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LEAD, HEADLINE, NEWS ABSTRACT? – GENRE CONVENTIONS OF NEWS SECTIONS ON NEWSPAPER WEBSITES

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Abstract

Increasing popularity and dynamic expansion of online newspapers creates a need for an in-depth analysis of online press, genre and discourse properties of online news in particular. The aim of the following analysis is to investigate genre characteristics of a newly developed news structure – a news abstract. The analysis examines the basic conventions concerning the purpose, form and content of these text types. The study encompasses news abstracts published on the websites of leading British, German and Polish newspapers. The inclusion of websites of culturally distinct newspapers was designed to evaluate the degree of universality and internationalization of the structure.

1. Introduction

The internet has had a considerable effect upon existing news media, which has led to a substantial transformation of media forms and media texts. Despite a significant interest in online journalism, the field still remains an under-researched area. Online newspapers represent one of the most dynamic and diversified examples of complex news genres. The structure and composition of newspaper websites constitute a significant aspect which deserves attention.

The homepage of an online newspaper constitutes the structural and functional basis of this media text. Its function is to establish a credible presence with the viewer, which will encourage the reader to explore the full online content available on the

website. A homepage, in other words, functions as a gateway to the complete offer of the paper. This function of homepages leads to significant requirements concerning the design of the website and organization of the content. One of the most conspicuous features of design is heavy compartmentalization and segmentation – the majority of newspaper pages are organized around the format of segments differentiated thematically, functionally and visually, e.g. navigational bars, headlines, news sections, services sections, multimedia. Such organization of content allows the users to easily navigate across the website and the editors to shape and highlight particular types of news and news content (Kolodzy 2006: 194).

One of the most vital segments of a newspaper homepage is the thematic news section which presents the gist of the most significant news items within a specific thematic area (e.g. world news, national news, sports, culture, etc.). Even a cursory examination of newspaper pages proves that news sections are regularly and commonly used on the websites and may be considered as the central components of these media forms. Yet, despite the widespread popularity and occurrence of such segments on newspaper portals, not much research has been devoted to the structures in question.

The following analysis is designed to fill that niche and to examine genre characteristics of news sections. Genre is here understood as a recognizable and standardized pattern of communication – pattern characterized by a consistent configuration of specific elements and regularities of structural organization (Swales 1990, Yates and Orlikowski 1992). Among the aspects determining a genre we find similarities in purpose, form and content (Swales 1990, Crowston and Williams 2000, Meyers 2010). Accordingly, the aim of the study is to investigate the basic conventions concerning the function, structure and content of news sections.

The study encompassed news sections published on homepages of leading British, German and Polish newspapers (*the Guardian*, *the Independent*, *the Times*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), *die Welt*, *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (SD), *Rzeczpospolita*, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Polska*). The analyzed corpus encompassed 30 editions of the homepages of each newspaper, collected over the period of three months (November, December 2011 and January 2012). The inclusion of websites of culturally distinct newspapers will help evaluate the degree of universality of the structure.

2. News sections – terminology and origin

The internationalization and universal use of news sections led some researchers to posit the birth of a new news genre (see e.g. Knox 2007, 2009). Knox (2007), who devoted considerable attention to the structures in question, proposed the name ‘newsbite’ as a label for the newly developed text type. However, the name does not yet seem to have been universally acknowledged. For this reason, I will use a descriptive term ‘news abstract’ to refer to the structure under discussion. Considering the content and structure of a news section, the term ‘news abstract’

seems accurate and suitable as it reflects the basic motivation underlying the use of this text type. It is also in line with Bell's (1991: 149–50) description of news story structure, where an abstract – the basic structural component of news discourse – encompasses two significant constituents – the headline and the lead. As we will see below, these two components represent the central elements of a news section as well.

As far as the origin of this news form is concerned, in addition to the compositional requirements of homepages, several other factors have played a role in the development of news abstracts – historical, social and technological. Historically, news abstracts date back to the traditions of the 19th and 20th century journalism – the development of the inverted pyramid format and of the nucleus and satellite components of a news story, as well as the practice of the time of summarizing news for the readers, and a gradual evolution towards a succinct and compact form of news (Fulton et al. 2005: 143, Knox 2007: 27). A further reason given by Knox (2007: 27) is associated with the practice in print newspapers to publish on the front page only parts of stories with references to specific news pages for further coverage.

