

Sensationalism in the media: case of Serbia

By

Katarina Belic

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Supervisor: Oana Lup

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Abstract

This research investigates the causes and the consequences of the crisis of the press in Serbia, with a special emphasis on one of its major features – sensationalism. I offer journalistic perspectives on this topic, enriching the academic literature on sensationalism, using qualitative interviews with seven journalists from different outlets in Serbia. The study also explores the effect of sensationalism on journalists’ roles and habits. The analysis showed the specific character of sensationalism in Serbia reflects in journalists’ belief that it is being used not only because of public demand, but also by the political elite with a purpose of distracting the public from important social and political problems. High level of sensationalism in Serbia is also explained by Serbian public being more prone to this kind of news because of specific political and economic circumstances of a transitional country. Lacking proper legal framework, according to the journalists, is the main cause of sensationalism perpetuating. The “ideal journalistic role” in their opinions, because of the mentioned trends, could be described as less demanding, making journalists feel powerless to change the direction of the developments.

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1 Introduction

In late April, parliamentary elections were held in Serbia. The country, especially the capital, is experiencing various protests, motivated by different government projects, accused of being non-transparent and/or illegal. The country is still suffering the consequences of the economic crisis, reflected in all aspects of society.

While scheduling the interviews for this study in Belgrade, the capital, I had a difficult time trying to find the available time slots in the journalists' busy working days. Nevertheless, I was intrigued by hearing a couple of times that they do not know whether they would be available because they had to be in Borca¹ all day. Assuming there is something important in Borca – such as offices, printing halls or headquarters of companies, I asked one of the participants to explain to me what was happening there. His answer was simply – a reality show.

Later, I found out that Borca is the place where a less known Serbian singer was allegedly killed. The story was headlining in the newspapers for days. The journalists were spending the days in front of her house, hoping to find pieces of new information. The protests against the government, on the other hand, were barely mentioned by the newspapers.

The example above illustrates the tendency of Serbian newspapers to report marginal, sensational issues at the expense of important public events. Sensationalism in the press is a feature of a wider crisis of the press currently happening in Serbia. Apart from sensationalism, other features of this crisis are the economic unsustainability of the press, the lack of ownership transparency and the lack of reporting diversity, as well as the suspicious independence of the

¹ Borca is one of the suburban areas in Belgrade.

journalists.² (Matic 2012, 167) Researching this crisis has therefore been the focus of general media research in Serbia in the last couple of years. However, the bulk of research in Serbia did not tackle journalistic experiences or how any of the features mentioned affect their work.

The research question this study is aiming to answer is: What are the causes and the consequences of the crisis of the press in Serbia, especially one of its most visible features – sensationalism? Specifically, I wanted to investigate journalistic perspective on this topic. Journalistic perspective is important because it clarifies and offers valuable insights about sensationalism from individuals actually producing the content of the outlets. The effects on journalists, on the other hand, are important because they reflect the health of a media system, which is one of the most important features of a democratic society.

The aim of this study is, therefore, to address the question of sensationalism appearance, as well as to examine its influence on journalistic work, habits and level of professionalism - as one of the most important parts of any media system – in a typical transitional country with extreme amounts of sensationalism, Serbia. This work is an attempt of exploring this development and its causes with the help of journalistic experiences, as well as presenting the consequences of sensationalism on the idea of the role they believe a journalist should have in a society.

The research on sensationalism in general has been mostly descriptive. Previous research results have confirmed the increasing use of sensationalism, but did not explore the reasons why is it being used as much. (Kleemans 2007, 11-12) My study addresses this gap by offering an extensive explanation of why and how is sensationalism being used, according to journalists in

² All of the translations from texts in Serbian are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

Serbia. Studies addressing this gap help to develop theories about possible differences in using sensationalism across countries. This is especially important because of the obvious focus of the literature on Western countries. The depth of the research on transitional, post-communist states is problematic because of the special circumstances they have. These circumstances – such as a chaotic political scene, law disobedience and unstable, evolving media systems – can affect the traditional usage of sensationalism as a demand-driven process that escalated because of the Internet.

The research is situated in Serbia because it is a transitional, post-communist country with the highest level of sensationalism and the lowest level of journalistic professionalism in Europe, according to the European Media Systems Survey (EMSS). (Popescu 2011) Sensationalism is turning newspapers into tabloids, and those outlets have specific characteristics. The author of the research "Tabloidization of the press in Serbia", Snjezana Milivojevic, states: "The specific thing for tabloidization in Serbia is the fact it happens not purely for commercial reasons, and because of intensive political changes and conflict situations this kind of press has a political focus." ("Tabloidizacija dnevne stampe", *B* 92, 2004)

To explore these issues, I have conducted seven interviews with journalists from different press outlets currently issued in Serbia. The thematic analysis of the data collected this way revealed their experience and opinions on the topic. Talking to journalists – people responsible for creating the actual sensational content – explains and clarifies this trend, as well as the consequences it has on their work, habits and roles. Journalism is one of the most important reflections of a democracy, and if this kind of development has a negative influence on the journalist, then it becomes a threat to the cornerstones of democracy.

The analysis showed that journalists explain sensationalism in Serbia not simply using a public demand argument, but also as a purposeful development, supported by the elites and interest groups, with the intention of focusing public's attention away from the important problems in the society. Sensationalism, as well as ethical breaches, are especially present in Serbia because of lacking legal framework and implementation of the media law. In these circumstances, journalists perceive themselves as powerless to do the job right, and adjust their writing to the sensational environment. Thus, even their description of an "ideal journalist" is less demanding, aligned towards an "objective" or "neutral" more than a "participatory" role. (More about these roles: Cohen 1963, 191 in McQuail 1994, 195)

The thesis proceeds as follows - the next chapter covers the most important literature in sensationalism research, focusing on implications of different definitions for understanding and studying the phenomenon. It also describes the importance of sensationalism, as well as most important theories about journalistic roles. A brief history of media scene in Serbia from 1990 until today is also included, describing current circumstances in the country.

The third chapter is devoted to the research design. It offers the explanation why Serbia is an important country for this research, as well as the steps in designing and conducting qualitative interviews with journalists. The fourth chapter presents the main findings of the study. In the Conclusion, the findings are summed up and future academic and policy recommendations are offered.

2 Literature review

2.1 What is sensationalism and tabloidization?

The word “sensationalism” in the beginning did not have any negative connotations. It was defined in Samuel Johnson’s dictionary in 1755 as “perception by means of the senses”. (Johnson 1755, 230 in Grabe 2001, 637) Grabe states that most of the media critics assume that there is a strong connection between sensationalism and people’s emotions. (Grabe 2001, 637) The most important aspects of this emotionalizing and the negative turn in explaining the notion have been captured in other definitions. For example: “Sensational news can be defined as news content that appeals to our basic needs and instincts” (Davis and Mcleod 2003, 210 in Wang 2012, 712) or: “Sensational stories provoke more sensory and emotional reactions than what society generally deems proper to experience.” (Daniels in Tannenbaum and Lynch 1960, 382 in Grabe et al. 2001, 637)

Other attempts have been connecting sensationalism with tabloids, as well as including explanations about the transformation that information is going through when sensationalized. For example, Wang explains: “To summarize, sensationalism can be defined as a tendency to sensationalize news, in which tabloid news topics displace socially significant stories and flashy production styles overpower substantive information”. (Bek 2004; Grabe et al. 2000, 2001; Wang and Cohen 2009 in Wang 2012, 712)

From all of these definitions, it is easy to sum up the main parts of sensationalized news. Most authors underline emotions, shocking style and flashy production (most of the time when it comes to television). It is important to note that some of the definitions could be understood as neutral – simply explanatory – while others mention also how it affects the society (“overpower

substantive information”). “The negative turn” in defining sensationalism in the literature – moving from a neutral term to a negative one - has been triggered by concerns about the influence on the public. However, the influence on the journalists has not been explored.

Another important aspect of defining sensationalism is the difference about the “content” and the “form” of sensationalism. “Stories dealing with celebrities, crime, sex, disasters, accidents, and public fears, have consistently been labeled as sensational.” (Davie & Lee 1995; Ehrlich 1996; Hofstetter & Dozier 1986; Juergens 1966; Knight 1989; Shaw & Slater 1985; Stevens 1985a in Grabe et al. 2001, 637) Grabe, on the other hand, argues that content-based defining is not enough – that by changing the form, other topics can also become sensational. (Grabe 2001, 639) Similarly, McLachlan and Golding are writing about three levels of tabloidization – range, form and style. (Mc Lachlan and Golding 2000 in Uribe and Gunter 2004, 388) When it comes to range, they think about less informational, foreign affairs and hard news, as opposed to more entertainment, home and soft news. (Uribe and Gunter 2004, 388) Form “was understood as less proportional space dedicated to text and more to visuals and headlines” (Djupsund and Carlson 1998 in Uribe and Gunter 2004, 388), and style as the emphasis on personalization. The range plays a similar role to content, and the form is represented under “form and style”.

