politicians

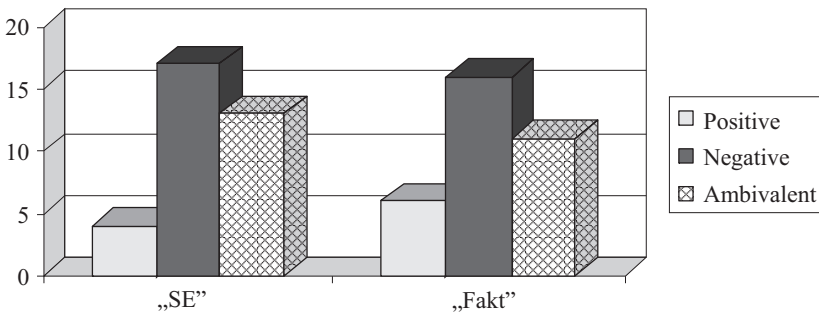
Figure 3. Soft and hard news in “SE” and “Fakt” (only persuasive items)



Source: Authors.

is rather negative and ambivalent (figure 4). They are more frequent in hard news; soft news brings more “caustic friendliness”, although articles related to a sexual involvement of the former Prime Minister in a new relationship are univocally critical.

Figure 4. Attitude of journalists of “SE” and “Fakt” towards politicians



Source: Authors.

Analysis of data collected in given period lead us to following conclusions:

- both “SE” and “Fakt” focus on current political process, although show some interest in foreign politics, especially American;
- soft news in both tabloids relate to members of families of politicians, with a little interest to their private lives;
- “SE” does not give any analysis of political process; politics is perceived as personal confrontation of “alpha males”; “Fakt” offers a number

of analysis of political process and motivations of main actors, but simplified and not in-depth;

- “SE” treats politicians as celebrities, it concentrates on their behaving, characters rather than on their positions or programs; politicians are simply common individuals but with worse temper which predispose them to become politicians – here we have consequently negative evaluation of politicians; “Fakt” is not so critical, and evaluates politicians through an ideal adopted by the journalists; there are a wide range of personalities in politics, some of them treated as celebrities, some as “serious” politicians;
- politics is a male world without women as important actors;
- basic cognitive heuristics are enough to understand and/or evaluate politics and politicians by readers of both “SE” and “Fakt”.

Comparing results of 2007 and 2009 research we may conclude that the outcomes of the last confirmed what we had found in 2007: “SE” does not expose any ideal of a politician, while “Fakt” not only has such construction but uses it as a measure of evaluation of specific Polish political actors. Reporting politics “Fakt”, differently than “SE”, uses standards typical for tabloids, but, at the sometime, tries to follow – in narrow extent – some standards of the quality press. In “Fact” there is a real, although very superficial, discussion on political process and the newspaper works out and promotes some patterns of political virtues. “Fakt” seems to “pretend” or “imitate” the quality press in respect to describing, commenting, and analyzing politics, while “SE” does not have such ambitions. The last statement may be put in other words: “Fact” wants to involve its readers, who may be not interested in politics or may not have skills to understand it, to political matters, using simplified language and giving superficial news but still keeping some standards of its own serious engagement in political debate, while “SE” is not seriously engaged in political discourse seeing its role as to inform and negatively comment on politicians’ activities.

Tabloidization is not an internationally unified process, as Frank Esser said. We argue that it is even not nationally uniform phenomenon. Differences between leading Polish tabloids of a very similar content, noticed in a way they cover politics, and proved in two researches conducted in various periods of time, stimulate to further research to define the specific variables influencing the process.

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Ideal polityka w polskich tabloidach „Super Express” i „Fakt. Gazeta Codzienna”

Streszczenie

Artykuł zawiera porównanie badań przeprowadzonych w roku 2007 i 2009. Analizie zawartości mediów poddano dwa wiodące polskie tabloidy, tj. „Fakt. Gazetę Codzienną” oraz „Super Express”. Celem porównania było stwierdzenie, czy wnioski dotyczące różnic pomiędzy badanymi gazetami w kwestii operowania ideałami polityka, sformułowane na podstawie materiału z 2007 r., zostaną konfirmowane badaniami materiałów publikowanych dwa lata później.

W konkluzji artykułu autorzy stwierdzają, że różnice pomiędzy wiodącymi polskimi tabloidami są wyraźne i mają charakter względnie stały. Co najistotniejsze, redakcja „Faktu. Gazety Codziennej”, w przeciwieństwie do „Super Expressu”, zarówno w roku 2007, jak i 2009, operowała stabilnym wzorcem, w oparciu o który oceniano i komentowano działalność aktorów politycznych. Natomiast dziennikarze „Super Expressu” nie posiadali takiego miernika, a ich teksty z reguły miały bulwersować, deprecjonując sferę polityczną oraz zawód polityka jako takie.

Interpretację wyników przeprowadzono w oparciu o wiedzę nt. tabloidyzacji mediów, tabloidyzacji *newsów* oraz personalizacji polityki.