2.1. Structure and content

The analysis proves that news abstracts are structured according to a number of standard conventions applied universally on all the newspaper homepages. Typically, they assume the shape of news paragraphs composed of a headline and a lead to the story.

More specifically, the basic structure of a news abstract comprises the following components:

- Headline
- Main body – introduction to the story in the form of a lead
- Visual element
- Additional links

The basic structure may be developed to include additional components, such as:

- Heading (kicker)
- Byline
- Reference formula
- Number of comments and/or recommendations

The components may be arranged and interconnected in various manners. Each of the constituents fulfils a specific, more or less meaningful, function in the whole composition (cf. Tereszkievicz forthcoming).

Headline

A headline represents the most significant component of the news abstract. Its main function, analogically to print newspapers, is to abstract the main event of a story and attract the reader (Reah 1998, Keeble 1994). Within the analyzed collection, all the

abstracts comprised the component of a headline. However, differences concerning the structure and style of headlines on the respective websites may be seen.

On the majority of the websites analyzed, be it a German, British or Polish newspaper, headlines assume the structural and stylistic conventions typical of print headlines with compact and dense forms, nominalizations and verbless clauses as prevailing syntactic structures. However, in *the Independent* and *Polska* in particular, there is a preference for long, complex, extended, and multipartite headlines.¹ For example:

Miedwiediew nie zgadza się z zarzutami fałszerstw, ale polecił je zbadać [Polska 12.11.11]

Angela Merkel rejects calls for increase in eurozone rescue fund [Independent 25.01.12]

In the case of multipartite headlines, the components of a headline enter into specific relations and fulfil a range of functions in the headline. The first role comprises the identification of the actor of the events or author of the message and/or interpretation of events, or the subject matter of the story (cf. Tereszkievicz forthcoming).

Hamish McRae: The Greeks will not be the last people to lose control of their fiscal policy [Independent 01.02.12]

John Le Carré: Szpiegostwo było moim pierwszym zawodem [Polska 29.11.11]

Open relationships: Love without strings [Independent 06.12.11]

The second part of the headline may also be used to specify the meaning of the first component, which, due to semantic ambiguity or unclear reference, may remain vague or imprecise for the reader, e.g.:

Once they were blind, now they see. Patients treated with cells from human embryo [Independent 01.02.11]

Ruling the roost: The amateur actors who are taking on the role of Johnny 'Rooster' Byron [Independent 30.01.11]

Headlines in these forms may perform an informative role, as they present the basic information on the content of a story – headlines include the most significant details on the actors, authors or type of an event (Keeble 1994: 109). In this way, such titles combine the pragmatic function of a headline and a lead.

¹ In *the Independent*, multipartite and compound headlines constituted 21% of all the headlines, as against only 6% of such headlines in *the Guardian*, or 4% in *the Times*. Such headlines on the website of *Polska* comprised 64% of the headlines, whereas in *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita*, multipartite and compound headlines comprised 6% and 5% of the headlines, respectively. With respect to German newspapers, such headlines constituted 10% of headlines in *FAZ*, 9% in *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, and 4% in *die Welt* (news abstracts collected in the period from 11.11 to 01.12).

The importance and a meaning potential awarded to headlines in this context is confirmed by the fact that a considerable percentage of news abstracts have a headline as their sole component. The segments on the websites in these cases assume the form of thematically grouped registers of links referring to specific stories. The abstracts in such form were present on the majority of the websites, dominating over other types in *the Independent*, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, and *Polska* in particular, constituting on average 68% of the abstracts in *the Independent*, 61% in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, and 76% in *Polska*, respectively.

Main body

While a considerable degree of similarity between the newspapers may be observed concerning syntactic and lexical properties of headlines, a significant degree of variation may be seen with respect to the main body of an abstract.