Previous distinctions are important because they underline the possibility of hard news to be represented in a sensational way too – and that is what researchers miss when marking it based exclusively on the content. Therefore, I will not employ definitions of sensationalism that make differences between sensational (crime, human interest and show business) and non-sensational (politics or economics) topics. (Adams 1978; Ryu 1982 in Uribe and Gunter 2007, 209)

Tabloidization as a process also emerged from a word that did not have negative connotations at first. Tabloids were simply a different form of magazines, mostly focused on “lighter news”, which was even considered desirable in cases of including the non-elite readers. (Fiske 1992; Hartley 1996; Lumby 1999 in Rowe 2011, 452) Similarly to sensationalism, it soon became a negative term – becoming a synonym to “trivialization” and “emotionalization” (*Deutsche Welle* in Rowe 2011, 452), as well as “condemned as representing the deterioration of serious news gathering, reporting, and analysis.” (Franklin 1997; Sparks and Tulloch 2000 in Rowe 2011, 452)

Nevertheless, the attempts of defining these phenomena are far from ending. Uribe, for example, stressed the need for notions of tabloidization and sensationalism to be constantly redefined and applied to different countries in order to achieve diversity. (Uribe 2004, 400)

2.1 Role of the journalist

Here I briefly present the basic conceptions of different journalistic roles in the literature. Useful distinction has been made by Cohen, who was one of the first to distinguish

two separate self-conceptions of the reporter's role as that of 'neutral reporter', referring to ideas of the press as informer, interpreter and instrument of government (lending itself as a channel or mirror), and that of 'participant', the traditional 'fourth estate' notion, covering ideas of the press as representative of the public, critic of government, advocate of policy and policy-maker. (Cohen 1963, 191 in McQuail 1994, 195)

Apart from these, McQuail also introduces other functions such as "a watchdog", "an educator", "political mobilizer" and "an entertainer". (McQuail 1994, 195) In an overview of the surveys examining the topic, he also mentions cross-cultural differences and the appearance of different journalistic labels over time, which makes it important to investigate changes in journalistic culture. (McQuail 1994, 195-197)

Nevertheless, in case of choosing any of the roles above, there are some journalistic codes, ethics that seem to be universally accepted. McQuail defines them as: truth and accuracy, impartiality and fairness, respect for individual privacy, independence from vested interests, responsibility to society and the public good, respect for law and moral decency and good taste. (McQuail 1994, 126) Almost every country has its own, mostly written Code of Ethics for journalists – unofficial, moral and professional guidelines that serve as "courts of honor". The Serbian one³ was used as a guideline for making a Report on daily press for the first time in the country. The Report on tracking the daily press in Serbia from April to December 2015, conducted by Organization for European Security and Cooperation and the Ministry of Culture and Information of Serbia, showed 3357 breaches of the Journalist codex. (Savet za štampu 2015) This is the first such report made in Serbia, which means the number is not comparable to previous years. However, it is still illustrative to the quality of the press in the country.

Information presented points to the fact media professionalism and journalistic ethics are endangered in Serbian society. It is an incentive more to explore how sensationalism and other features of the “crisis of the press” influence the work of journalists.

2.2 Why is it important to study sensationalism?

It is important to explain what influences sensationalism could have on society and why it is important to study them in states where tabloidization and sensationalism rapidly emerge. The more is known about different problems sensationalism could cause, the more seriously it could be understood as a problem that should be fought against. Also, it is important to access the nature of sensationalism in a media system. As previously discussed, simple content-based

³ “Kodeks Novinara Srbije.” [Journalistic Codex of Serbia] n.d. <http://www.nuns.rs/codex/ethical-code.html>.

sensationalism is less harmful. Nevertheless, if the important societal and political aspects of the public discourse become sensationalized, this can endanger the whole media system and the cornerstones of democracy. Investigating sensationalism from various aspects reveals its nature – whether it has the potential to cause some of these problems. If it does, then an incentive to fight this phenomenon emerges out of the analysis performed.

Firstly, sensationalism can affect the basic democratic right of a citizen to be informed. This does not happen directly – by hiding the information from the citizens – but rather indirectly, by preventing the most important parts of the story to get to the public as the most important one. As Wang states, it has the possibility to “displace socially significant stories”. (Bek 2004; Grabe et al. 2000, 2001; Wang and Cohen 2009 in Wang 2012, 712) By highlighting the sensational parts of the news (most of the time persons involved instead of the actual happening, but not exclusively this), it can shift the audience attention from the causes of the problem to sensation, emotional and overemphasized aspects of the story, thus not hiding but transferring the information. This, in turn, prevents citizens from having the full story, even though the information they receive might be true – they are packaged in a way that focuses their attention away from the problem roots and eventual solutions, rather than the other way around. If this is found true by investigating consequences of sensationalism, then it is justified to condemn it and frame it as a problem for democracy in a country.

The second most important issue or problem that tabloidization and sensationalism could cause is connected to the media’s “facilitative” role in a society, as presented in a book by Christians et al. “When we enact the facilitative role in reporting on human activities and institutions, we examine a creative process whereby people produce and maintain forms of life and society, as well as systems of meaning and value.” (Christians et al. 2009, 167) They

especially emphasize the journalists' role in this process, saying that media professionals are definitely a part of society's "process of moral articulation." (Christians et al. 2009, 169)

The most important media norms and laws were developed because of the fear that unacceptable patterns of behavior could become legitimized if they become widespread in an unregulated media environment. Sensationalism and tabloidization in the media cannot be officially forbidden – and there is a fear that by promoting sensational, emotion-driven and tabloidized news, the media could (even unintentionally) alter the public discourse. This could happen by producing the belief that it is "normal" or "acceptable" that this kind of reporting exists, leading to the belief that it is "normal" or "acceptable" to look, think and analyze the issues in this way – superficially, *ad hominem* and overemotionally. This mechanism is best explained as a "slippery slope":

The 'slippery slope' is slippery because at each step the standards and the practices of the past are not merely abandoned but forgotten, as the new (reduced) standards become established and acquire a feel of naturalness and inevitability; that is, as they take root in the *habitus*. (Crossley and Roberts 2004, 96)

Apart from these, sensationalism and tabloidization could endanger the media's monitorial role, sometimes referred to as the "watchdog function". (for example, Christians et al. 2009, 30) It could be defined as "an organized scanning of the real world of people, conditions, and events, and of potentially relevant sources of information." (Christians et al. 2009, 140) Tabloidization and sensationalism can influence this by turning the "scanning" role into a superficial search for sensational aspects of the story, which narrows down the potential sources and changes the optimistic meaning of the word "monitorial" into something more similar to "monotonial". Everything becomes represented the same way – shocking. Sensationalism is often described as emerging from commercialism and increasingly heating competition for the audience, which

"has been associated with manipulation, consumerism, lack of integrity and lack of originality and creativity." (Blumler 1991, 1992 in McQuail 1994, 138)

On the other side, there are thoughts about possible positive aspects of this process. This is why it is important to investigate the consequences of sensationalism in individual situations, accessing whether it is dangerous in that case or not. For example, Professor Mitchell Stephens argues, "sensationalism also serves a function by promoting the spread of information to less-literate audiences and strengthening the social fabric". (Rogers 2016) He does not deny the negative side – but also states that it serves some important functions. "While there is plenty of silliness in our various tales of wantonness and crime, they do manage to serve various important societal/cultural functions: in establishing or questioning, for example, norms and boundaries." (Rogers 2016)

Lastly, there could be an argument along the lines of demand or audience-driven sensationalism, meaning that giving people what they want to read cannot be judged without crossing the lines of paternalism. People's choices and tastes, and the newspapers that simply address the public wishes cannot be judged, because that would imply that there is a proper model of what people should read, disregarding their taste and differences.

Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that an overtabloidized society overall lacks the possibility to offer a different choice of reading material – therefore, people are not in the position to choose. Media scholars were not able to fully explain the demand side when it comes to describing the expansion of sensationalism. This is mostly because preferences about media content, even though sometimes connected to family and social background, are still individual and hard to predict. (McQuail 1997, 79) In this work, McQuail concludes that the best scholars

can do is to describe the audience's taste in a certain moment of time. (McQuail 1997, 81) For example, Kleemans et al. have conducted an experiment about the age and gender differences in preferring negative content and tabloid packaging in the media. The results showed men and younger individuals prefer this kind of content more. (Kleemans et al. 2012, 691) Researches aiming to describe the demand side at a certain point in time are also necessary in order to see whether the demand side argument about sensationalism is justified, or there is something else to the sensationalism expansion.