The main body of a news abstract in some respects resembles a lead of a conventional news story. The most significant similarities concern the function, content and discursive properties of the two news components. In terms of function, a lead of a news abstract fulfils the two primary goals of a conventional lead in a news story – to draw in the reader and to frame the key content of the story (Cotter 2010: 152). In this way it combines two significant functions – informative and interpersonal – in an expanded scope in comparison to the headline. The paragraph highlights what is the most relevant, immediate, new, or attractive – which is a core function of a lead as well (Kolodzy 2006: 192). In contrast to a traditional lead, however, the lead in a news abstract, being a separate and more autonomous unit, does not set up the story structurally, which is an additional function of a lead discussed by Cotter (2010: 152). What is particularly vital in online leads is directness and specificity of information. As Quinn and Filak (2005: 72) emphasize, “a lead that in print may be indirect or slow to develop should be to the point and without mystery on the Web”.

Variation concerns the degree of structural and informational complexity of the leads. The leads may be placed along a scale of informative value and content richness, ranging from texts highlighting the key facts of a story to an all-encompassing summary of the events comprising a story.

In most cases the leads are one-sentence long with the conventional length amounting to 24 words on average.² With respect to content and style, we can see that the sections are organized in line with the requirements to present the key fact of a story and attract readers’ attention, but also to facilitate a quick comprehension of the news. Typically, the leads focus on the key issues of a story. In the examples below, the readers are given news on the main players in the events. In both examples, the most significant elements are fronted to facilitate immediate identification of the news content:

² Detailed length of leads in the analyzed news abstracts was as follows: *the Times* – 20,64 words, *the Guardian* – 16,33, *the Independent* – 18,30; *FAZ* – 28,65, *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* – 44,20, *die Welt* 20,60; *Rzeczpospolita* – 17,74, *Gazeta Wyborcza* – 15,62, *Polska* – 38,2 (news abstracts collected in the period from 11.11 to 01.12).

Swiss bank chief quits after row [Independent 09.01.11]

The head of Switzerland's central bank Philipp Hildebrand has quit in the wake of a public uproar over his private currency deals.

Dutzende Tote bei Anschlagsserie in Bagdad [FAZ 22.12.11]

Bei einer Serie von Bombenanschlägen in der irakischen Hauptstadt Bagdad sind mindestens 70 Menschen getötet worden, mehr als 180 wurden verletzt.

The tendency towards the inclusion of the most remarkable, newsworthy or unusual aspect of a story is particularly strong. The majority of the sections make salient only selected details which are considered the most valuable, striking or immediate in order to excite readers' attention and draw them into the story. Among the news values which are foregrounded in the stories we find negativity, conflict, personalization and prominence – the core criteria of newsworthiness (Keeble 1991: 156, Cotter 2010: 69). The reflection of these news values can be exemplified in the following news abstracts:

Syrian forces clash with defectors [Guardian 04.12.11]

More Syrians have died a day after the UN human rights chief called on the world to protect civilians.

Putin accuses US over poll protests [Independent 08.12.11]

The Russian Prime Minister accused Hillary Clinton of encouraging the election protesters.

The focus on newsworthy details of a story, on the values mentioned above, is associated with the need to enhance the appeal of the news abstracts and encourage the readers to explore the story. This pragmatic and rhetorical goal, due to the position of the abstracts on the front page, becomes the primary function fulfilled by this genre.

At the other end of the scale, with respect to length and complexity of leads, lies *Polska* and *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (SD). The news abstracts on these websites exhibit the most textually complex and extended forms as compared with other newspapers. The information density packaged into the texts is high – the abstracts provide a comprehensive illustration of an event in the form of a summary of the main points of the story. The news abstracts include information on not only the 'what' and the 'who', i.e. standard components of abstracts on British and Polish websites, but also provide background and contextual information on the facts described (cf. Tereszkievicz forthcoming). In other words, the description is rich in detail concerning the circumstances of the events reported on. For instance:

Nach Havarie des Kreuzfahrtschiffs „Costa Concordia“ [SD 14.01.11]

Opfer identifiziert – Kapitän soll verhaftet worden sein

Nach dem Schiffunglück vor der Westküste Italiens suchen die Behörden noch nach Dutzenden Menschen. Drei Todesopfer sind bestätigt, auch deutsche Urlauber wurden

verletzt. Zeugen berichten von Panik an Bord und chaotischen Rettungsversuchen der Crew, nachdem die „Costa Concordia“ auf Grund gelaufen war und seitlich aufgeschlitzt wurde. Unterdessen melden mehrere italienische Medien übereinstimmend, dass der Kapitän des Schiffes in Haft genommen wurde.