2.3 Previous research on sensationalism

There has been a high level of interest in examining and explaining sensationalism among the political communication authors. (for example: Grabe et al. 2001; Uribe and Gunter 2004, 2007; Wang 2012) Nevertheless, the research has been unstructured and relied on different definitions, as well as the concepts of formal measurement, making it hard to access whether the reporters have been rightly accused for creating sensational content. (Grabe et al. 2001, 638) There have been studies focusing exclusively on the tabloid outlets, assuming that the broadsheets are not affected by sensationalistic tendencies as much. (Uribe and Gunter 2004, 387)

The bulk of the research has mostly focused on the USA and Western Europe. The researchers tackled the issue of how spread-out sensationalism is while also trying to come to a joint definition of it (Wang 2012). The competition in the market has been a general answer to the occurrence of sensationalism. Because of this, “market-driven journalism” has entered the scholarly usage (for example, Vettehen et al. 2005). The logic behind it is newly appeared competition with the electronic media, in a race for profit and survival. (Wang 2012, 716) Nevertheless, this story is far from closure, as scholars also

call for investigation on how and why these sensationalism trends appear in various countries (Wang 2012).

There are a couple of research projects, mentioned by Kleemans (such as Slattery and Hanaken 1994, Hjarvard 2000, Slattery, Doremus and Marcus 2001) that aimed at discovering whether there is an increase or decrease in sensationalistic news reporting, or comparisons in between two media systems or moments in time. (Kleemans 2007, 10-11) In almost all of these studies, the result was increasing the amount of sensationalism in general reporting. (Kleemans 2007, 11) These projects, despite being descriptive, are useful for gaining support for further examination of the phenomenon.

2.3.1 Previous research in Serbia

In Serbia, this kind of a comparative analysis between two broadsheets and two tabloid newspaper was conducted by Snjezana Milivojevic in 2004, right after the tabloids started becoming visible. The authors of this research wanted to investigate the differences in reporting in the broadsheets and the new generation of tabloids. The broadsheets were represented with *Politika* and *Danas*, while the tabloids were *Kurir* and *Centar* (which does not exist anymore). (Milivojevic 2009) The major concerns behind this research were anticipated changes in the reading habits of the society, as well as journalistic and ethical standards. (Milivojevic 2009)

The research team did the analysis consisting of a couple of case-studies on political events and their coverage in these outlets. They found that there was a major difference between titles – most of the broadsheet ones were informative, and the tabloid ones were largely "sensationalized, focused on the affairs or conflicts". (Milivojevic 2009) The difference reflected also in the cited sources – the number of anonymous sources was higher in the tabloids – and the

cover pages.⁴ (Milivojevic 2009) These results hinted the possibility of tabloids to be less informative and reliable. The study was conducted in 2004, and while it is important for this research as a proof that the process had been going on in Serbia, it did not offer any explanation on how the journalists perceive it, or how it affects their work.

Nevertheless, it seems that tabloidization and sensationalism are being used slightly differently than what the classical market-driven explanations are about - simply arguments about demand for sensationalism in the audience. Milivojevic states there are differences between Serbian tabloids and such outlets in other countries. She claims the main difference is the lack of classical tabloid topics, like celebrity and show business, in Serbian tabloids, and focus on the political topics that mostly are not center of attention for these kinds of outlets. (Milivojevic 2009) This is why it is important to see how the media scene has been evolving in Serbia.

2.4 The media scene in Serbia

The media system of the Republic of Serbia has developed under the influence of the communist heritage of Yugoslavia. The break-up of this country has resulted in six⁵ different systems. Until the year of 1990, the media system was typically communist – most of the media outlets were under the control, owned and influenced by the state. However, the states of which Yugoslavia consisted had a possibility for their own development path even with state control – because the country had a decentralized media system, where each of the republics had its own communicational channels. (Radeljic 2012, 123) Therefore, the Yugoslavian media system was

⁴ "The general message behind the cover pages of *Politika* and *Danas* is calming and rational; the general message behind those of *Kurir* and *Centar* is disturbing, excluding, frightening and threatening." (Milivojevic 2009)

⁵ Seven if Kosovo is included. Kosovo is internationally recognized as an independent country, but has not been recognized by the Republic of Serbia.

segmented along the lines of "economic, political, geographical or cultural reasons" that characterized different states. (Radeljic 2012, 123)

A critical juncture for the media was the death of the leader of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito, in 1980. (Radeljic 2012, 123) This was, according to Radeljic, an opportunity for media to "modify their activism" - "as soon as the republican Communist leaders became increasingly critical of each other and of the federal structure of the state, the media also became critical as 'astute journalists were able to create space for genuinely independent work by exploiting new divisions among the authorities' ". (Thompson 1999, 9 in Radeljic 2012, 123)

The break-up of Yugoslavia in 1990 marked the beginning of the Slobodan Milosevic regime in Serbia, under the Socialist Party of Serbia. This period, until the end of this leader's rule in 2000, was most commonly described as centralized, monopolized and repressed (Matic and Rankovic 2016), even though the state monopoly in the media sphere was formally banished. ("Nepozeljnost skrivenog drzavnog vlasnistva u medijima", NUNS, 2016) This period brought the first appearance of independent media. The Serbian media was mostly polarized between outlets that were marked as "regime" and "oppositional". (Matic and Rankovic 2016) The context in which the media developed was extremely politicized, with the media system as one of the most important battle fields for political forces. (Matic and Rankovic 2016) This is probably where the different paths, even for tabloids, started – going into the world of politics. The government still had an enormous influence on what was written, published and played, and these were the major concerns of the opposition.

Nevertheless, even with the democratic opposition winning the elections in 2000, the expected structural change did not happen, and most of the media outlets remained inclined to

whoever was in power at the moment. (Matic and Rankovic 2016) In 2002, the process of privatization of all publicly held media started with the Broadcasting Act (Matic and Rankovic 2016), causing different opinions about the influence on journalism. In 2015, this process was still incomplete, but most of the outlets became privately owned. Vukasin Obradovic, president of the Independent Association of Serbian Journalists, summarized the concerns in an interview for BIRN: "Before, the money [for the media] came from the state, but now the owners will just try to get the money in muddy waters." (Dragojlo 2015)

Even though the most important goal of the privatization was distancing the media from the state influence, other concerns appeared. The situation was worsened with the accusations of controversial and suspicious privatizations, such as the one of the daily *Vecernje novosti* (Kremenjak 2015), and the unexpected possibilities, such as giving "rise to "Serbia's little Murdoch", as the media labeled a businessman from Krusevac who bought eight local media outlets at a total price of 280,000 euros." ("Media Landscape in Serbia in 2015" 2016)

In that moment, ownership of the media also became one of the most important questions, with the rise of companies buying different media outlets, and the same owners opening different outlets. (*Politika* 2015) The world wide economic crisis is also affecting the media revenues, decreasing them and making them dependent on commercials and advertising. (Matic and Rankovic 2016) The general public opinion is not inclined towards trusting journalists, while most press outlets are becoming tabloids or at least tabloidized. (Matic and Rankovic 2016)

The paradox in the status of the Serbian quality press is that the papers that contributed most to the democratization of the country in the difficult period of the 1990s and that served the public interest, are the poorest and still have a limited influence on the public. The major problem of the high quality press is economic sustainability. These papers are

barely profitable – they suffer financial losses or survive with minimum income. (Matic and Rankovic 2016)

Apart from economic sustainability and commercialization, the influence of the Internet is one of the factors that is mentioned in the research literature. Balkanmedia, a portal on Media and Democracy in South East Europe, blames the lower quality of the daily press on online media, saying that even though the newspaper prices are low, the circulations are declining. (Nedeljkovic 2016) High quality level is hard to maintain – only a couple of outlets have managed it – while most of them surrender to sensationalism and tabloidization in this market race. (Nedeljkovic 2016)

Other Serbian literature on media also includes concerns about increasing tabloidization. "In the last three years three daily newspaper stopped printing (*Pravda*, *Nacionalni gradjanski, Glas Javnosti*), and one new showed up (*Informer*). (Matic 2012, 169) Matic concludes that broadsheets have the lowest selling rates, while tabloids are represented the most in the market. (Matic 2012, 169) However, none of these researches included examining the attitudes and opinions of journalists working in this fast-changing and transforming environment.

As already mentioned, traditional media still play an important role in the country, and the market for the printed media is still large - it is estimated that between 800,000 and 1 million copies of papers are sold in Serbia daily. (Matic and Rankovic 2016) Ipsos Strategic Marketing Data presented the readership percentages of daily press in 2010. In the 12-65 age group, 41,4 percent reads at least one daily outlet, which is around 2,198,362 people. (Matic and Rankovic 2016) When it comes to different newspapers, the most read ones are *Blic* (14.5 percent), *Vecernje Novosti* (9.0 percent), *Kurir* (7.3 percent), *Press* (6.6 percent), *Alo!* (5.1 percent), *24 Sata* (4.2 percent) and *Politika* (2.5 percent). (Matic and Rankovic 2016)

According to a research from 2015, the first three newspapers did not change – the most read ones are still *Blic*, *Vecernje Novosti* and *Kurir*, but they were followed by a new tabloid on the market, *Informer*. (Parcetic Mitic 2016) *Kurir* and *Informer* are tabloid newspaper, while *Blic* and *Vecernje Novosti* are not publicly recognized as such, but are increasingly tabloidizing. Out of all the above, only *Politika* is still recognized as a broadsheet, quality newspaper.

3 Research design

In this chapter, I offer explanation for the selection of Serbia as a country in which I conducted this research. Also, a detailed process of preparing the questionnaire and conducting the interviews, as well as performing the analysis is presented. I have been using qualitative interviewing to answer to the research questions of this study.

3.1 Case selection

Serbia is a perfect fit for research on journalistic perspectives on the topic of sensationalism, as well as the changing role of journalists and their problems. Firstly, it represents a typical under-investigated country – a transitional country in the Balkans. The under investigation of transitional, post-communist states is problematic because media and political environment differ from those in Western countries. The media systems in transitional countries are still fragile, lacking proper implementation of the laws and democratic tradition to rely on. These circumstances, together with often chaotic and unstable political systems, can affect the traditional understanding of sensationalism as investigated in Western countries – the demand side and market based explanations might not be enough.

Secondly, there have been media system studies - such as the European Media System Survey, which is an expert-based survey – that gave this country by far the worst scores for professionalism of journalists, sensationalism and respect for journalistic ethical norms. (Popescu 2011) The EMSS data are a result of a cross-national online survey, whose respondents were several hundred media experts across 33 European countries. (Popescu 2011). This research has enabled a comparison of different media systems on topics that did not have an empirical background before.

EMSS questions are especially useful for comparing the amount of sensationalism among the European countries. The experts were asked “Do the news media in Serbia focus *too much*, *just enough* or *too little* on information about sensational aspects of events and stories?” On a scale where 0 represented “too little”, and 10 represented “too much”, Serbia scored 8.9, which is the highest score for the 33 countries surveyed. (Popescu 2011) The neighboring countries, Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia scored similar. The mean for all of the countries is 7.46, which confirms that there is a general trend toward sensationalism in the media in Europe. This alone is an incentive for answering the question why media professionals believe this problem is affecting these countries more than other European states, which are also affected by sensationalism.

The negative trends, such as sensationalism, influence media environment – more specifically, the role and the work of a journalist in a country. This was partially investigated by evaluating the statement “Journalists in the country are motivated by an ethic of serving the public interest”, where 0 stands for “not at all”, and 10 is “very much”. Serbia scored 3.3, which is the lowest result for the 33 countries. (Popescu 2011) The mean of all the results is 4.84. On the same scale, this country scored the lowest – 2.8 – on the question “Journalists have sufficient training to ensure that basic professional norms like accuracy, relevance, completeness, balance, timeliness, double-checking and source confidentiality are respected in news-making practices”. (Popescu 2011) The mean of all the results is 4.36.

Two composite measures⁶ – the Journalistic Professionalism Index and the Journalistic Culture Index, on a scale where 0 is low and 10 is high, scored Serbia 2.7, which is once again the lowest grade received. (Popescu 2011) The means of the scores are 4.59 and 4.61

⁶ The composite measures consisted of multiple responses to questions about a similar topic.

respectively. All of the above mentioned makes a perfect case for examining how this trend affects – if at all – journalistic roles and habits, and what the journalist think about this development in general.

3.2 Methodology

Doing interviews with journalists – people who are responsible for creating the content of the newspaper – is the best way to respond to the aim of this study. These people, who work on the content of the news every day, are the legitimate ones to talk about how development of the media system affects them, how they perceive their role, as well as sensationalism and its causes in general. It is important to hear their side of the story because it is the only way to narrow down the research gap on how sensationalism is used in practice.

The purpose of the fieldwork that I have conducted in April and May 2016 in Serbia was, therefore, to find out how journalists reflect on the current situation of media and media development, especially on sensationalism. Apart from the general research question already mentioned, there were quite a few broad themes I was looking to explore. I wanted to investigate which of the mentioned journalistic roles are perceived as “ideal” among Serbian journalists, hoping the conclusions could reveal the ways circumstances in this country affect the idea of the profession itself. This was important especially in light of theoretical debates about this issue. I aimed for some experienced journalists – those that had been working in communist times – to see if roles and habits changed throughout time and what is their understanding of the causes of sensationalism, as well as for journalists from publicly proclaimed tabloids and other newspapers. It was also interesting whether they will mention any positive aspect of sensationalism, or they perceive it exclusively as negative, as well as if they have specific assessments about “what the audience wants”.

Therefore, the most appropriate methodology for this kind of research was conducting qualitative interviews. (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey 2011, 109) I have decided to conduct in-depth interviewing because this method is most commonly used when looking for personal experiences and individual stories about a certain phenomenon. (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey 2011, 109) The semi-structured interviewing was necessary because I wanted the participants to "tell their own story", but still respond to general topics I had in mind. Therefore, I have been using interview questions as a guideline, using a less-structured interview guide that complemented the exploratory character of this research. (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey 2011, 112) The English version of the questionnaire is included in the appendix.

The questions asked were open and quite broad in scope. This was important for my study, because I did not want the responses to be biased or influenced by the phrasing of the questions. I also wanted to avoid any possibility of leading the interviewees to a certain answer. For example, even though sensationalism and tabloidization were the topics I wanted to find about the most, I did not ask the opening questions using those terms. Rather I asked them "how would you explain or characterize the current situation in the Serbian press", which allowed me to see what their general opinions are and whether they will mention sensationalism. Also, for example, without informing the journalists about the results about the ethical breaches, I wanted to see if they will mention this as a problem, and if they will explain it with similar or the same causes as sensationalism, or other problems they identify in their responses.

In cases the interviewees did not answer the question I asked, I proceeded with a follow-up question about what I wanted to find out, phrasing it in a way that hopefully minimized the possible influence – most of the time simply as "Is there something else you would like to add about this?" The interview guide included possible follow-ups and probe questions. (Arthur and

Nazroo in Ritchie and Lewis 2003, 124) These additional questions differed, but they tapped into the same idea. Nevertheless, every participant had a different style of answering the questions, which made it necessary to adjust the way of phrasing.

When it came to participant recruitment, I followed Hennink, Hutter and Bailey's two-stage approach – first, defining a population from which I need a sample, and then envisioning the strategies for participant recruitment. (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey 2011, 84) The study population was defined by my research interest. I decided to limit the scope of this research to journalists who are employed as reporters in traditional daily newspaper issued regularly in Serbia, without including the online versions of those outlets or Internet portals. There were two reasons for this decision. Firstly, interviewing journalists of traditional outlets makes it possible for some of the respondents to have more working experience, which brought many valuable insights. Online outlets and Internet portals are mostly working with a younger journalistic team. Secondly, even though the circulations of daily newspaper are following the worldwide trend of decrease, these traditional media outlets are still a significant way for communicating in Serbia. According to the European Media Systems Survey, experts in Serbia have marked their country with the highest result when it comes to answering the question whether online news media outlets are significant competitors of traditional media outlets. This country scored 7.5/10, which means that there is a strong support between the respondents that traditional media is still the one that is read/viewed the most. (Popescu 2011) The mean of all the results is 5.78.

As for the strategies, I was not concerned with randomizing the participants, because I was not looking to generalize findings to all of the journalists - rather to gain an understanding of the process in question, examine how the participants perceive it and gain knowledge about the environment where it is all happening. (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey 2011, 84) Therefore, I

utilized a non-random approach, precisely because I had specific characteristics of the participants in mind. (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey 2011, 84) The aim was to have one participant from each of the current major newspaper in Serbia – *Blic*, *Informer*, *Kurir*, *Vecernje Novosti*, *Politika* and *Srpski Telegraf*. The readership percentages I was following while scheduling the interviews from different outlets are presented on page 18. I chose journalists in such a way that they come from different environments – tabloids, semi-tabloids and smaller, broadsheet-aligning outlets. Unfortunately, due to time limitations and problems with scheduling, I was unable to speak to a journalist from *Politika*, which is the only recognized broadsheet left.