In these cases, the readers obtain an extensive picture of the events. However, the complexity of discourse and a high informative value may hinder smooth and quick processing of information. The complexity of form stands against conventional principles of design and user preferences regarding online texts, as described above.

The leads of the abstracts often perform the function of leads to the stories behind them, as is the case on German and Polish newspaper websites. This remains in contrast to British newspapers, where leads typically constitute more autonomous structures, not repeated in the same form in the article, but created specifically as a component of a news abstract.

Images

Though the newspapers differ in the frequency and weight applied to visual elements, their role on all of them is worth noting.³

Visual elements in news sections are of a small thumbnail size. The images do not prevail in the section, rather the relationship between the visual component and the verbal elements of the headline and the main body is underlined (Knox 2009: 165). As Knox (2009: 157) rightly observes, images in news sections do not fulfil all the functions conventionally attributed to press photographs. The images do not inform or present evidence on the events reported on and are far from telling a story (Knox 2009: 157). We may rather say that they act as a “prompt or lead-in for the reader’s eye” (Griffin 2004: 384).

The introduction of visual components to news abstracts and their growing popularity reflect an increasing role attached to the visual and the multimodal. The use of various forms of modality may considerably enhance the meaning potential and the impressive function of the content (Machin 2007, Kress 2010). As Kress (2010: 139) underlines, the application of various modes of communication may serve as a tool of presentation and transmission of knowledge as well as various social positions and relations. Thus, the combination of a textual body or headline with a visual component may significantly add to the general value and impact force of a news abstract.

Links

The structure of the news section may encompass hypertextual links leading to other materials. The addition of links is a common strategy on the websites of *the Guardian* and *die Welt* in particular. On other websites additional links are provided in

³ This can be confirmed by a relatively high frequency of visual components in the form of a photograph or image. Such components were identified in 76% of the news abstracts in *the Guardian*, 33% in *the Times*, and 19% in *the Independent*, 35% in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 31% in *Rzeczpospolita*, 19% in *Polska*, 45% in *FAZ*, 38% in *Suedduetsche Zeitung*, and 32% in *die Welt* (news abstracts collected in the period from 11.11 to 01.12).

the case of the abstracts presenting the news of the day and/or news of significant or ongoing importance.⁴ The list of links may be more or less complex, depending on the impact, value, or consequential nature of the events. Below, we may observe an extended collection of links accompanying a news abstract:

Cameron cuts Britain adrift in Europe with treaty veto [Guardian 09.12.11]
 EU leaders poised to line up 26–1 in support of Franco-German blueprint, leaving UK isolated

- A two-speed Europe, with UK alone in slow lane
- Merkel: ‘I don’t believe Cameron was ever with us’
- PM: ‘I’ve been true to my word’
- Miliband: Cameron has let Britain down
- Coalition strained as Clegg warns Eurosceptics
- Fears in City as UK misses out on bank talks
- Analysis: a new Europe with Germany in charge
- Nicholas Watt: has PM tripped on his own red line?
- Larry Elliott: blundering into a dangerous blind alley
- Jonathan Freedland on the UK treaty veto
- Blog: all the day’s developments
- Editorial: the English outpatient

The links perform a range of functions. If we investigate the content of the links we may see that they provide the readers with a background, follow-up and commentary – the components of a typical news story, regarded as categories which contribute to an event (Keeble 1994: 170, Bell 1998: 88). Specifically, background as a category encompasses previous events to the action of the story, a follow-up covers subsequent events, and a commentary encompasses interpretation of the events in question (Keeble 1994: 170, Bell 1998: 88). By means of links the components are more explicitly marked, become more ‘tangible’ and may be given an extensive form. They are not intertwined into the story and included as components of a story as such, but are self-contained units with a vital informative or illustrative potential. The first two functions are fulfilled by the so-called contextual links which offer previous or parallel texts devoted to a particular event. The role of such links is to help the reader understand the context and background of a news story and to present a cause-and-effect association between the events (Olszański 2006: 168). The comment function is fulfilled by links to journalist commentaries, blogs and editorials. Another category of links comprises the recommendation links (Olszański 2006: 168), which refer the reader to texts more or less closely associated