However, this did not influence the analysis for two reasons. Firstly, when it comes to mechanisms and differences I was mostly concerned about sensationalism in the press, and those are the insights only journalists working for outlets that are more or less affected by this trend could offer me. Secondly, the circulation rate of *Politika* is small, which means that this shortcoming did not exclude an important part of the market share.

It was also important to make sure some of them were experienced journalists (with over twenty years of professional work), and that I include representatives of a younger generation and journalists just entering the profession. These were valuable insights on any existing differences in their opinions and experiences.

I used mixed strategies for participant recruitment. The first attempt was to utilize the formal networks by directly contacting the newspaper, but soon I realized informal networks as well as approaching the individuals that fit the profile I was looking for directly turned out to be the most effective strategy. From that point on, I also used the snowball strategy, asking previous

participants whether they know a colleague from another outlet that fits the profile. (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey 2011, 91-102)

The respondents are all voluntary participating adults, who have mostly requested anonymity. Because of the possibility of recognizing a journalist by their personal information in a small society such as the Serbian one, I promised I would only use the outlet they are working for and the years of journalistic experience while presenting the data. This was an important part of establishing rapport in the interviews. (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey 2011, 124) In only one case, I agreed to disclose also the name of the outlet. Composition of the sample – the profiles of the journalist – can be found in the Appendix.

As previously mentioned, I had a clear goal in mind – to interview journalists from all of the most read newspapers. Nevertheless, I wanted to increase the number of interviews until I reached saturation. That is why I complemented the data from five face-to-face in-depth interviews with two e-mail interviews from other, smaller newspapers' journalists. At that point, the themes were recurring enough, so I decided that I had a reasonable amount of data.

This kind of changing the interview mode while in the research process is possible because of the greater flexibility of qualitative research. (Silverman 2013, 153) While this kind of interviewing has the possibility to reduce the interviewer bias, increase the available time for thinking and reflection, as well as avoid transcribing, there is still no opportunity to clarify the answers and ask probe questions, making the interviews less informative and open. (Halperin and Heath 2012, 271) I faced this difficulty of my methodology by exchanging follow-up e-mails with the two participants in question.

General limitations of this study are twofold. Firstly, the results of this study do not generalize to wider population of Serbian journalists, as case in every qualitative research. However, it was not the aim of my study to generalize the findings to a larger group – I was rather looking for a story that will help explain and understand the phenomenon in the country from a perspective of the journalists. Secondly, this research is focused on sensationalism. However, this is not the only problem journalists in the country are facing. Self-censorship, different ideological and political influences and occasional suspicious firing of the journalists are topics that deserve separate investigation. Therefore, this study examines only a specific part of media system characteristics. Future examination of other mentioned topics are necessary in order to have the whole picture.

Apart from those general remarks, in spite of every effort from my side and the anonymity, I cannot be sure whether all of the responses reflect true opinions of the journalists. Possible personal connections to the outlets or external pressures might have inhibited some of the interviewees. While I believe this was not the case in the interviews conducted, it is a possibility I cannot exclude.

3.3 Analysing the data

After collecting and transcribing interviews, I proceeded with data reduction, coding and drawing conclusions. (Halperin and Heath 2012, 278) I started with some basic themes coming from the questions, doing 'deductive coding'⁷ (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey 2011, 219) and proceeded inductively, with developing codes by "constant comparison" (Glaser and Strauss

⁷ Some of the basic deductive themes I started from were: "general description", "the time of appearance", "the causes", "the influence", "the definition", "the ideal role" etc. However, inductive proceeding allowed me to reveal new ones – for example, "privatization", "demand-side" and "elite influence" emerged from the causes, "ethics" emerged from the definition, "future" from their concluding remarks, and so on.

1967 in Halperin and Heath 2012, 281), meaning that I was constantly comparing the coded themes while reading the transcripts, until I reached the best possible versions. "This process is ongoing until saturation is reached: that is, no new codes or categories emerge and coding more transcripts would only produce a repetition of themes." (Halperin and Heath 2012, 281) Combining inductive and deductive coding allowed me to seek for the themes I did not notice initially. (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey 2011, 218) Lastly, I presented the conclusions by connecting and comparing themes from different interviews. Illustrative quotes are also presented. These were extremely valuable in cases where interviewees provided me with examples and time comparisons.

4 The perspectives

4.1 General trends

There is one aspect where all of the participants of the interviews fully agreed – defining the current state of the press in Serbia. Initially answering, none of them was even within the limits of moderate. They all perceive the current situation as “maybe worst ever”, “process of complete dying of journalism, “awful”, “total commercialization”, “chaotic, poor, pitiful and miserable”. There was no difference in the opinions between more and less experienced journalists in general. Nevertheless, a younger journalist specifically stated there are absolutely no positive trends, while an experienced journalist was a bit less exclusive:

Currently in journalism, unfortunately, I really don't know what kind of positive thing I could say... Maybe, there is still a lot of young people that wish to do this job, they are schooling, graduating from faculties... (B)⁸

Shortly after that, when asked about the possibilities of those young professionals to become good journalists, he said – “Hardly, hardly... They have been pressured from all sides.” These responses gave the impression that from a distance, a large number of young journalists could indicate an important development. However, the younger journalists had hardly any positive words for the current state in the media.

When asked about the problems they are facing – basically, why they describe the situation in such a negative tone, they all, apart from one, mentioned sensationalism and the tabloidization of the media scene among the most important problems. The one that did not mention this directly was talking about commercialization, but in the later conversation basically used tabloidization and commercialization interchangeably, while others identified

⁸ The interviews are conducted in Serbian. All of the translations are mine.

commercialization as one of the causes – not always as the same notion – of sensationalism and tabloidization.

The respondents in this study did not make any difference between sensationalism and tabloidization. They mostly used them as synonyms, reflecting a negative trend in the press. It became clear sensationalism is one of the most important problems they are facing, confirming the empirical evidence from the EMSS survey and other data presented in the Literature review.

4.2 Who is to blame?

The causes of sensationalism are the topic that induced the most theories and very illustrative stories from the participants. Generally, their opinions could be represented as an interplay of two general groups of causes, that I marked “bottom-up” and “top-down”. The “bottom-up” vein represents the demand side – sensationalism as something that people want to read. The “top-down”, on the other hand, is the elite driven part of the argument, which appears to be characteristic of Serbian sensationalism that is different from the Western countries.

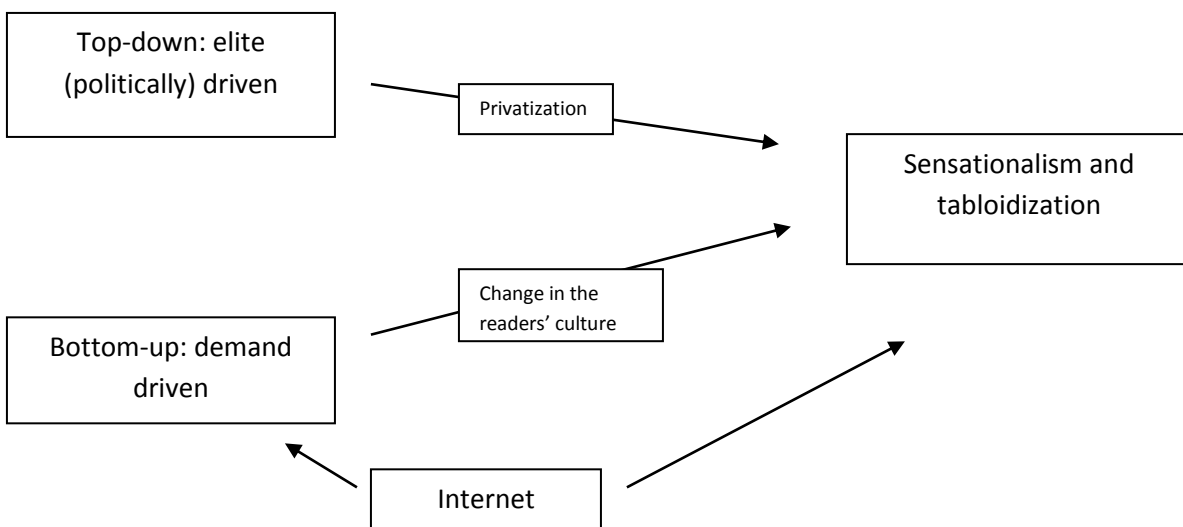


Figure 1: The causes of sensationalism

As shown in the Figure 1, there has been another cause, which apparently influenced the demand-driven direction, but is still independent from it. This is the specific role of the Internet. It was referred to as a world-wide trend and recognized as influencing tabloidization by the interviewees, by making the traditional outlets to compete for the readership with the new, electronic ways of communication. One particular quote has merged the influence of Internet on both the public and the producers of the news:

The newspapers now have to fight Internet media, and social networks too. Because people share different kinds of nonsense, and then we try to compete with them with our nonsense, well, not exactly nonsense ... But lowering the criteria. (D)

Interestingly, the two participants who had over twenty years of journalistic experience built their stories mostly around the elite driven approach, mentioning privatization within the scope of this part of the causes, as also a process that was promoted by the elites – sometimes mentioning the role of the European Union (in a sense of promoting the privatization process), but mostly focusing on the role of politics:

In one moment, politics penetrated the media system, and the editors became party representatives. Then came the private capital, and the most important thing became selling the newspaper no matter what... Even if the price to pay is writing lies and semi-truths... They started using the newspapers as a weapon. (D)

The situation is really like that – if you made something, even if it is the most correct and the best thing in the world, but it is, for example about (a politician), they say – ‘you are against me’. ... Then you have to give up doing some things, some to leave for later, about some simply to keep quiet, and most do *different than you would*. Also, the editors, they say: ‘this is the editorial policy, we have to keep it – whether you like it or not.’ If you do not fit – you’re out. (B)

While both of them closely related privatization with the triggers of tabloidization, one of them specifically pointed out that this was “a bad idea, and now even those who did it admit it was bad” (B), and the other one said that “privatization as a notion is not intrinsically bad – you have private medias everywhere – the problem is making profit no matter what, on the one side –

which is, of course, a priority for the private owner – but also the absence of any kind of control, structural before all.” (D)

The follow-up questions on this topic showed that this is exactly the mechanism these journalists perceive as affecting the quality of the press. Privatization allowed private, elite interests to be in charge of the outlets, giving them the opportunity of working in an unstructured law environment without proper punishments for breaking the law. The most important problem was not privatization itself, but the atmosphere in which it was done, that, according to them, lacked legal and structural framework.

That is why we now have a chaotic situation where a certain (name) who doesn't have a clue about media can buy 15 media outlets in Serbia. ... His goal wasn't to make serious products, or maybe, he wanted one serious, that would serve to (a politician)... (B)

The younger journalists mostly did not specify privatization as a direct influence on sensationalism, but it was an underlying notion while discussing the first appearances of tabloids in the country. Their approach on the elite-driven parts of the argument put the emphasis on the owners and their intentions, but also the relationship between politicians in power and the owners. Importantly, some of them emphasized their belief of elite's *intentions* to focus public attention on trivialities of the sensationalistic news.

All of a sudden, some people here figured out they could buy the readership for a short time, make large amounts of money ... They saw the role models in the British “Sun” and European tabloids, so they created them... So we witnessed that the owner of Glas Javnosti, probably the best quality newspaper that existed here in the last thirty years, opens Kurir, which is a total tabloid. Then he stopped giving salaries to journalists of Glas, and directed all of that money to developing his tabloid. (A)

They intensively work to focus the attention of the people on the trivialities, instead on the burning problems of the state. It seems like it is unwanted for people to think with their own heads ... Single-mindedness is the goal. (E)

The tabloids are connected to the government, or the moguls, or different interest groups, and they are serving the goal of influencing public discourse and diverting the public's attention off the important events. (F)

Even though, as presented, all of the journalists have underlined that politics – more specifically, politicians and the editors connected to certain political parties – have a role in supporting the tabloid culture, the statements about this topic were very vague and general. I did expect this because of the sensitivity of the topic. Nevertheless, the way the participants expressed their thoughts about the subject was surprising - mostly calm – as if this was something everyone knows and not quite interesting to discuss, even though the general opinion about this trend was absolutely negative. In one case, a young journalist from a small newspaper who has recently been in conflict with the Government, clearly states:

The politicians are still, ever since the 90s, the owners of many media outlets. The data about the media is kept secret, the ownership structure is protected as if it was a private thing... As long as this remains like that, we will have what we have now – favoring certain tabloids, and preventing others from doing their job critically, and not just as a negative press, which is apparently the role of the tabloids. (G)

In general, the negative, but conformist attitude shown in the responses triggered first concerning signs about the effect of these influences to the journalistic role. Summing up, this part of the analysis showed that journalists believe that common causes of sensationalism do not cover the whole Serbian scenario. While there is an important role of economic and Internet forces at play, what sets Serbia apart is the belief of the journalists that the tabloids and sensational news are *serving a purpose* for the political elite, as well as pointing to important role of privatization, characterized as suspicious and lacking clear and structured legal framework.

While the elite-driven causes are mentioned by both experienced and less experienced journalists, when it comes to the demand-driven part of the argument, the younger ones were more likely to mention that sensationalistic news are also driven, partially, by the fact people like

to read them, or comment on this angle of “tabloidization defense”. According to them, there are also *specific reasons* why the audience warmly welcomes sensationalism served to them in Serbia and the region.

People needed something like that ... Everyone is sick from the crisis, the prices going up, and people getting fired from their jobs... Somehow, it is all satisfaction for people – to relax, to laugh, to talk about... Simply, what the public wants, media finds that for them. For example, since I am a journalist, I watch all of the hard news and quality content I can find – my family is going crazy because of it. (C)

People say they don’t have time to get properly informed. Because of unemployment, or the employment that requires far more than eight hours a day, without a satisfying salary, people don’t have any motive to be responsible citizens and inform themselves about the problems of the real world. They reach for the short, uninformative and unimportant information, and bunch of photos. (E)

The opinions were definitively more coherent when it comes to the elite-driven causes – they all mentioned them in varieties of topics. The demand side of the equation, on the other hand, caused a direct confrontation of opinions among younger journalists that have mentioned it.

People always expect something from us... I am a journalist, how can I write... There is 4-5% of academically educated citizens in Serbia, out of the remaining 20% are for sure semi-literate, illiterate, simply, those people love to read it, those people aren't really concerned with me making some bravura, quote Shakespeare, Njegos, they don't care about that, they don't understand it... (A)

While this kind of quite cynical view was present, one of the responses summed up the counterargument and offered a doubtful view on the notion that these kinds of stories are the only ones people would read. Similar responses hinted at an idea that there must be something else – someone’s interest – to publish sensationalistic news.

The media often defend themselves claiming the readers want it, that these are the most viewed/most read articles, but the statistics are almost the same when you observe the positive pieces, interesting human stories and reportages. However, you don’t see media struggling to publish that kind of content. (F)

Interestingly, participants did not stop at explaining why tabloidization appeared in the first place – they continued with claiming that the process is just perpetuating and getting worse, influencing even the outlets that did not start off as tabloids.

People ask for sensation, and the *competition* between tabloids accelerates the process.
(G)

The problem is also that tabloids were not always like this... You can easily see ... their only chance is to be worse every day. There is no place for a serious genre in the tabloids... (A)

These concluding remarks were the first sign of a depressing image the journalists have about the future of the press in Serbia.

4.2.1 *Explaining the difference*

The responsibility of the media in the eyes of the law has been made as one of the most important differences between Serbian and other media systems. Although most of the participants have confirmed that the trends towards tabloidization and sensationalism are world-wide, they have mostly characterized the region as being the worst in Europe. More importantly, some have explicitly made a difference between Serbian and other European tabloids:

D: In *normal* countries... You know, tabloids weren't invented in Serbia... They were invented in England and they are very cruel, but there is a difference...

I: So you would make a difference between ours and foreign tabloids?

D: Yes, yes. It is worse here.

I: What is the difference, if you said both have profits as their goal?

D: The press-charges. Abroad, when you have been press-charged, it ends up quickly, and in our country it lasts for a couple of years, so it pays off to take risks and produce flashy semi-truths. In other countries, that risk pays off only for some time – you have some profit, but then comes the state, says 'you cannot do this' and locks the door.

Talking about the differences allows gaining insight in how the participants define the notions of "tabloid" and "sensationalism". They rarely employed purely descriptive sentences⁹ – rather, the explanations were mostly negatively orientated. Sensationalism has been explained as "bombastic, often incorrect and mischievous reporting", "usually bordering with human and journalistic ethics", with "concerning language constructions, unethical photographs, ambiguous titles". The tabloids in Serbia are characterized as the outlets employing the described type of reporting, with increasing concerns about "the race for the cover page" among journalists, and, more importantly, as constantly connected with "semi-truths, unchecked news and information". Only one of the respondents mentioned the possibility for a positive role of tabloids:

Tabloids have that one even positive role, namely that they will publish something in such a way to really make the unjust better... They should have double-checked information – a true tabloid should work with true information, which is not the case here. (D)

Therefore, tabloidization and sensationalism in Serbia, according to the journalists, are much more than simply a different form of reporting, or lack of hard news in the newspaper content. Quite the opposite, sensationalism has been defined as *extremely politicized*. These notions are also described as absolutely negative, going hand in hand with the lack of objectivity, incredibility of sources, and lack of basic journalistic ethics.

Summing up, this section showed that there are characteristics setting apart sensationalism in Serbia from the same phenomenon in Western countries. *Firstly*, according to the journalists, it is used to silent the critique of the political elite by turning the audience's attention towards politically irrelevant, sensationalistic details. *Secondly*, specific political and economic circumstances in the country, explained in the chapter about the media scene in

⁹ Only in one case it has been defined as "strong headlines, lots of pictures", which could imply a neutral observation. However, the response has been followed by a negative picture of the audience targeted with such stories, which erased the neutrality.

Serbia, made the public prone to accept sensationalism as a relief from every-day social problems caused by the painful transition. These are also the main reasons behind the lowest grades Serbia received in the EMSS study.

4.3 When did it start?

Almost all of the participants agreed that the trends towards sensationalism could be traced in the Serbian press even before 2000s, but the beginning of that decade was marked as the time where tabloidization flourished. Interestingly, in one case, it was specifically mentioned that this process coincided with the democratic changes in Serbia. These kinds of answers triggered interesting time comparisons, leading to an underlying idea that the communist and semi-authoritarian periods of Serbian press are observed in a more positive light than the democratic one. Nevertheless, a more careful look at the responses reveals what they mostly regret is a lack of regulations and proper legal frameworks.

We got used to some serious press... Even in the 90s, in spite of everything that has been happening, despite Government tyrannizing media, not letting them write anything, censored, we still had serious newspapers like *Glas Javnosti*, *Blic*, *Novosti*, *Politika*. (A)

It sounds a bit strange – now we have democracy – but in the time of non-democracy, Tito's time, we knew – you write something, and either you will have problems if it's not true, or if it is good and true, the ones you have been writing about will have a problem. Even in the Milosevic time, there was still serious press – even though there were claims about low media freedom, suffocating of the press... (B)

The causes of these differences could be grouped to two wide categories – *the worsening of the economy in the transition period* and *a stronger state control in the communist time*. The first category has worked through the demand-side mechanism explained above. The second one, participants have been explaining through two main veins – *state ownership of the media* and *safety and responsibility*.

I was working in the state-owned media and now I work in a private one... There is a huge difference, huge. I don't feel safe anymore when it comes to criticism, attacks, losing the job ... *All I've got is an enhanced dose of that injection that demands something from me.* (C)

As shown in this section, journalists emphasized the importance of a strong state and regulatory bodies with the capabilities to punish the outlets that are breaking the law and the Code of Ethics with their sensationalistic reporting. A strong state – at least in the aspect of regulating media – disappeared with the communist regime, which explains why the interviewees think about the communist times as better for the media environment. The difference is not in the ideology – rather in the capabilities of the state to implement the laws and regulations.

4.4 Change in the working system

Graphically, according to the journalists' responses, the mechanism of change of their working system could be presented as an improved version of the previous schema.

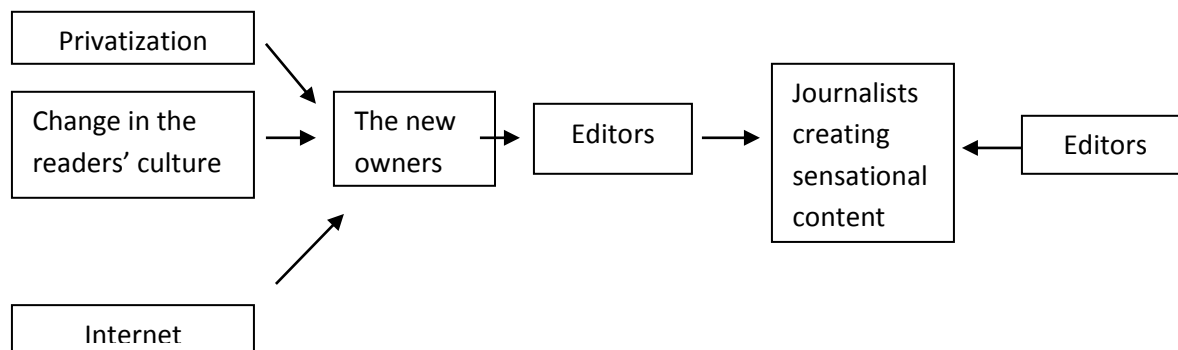


Figure 2: The change of the working system

As shown in Figure 2, privatization, with all of the characteristics explained in the previous sections, allowed the new owners of the outlets a possibility to completely influence

journalistic work through the editors' comments. On the other hand, change in the readers' culture and the Internet incentivized the owners to offer sensational content. Because of this, there is a recurring theme about some "others", a new generation or type of journalists, that "embarrass the profession" and believe everyone could do this job, because they started their work in the circumstances described, and don't have "a good journalistic role" to look up to. However, soon after these introductory judgments, the general tone becomes more understanding and compassionate:

It all ends when a journalist graduates, then comes to an office to volunteer, then we have this period of disappointment, and then in time he swallows it, gets accustomed... And then we go on, down the road. (A)

There is no journalistic courage, that is true... But, we cannot say that it is all journalistic fault. People probably know how to do that job, and nothing else, and their survival depends on it. There are families in question... People simply give up, give in to what is pressuring them, makes them become as they are. (C)

There is a strong agreement among the interviewees that the most important role is not played by the individual journalist, but by the editors and the editorial offices. Their influence reflects *ex ante* and *ex post* – with the possibility of changing the journalists' writings before printing. Most of the younger journalists refer to the editors as "them" - a distant organization with goals different than their personal. However, a journalist with over 30 years of experience has a different position:

I know – these people, who lead the newspaper – I know them – I am sure they would do things differently, but they have to take care because more than 500 people have to have their salaries. And then it happens that someone tells me - 'I know how you should do it, but you will do it this way. (B)

Strikingly, there seems to be a sharp difference between how journalists think they should do their job and how they are actually able to do it. Their every-day examples are more than illustrative:

I absolutely know what is asked of me and what is expected. Somehow I try not to be like that – but, today for example, I had a piece about a car accident, which I did professionally and objectively, but the editorial office had changed it. ... I have sent a text according to all journalistic rules, and today in the papers you have something completely different, sensational. There is a hidden dissent, a rebellion, there is – but if you want to be in journalism you have to adjust to what is forced onto you. (C)

You know, before the editors would say to their journalists – what kind of sentence is this? Do you read books? And now, I have been a part of those conversations a lot of times, they said it to me too – I like that more literary style – they say, what does this thing you wrote mean to a grandma from Babusnica? I can guarantee you – if a journalist was what he should be, and if he demanded to be that, he would be surely unemployed. (A)

The working system has completely changed. Before, I had to have multiple sources and well-supported information... Now, semi-truths and rumors are sold as the complete truth. (D)

It became clear that journalists mostly *fear* losing their job, and this is why they accept the changes in the working environment, even though they believe this is a negative development. On the other hand, editors who are accused of forcing these changes are influenced by the owners and the political elite, having their own interest in mind, as explained in the previous section.

4.5 The role of the journalist

When asked about general opinions on what should be the role of the journalist in a society, the initial answers simply pointed to the opposite of the major problems they have been talking about. The most important qualities of a journalist are to be professional, *objective, and truthful and listen to the other side of the story*. Despite occasional opinions that "the journalistic tasks are apparently not clear even to the journalists themselves", the initial answers all pointed in the direction of a journalist as a "neutral and objective observer", rather than a more demanding role such as "the watchdog" or the "participatory" one. Only one participant mentioned that journalism should be "about publishing things that the government doesn't want to reveal". In

one other case, even when the investigative journalism was mentioned as an ideal, it was not mentioned in an exploratory sense, but rather "for citizens to be objectively and truly informed".

It seems the "journalistic ideals" have been somewhat adjusted to the current situation. The journalists have been talking about this topic hardly believing that it will ever be possible to achieve those standards. This could be why they did not want to demand "too much" of Serbian journalism. The minimal ethical standards are set as the "ideal", which speaks a lot about the current situation. And even with those, the hope was minimal:

There is a nice song that says 'fools die for the ideals'... I mean, we can talk about them, and we will, but it is simple – ideals are something you cannot achieve in the real world. (A)

The future of journalism in Serbia is painted with the same pessimistic colors.