⁴ Within the analyzed corpus, links were present in 64% of the abstracts in *die Welt* and 54% of those in *the Guardian*. The links proved less frequent on other websites – these components were identified in 10% of the abstracts in *FAZ*, 8% in *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, 7% in *the Times*, 6% of the abstracts in *Rzeczpospolita* and in *Polska*, 3% in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, and 2% of the sections in *the Independent* (news abstracts collected in the period from 11.11 to 01.12).

with a given article – stories in the same thematic field or discussing analogical issues. Frequently there are also supplementary links (Olszański 2006: 168) in the form of multimedia and interactive content that refer the reader to audio-video materials associated with the event in question and complementary to the textual message, as well as to comment boards, and a live coverage of events.

The links may have either a single or multipartite structure. Single-component links have the shape of headlines of the stories and materials they refer to. Analogically to headlines, the components of multipartite links stand in various relations to one another and perform different functions, among which we find the following:

- identification of the author – the first part of the link identifies the author of the text, interpretation, report, etc. It is usually the names of famous politicians, statesmen, experts, and/or celebrities that are supplied, which evidently is to serve a persuasive function and act as an encouragement for the readers to follow the link and read the article in question:

The Earl of Sandwich: It's time we realized these drugs are a threat to society.
[Independent 29.12.11]

Timothy Garton Ash: a diminished Europe [Guardian 07.12.11]

- identification of the subject area – the first component provides information on the thematic scope of the news report. This strategy may serve as a means to help the readers identify specific areas of news in which they may be the most interested:

Reading the Riots: full coverage [Guardian 06.12.11]

Markets live: no solace from Italy [Times 29.12.11]

- identification of the genre – the first component may provide information on the genre of the text to which the link refers. In this way the editors may help shape the users' expectations concerning the form and content of the articles in question:

Comment: SAS's Afghan role cloaked in secrecy [Guardian 06.12.11]

Interview: the man who betrayed Bradley Manning [Guardian 17.12.11]

Blog: UK heads for trouble [Times 08.12.11]

- identification of the type of content – the first part of the link provides a specification of the type of multimedia or interactive content to which the link refers. These components, analogically to the previously identified category, inform the users on the form of the materials behind the links, so that the readers interested in multimedia in particular may easily locate the preferred content. They also highlight the variety of multimedia offered by the newspaper:

Video: Durham Police Appeal [Times 02.01.12]

Audio dispatch: Charles Bremner Times [Times 16.12.11]

In pictures: scenes of the blasts [Guardian 22.12.11]

Interactive: Leveson inquiry day by day [Guardian 02.12.11]

The addition of links shows the complex and extensive coverage of the news story. Links reveal various aspects, angles, and themes, which broadens and enriches the portrayal of the event and may help increase the number of readers interested in the story (cf. Ward 2002: 124). The links allow the news section to merge a range of layers of storytelling – text, image, sound (Kolodzy 2006: 209) and in this way become a hypermodal, intersemiotic entity.

With respect to additional components, a number of conventional practices have also been observed.

Heading (kicker)

A heading or a kicker is a standard component of news abstracts in German newspapers, not conventionally included in Polish and British sections. Within the analyzed collection, namely, a heading represented a regular constituent in the news abstracts on the websites of *die Welt*, *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. The form of the heading differs between the newspapers and remains in various semantic relations to the headline.

Kickers assume a range of structural shapes, to the most frequent of which belong the following:

- Nominal phrases – kickers have the form of noun phrases; this form of the heading proved to be the most frequent possibly because it helps to quickly identify the focus and topic of the publication, e.g. *Gipfeltreffen zur Euro-Krise* [SD 09.01.12], *Anwalt des Bundespräsidenten zu Anruf bei Bild-Chef Diekmann* [SD 09.01.12];
- Simple sentences – kickers also assume the form of simple sentences; in this way, they acquire a more informative and also more intelligible form, e.g. *Frankreichs Präsident kündigt Transaktionssteuer an* [SD 10.01.12], *Gericht stoppt ungarisches Mediengesetz* [SD 21.12.11].

The primary function of a kicker is to provide an orientation on the subject matter discussed in the main story. The degree of specification varies and ranges from a general identification of the field of interest under discussion, to a more detailed description of the core theme of the news. Specifically, kickers help identify the following aspects of a story:

- place, situation, hero of the event – e.g. *Griechenland* [Welt 02.12.11], *EU-Gipfel* [Welt 07.12.11], *Altkanzler* [Welt 04.12.11], *Bundespraesident* [Welt 14.01.12];
- global theme, subject of a continuing series of stories – *EU-Krise* [Welt 12.12.11], *Geldpolitik* [FAZ 21.12.11], *Rechtsterrorismus* [FAZ 03.12.11];
- detailed theme, core issue of the story – *ICE nach London* [FAZ 08.12.11], *Nach Havarie des Kreuzfahrtschiffs "Costa Concordia"* [SD 14.01.12], *Flutkatastrophe auf den Philippinen* [SD 17.12.11].

The function of a kicker is, however, not restricted to identification and may involve a specified description of the key event covered in the story. Such kickers go beyond an identification of a single element of a story to include further components of a news story, e.g. the ‘who’ and the ‘what’. For instance: *Merkel will Lissabon-Vertrag*

ändern [SD 21.11.11], *Bundestag reagiert auf Mordserie* [SD 22.11.11]. On *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* website the kickers perform more descriptive and commentative functions as well. For instance: *Bundespräsident verweigert Veröffentlichung von Medienanfragen* [SD 11.01.12], *EU Bericht rügt Siedlungspolitik im Westjordanland* [SD 14.01.12].

The headings may be seen to fulfil the function similar to that of a headline – they provide information on the focus of the news story. The two components clearly supplement each other to provide a clear frame of a news abstract and its focus.

Byline

In contrast to British or Polish newspapers, a byline is conventionally applied in news abstracts on all the analyzed German websites. Thus, it can be seen as another standard constituent typical specifically of news abstracts on German websites, rather infrequent on other pages, where only several isolated instances of bylines were identified. A byline as a rule comprises the name of the author(s) of the article, journalists or reporters. Additionally, a byline may be extended to include a metatextual specification of the news genre behind the abstract, such as a commentary, interview, e.g.: *Ein Kommentar von Herbert Prantl* [SD 15.12.11]. In this way, by offering the information on the author and the genre, a byline provides further clues on the form and content of a specific publication and may raise the readers' expectations as to the general overtone of the news story. Clear information on the author may be particularly meaningful considering the context of the publication and the medium, that is the web. Namely, disclosure of the author's identity on the internet is becoming more and more significant in the era of a growing popularity of citizen journalism and user-generated content online – phenomena which, though positive in a range of respects, have also faced criticism connected with the degree of professionalism of citizen journalists and credibility of citizen-created content. Attribution of the stories and reports to a specific author may thus raise the trustworthiness and reliability of the materials published.

Reference formula

Reference formulas are supplied in news abstracts on German and Polish websites, and are not conventionally used on British web pages. The formulas are typically attached to the main body of a news abstract. The formulas may assume a graphic or verbal form. On the analyzed German websites, the reference formula attached to the main body of an abstract typically has a verbal form, i.e. "mehr...". As stated above, on British websites, i.e. the home pages of *the Independent*, *the Guardian*, and *the Times*, no such formulas are supplied. Instead, the user is directed to the article upon clicking on the headline. A similar solution is applied on the website of *Rzeczpospolita*, while in the news abstracts on the websites of *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Polska*, reference formulas assume a graphic form of three dots and an arrow, respectively.

As stated above, these solutions apply to news abstracts comprising the element of a main body. In the case of headline-based abstracts, the headline itself links to the article behind it, with no further reference formulas supplied. The only exception to this convention was identified on *www.faz.net*, where headline-based abstracts include an additional reference formula in the form of an arrow.

Number of comments and recommendations

Information on the number of users' commentaries and recommendations is provided in news abstracts on the majority of the analyzed newspapers, i.e. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *die Welt*, *the Guardian*, *the Times*, and *Polska*. This component is not present in news abstracts of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Rzeczpospolita* and *Sued-deutsche Zeitung*.

The addition of this component clearly reflects the affordances of the medium, the degree of interactivity it allows and the possibility the users have to express a commentary or opinion concerning an article, report, or news in general. The function of this component is to provide information on the popularity of a news story or of a particular topic among the readers, which adds a significant persuasive force. Foregrounding information on user-activities on the home page of a newspaper may also be seen as a sign of the newspaper's wish to enhance communication with the readers, enter into a closer relationship with the users, and in this way increase readership.

2.2. Function

The structure and composition of news abstracts is inseparably connected with the functions they perform. The analysis of news abstracts proved that they are used for a range of purposes – informative, descriptive and persuasive – functions common for other journalistic genres as well, headlines and leads in particular (Bell 1991, Cotter 2010).

The first significant function of news abstracts is provision of information and reports on current affairs. The abstracts, as pointed out before, may summarize stories and provide the most significant details on the events reported on or inform about the core aspect of a story. As news abstracts are categorized thematically into sections devoted to various fields of life and areas of information, they have the potential to offer the reader an all-encompassing view of current events. The descriptive function of the news abstracts is associated with the role they play in presenting the stories covered by the website and portraying the offer of the newspaper. A further crucial role of news abstracts, which they share with the headline and the lead, is their persuasive function. The abstracts are not only to provide information, but more importantly, to encourage the users to follow the headline, the lead, to explore the links and delve into the stories (cf. Knox 2007: 26). Persuasive function is associated with an ideological rationale for the use of abstracts. By means of shaping the abstracts in specific ways, an editor has the possibility of influencing the reading path of a reader (cf. Wojtak 2010: 68). In this way the abstracts perform an important ideological function – they point the readers' attention in a particular direction, they suggest a connection between selected facts or stories, and they may suggest an interpretation and evaluation of the events. Finally, their role in the compositional aspect needs to be underlined, as the sections help structure and segment the news, and organize the offer of the newspaper (Knox 2007: 26).

3. Conclusions

News abstracts can be said to bear traces of other news genres – reports, news briefs, or components of stories (headlines, leads), but they also developed features of their own. Among the properties which the sections share with news reports, we may find focus on immediacy, precision, accentuating the drama in an event, and highlighting the uniqueness of an event reported on. It can also be seen that news sections fulfil rhetorical and discursive goals of leads in many respects (cf. Keeble 1994: 109, Cotter 2010: 161). The abstracts follow the conventions of form and discourse – are short and tight, with the most newsworthy element fronted, they highlight the main theme, news values, set the tone of the story, and the conventions of reader orientation – they use a variety of devices to draw the readers in and encourage them to follow the story.

On the other hand, however, news abstracts functionally and structurally differ from the other known genres. Although they are not completely autonomous as they abstract a story, due to their position on the front pages they gain more significance and more independence than leads and headlines, and their role has become more crucial. Unlike leads, which, as Keeble (1994: 183) emphasizes, remain a part of a story as they may contain details not repeated in the story, news abstracts reveal information developed and elaborated on in the main story. Very often the abstracts do not only introduce a story to the reader, but they are news in brief and may constitute a single source of basic information for the readers (cf. Kolodzy 2006: 198). In this way, they are stand alone units, similar to headlines (Keeble 1994: 186), since they are derived from the story, but they are more self-sufficient than headlines and leads. They form a complete whole of visual and textual components (cf. Knox 2007), whose integrity is signalled structurally.

News abstracts may be seen to represent forms dominating on newspaper websites. Since the web belongs to one of the most quickly developing media, potential evolution of the genre of news abstracts is inevitable. Their further development, changes in the content and form across culturally different backgrounds constitutes an appealing area of further research in the field.

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