The stagnation of it all equals success, I'm afraid. I don't see any light for journalism. (C)

It is about time for something to change – but the journalists aren't incentivized to do so. (F)

This is the last phase of journalism, the domination of tabloids in a desperate attempt to make people buy them. In the next phase, people won't even buy those anymore, because they will have them online. I can guarantee – people will no longer buy newspaper. There will be outlets such as *Times*, *Politika* – for prestige – they will be really expensive, and have really small readerships... They will be more of a status symbol. (A)

A general agreement is that the journalists are not the ones with the lack of capacity to make professional, serious content – more specifically, that they do not even have the desire to do sensationalistic news. However, there is a concern about creating the new generation that does not have a role model to look up to, or the time to make any meaningful texts.

We have older colleagues – they are old professionals – but they also say to us to listen to what the editors say, for our own good. ... Those of them who had other sources of income had left. (C)

I just wish someone told me what can I investigate in one day. There is no time, the deadlines are short. The ones that really don't want to give up on proper journalism went to work for weeklies – but there is not enough of them for all of us to work there. (A)

This way of expressing pointed out that the journalists have a depressive, pessimistic image for the future. More importantly, it seems that most of them do not believe in the possibility to change – or if the change is their responsibility at all. The tone of the responses is mostly powerless and adjusted to the current situation. The general idea this puts forward is that journalists perceive current situation in the press as absolutely negative, but also perceive themselves and their colleagues as unable to stop or even slow down the trend.

However, the most concerning development is the downgrading of the “ideal” journalistic role. When the mindset of the journalists is changing as explained, there is a fear consequences will remain even after (and if) the negative influences disappear.

4.6 The ethical breaches

Even though none of the participants was directly asked about the ethical breaches, all of them mentioned this as a problem – either as a consequence of the same causes as sensationalism, or simply talking as if these two notions were a part of the same process of tabloidization of the press, going hand in hand.

Numerous times the editors would refuse to publish my stories, asking for blood, sweat and tears. ... These kinds of stories are forced on the journalists as mandatory these days. We have become people that editors force to go interview families that survived a tragedy a couple of hours ago, lost a member of the family, to photograph the funerals, dig out someone's personal life... In this fight for readership, it often happens that human rights, dignity and privacy are attacked. (F)

The basic journalistic rules – such as responsibility, neutrality, the "rule of the other side", those kinds of things taught in the kindergarten of journalism – are not respected. (D)

There is not that many lies, but there is a lot of spinning, transforming the truth, presenting some really odd truth... Now we have reached that level where I'm just waiting

for people to start getting statements from children, too. I mean, things that were really serious, not to photograph the children... We are out of all borders. (A)

For example, we had this accident, where the media published how a person had died, and he didn't. And then they retrieved it after someone from the audience told them, someone who knows the truth better than the journalist who wrote the story. The basic ethics are not respected. (C)

Even though most of the respondents mentioned twisting the truth somehow in connection with questions about sensationalism, which points to their opinions about the character of sensationalism influence on the public, which is the topic of the next part, they did not name plain lying as one of the tabloids characteristics. This is the borderline that, according to most of them, still remained uncrossed.

I have never had a situation of someone ordering me to write complete lies in any of the tabloids. Some things could be kept quiet – and I did – we didn't do those stories, they said they were not interesting enough. But to do something completely opposite the truth – that never happened to me. (D)

It is clear that sensationalism in Serbia reached the concerning levels explained in the chapter about why is it important to study this phenomenon. Specifically, spilling over from sensationalism to ethical breaches endangers core values of modern journalism, placing journalism on a dangerous “slippery slope”.

4.7 The effect on the public

When it comes to the evaluation of effects of sensationalism on the public, I expected mostly negative responses, according to the definitions they gave to the notion itself. Nevertheless, despite unanimously agreeing that these trends do not affect the readers in any positive way, it was hard for the respondents to isolate the exact mechanism of this effect.

The younger journalists strongly argued the negativity of the process by using vague statements such as "it influences democracy in a society" or that "the information presented is far

from those of public importance, mentioning also how the public in Serbia "is used to believing everything the newspapers say" because, as previously written, there are still residues of the time where the newspapers were a reliable source of information. Their reluctance to offer concrete examples seems to be a reflection of the lack of experience from the "good times" - they have an opinion, but cannot pinpoint the mechanism or the influence.

However, the more experienced journalists offered valuable comparisons, underlining that *information availability and understanding* are the notions that suffer the most because of the current trends. As one part of this mechanism, they simply restate that the information is becoming unchecked and therefore prone to misinterpretation or simply being wrong, causing misinformation of the public, or simply lack of information. On the other hand, they have made *emphasis* – in a sense of changing the importance of different pieces of information in the text - one of the most important mechanisms through which this is done.

You know, people do get some information with the tabloids. Now, the question is whether it is the important information. Here, I'm going to give you an example, where the people are being less informed. Let's say, for example in the year 1991, in the Serbian Parliament you had a voting about a really important law. And the law was passed, but during the discussion, two politicians have gotten into a fight. And then, you would have all of the newspapers writing about the law, how it was passed, what is inside... Maybe there will be a small text box in the end that two politicians were arguing. People got their information.

Now, we are coming to the year of 2016, where all is sensationalized. So you have a really important law passed, but the headline will be "Scandal in the Parliament – fight between (politicians' names)!" And then the whole text is about the fight and what words these two used, and somewhere down, in the end, people can read that a law has been passed. So, this is how the information is suffering – because the tabloid will put the emphasis on what is *bombastic* – not necessarily the most important element – simply bombastic. (A)

The choice of the examples that the journalists have used speak a lot about the other side of the topics that are being sensationalized in Serbia. This example precisely shows how one of the most important political issues is being presented differently, and the exact mechanism of how it

could influence the public's political knowledge. This is only one illustration of how sensationalism in this form can negatively influence even the cornerstones of a democracy.

Therefore, it became clear that, according to the journalists, neutral definitions of sensationalism do not work in case of Serbia. The one that could fit the best is Wang's, with an emphasis on *displacing socially significant stories*. (Bek 2004; Grabe et al. 2000, 2001; Wang and Cohen 2009 in Wang 2012, 712) However, having all of the information from previous sections in mind, this is not the only negative consequence sensationalism have in this country. The circumstances in the country, explained throughout the text, changed the nature of sensationalism from an easy-selling style to a development endangering journalistic work, public information and media system as a whole.

5 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore crisis in the Serbian press, with a special emphasis on one of its features, sensationalism. Specifically, I wanted to tackle its causes and the consequences of sensationalism on the role of the journalists in the society, as well as their work and habits as media professionals.

Journalism should serve citizens by giving them the opportunity to check their perspective of the reality, not distort it. (Sonnemaker 2015, 52) This kind of reasoning

lets citizens come to new understandings of the parts of the world that lie beyond their immediate horizons, lets them use that new knowledge to better participate in the public political forum of a deliberative democracy, and it lets journalism safeguard that forum from distortion or manipulation in ways that prevent citizens from exercising their rights. (Sonnemaker 2015, 52)

Journalism's role as a safeguard of public political forum could be endangered in many ways – by controlling the media, censorship, oppressing free speech and other attacks on the democratic systems. However, this study has shown that endangering journalism could take different forms. In Serbia, sensationalism is one of those forms. Sensationalism might look less dangerous than truly oppressing the media, and in most of the cases it is. Nevertheless, the analysis above showed this trend is way more dangerous in Serbia than it might seem. It affects the journalists' working habits, their role in society, as well as, according to the interviewees, the information available to citizens. Put differently, it affects the cornerstones of democracy, disguised in a “this is what the audience wants” wrap. Nevertheless, this shiny, shocking wrap is not an excuse for not taking the processes behind it seriously.

The journalists have confirmed that commercialization, privatization and Internet influence have had an enormous impact on sensationalism in Serbia. The fragile political scene

at the time when the newspapers started “competing” with the Internet, sensationalizing the content in order to attract the audience and survive on the market, only made the situation worse. Nevertheless, what sets Serbia apart is not just this unfortunate interplay of causes at the same time, but, according to journalistic opinions, also the *active involvement of politics* into the emergence and perpetuation of high levels of tabloidization and sensationalism.

What does this mean? One of the conclusions from the analysis of the interviews is that, in the Serbian case, sensationalism is not there simply because “people like to read it” – it is also there because it *serves a purpose* to the political elites. In this case, the stories about judging sensationalism by problematizing the limits of paternalism are becoming less relevant. It is not all right to problematize people’s taste, but if people are being offered only this kind of reporting, especially with an intention of altering their opinions and understanding of the news, then problematizing becomes justified.

What purpose do Serbian journalists believe it serves to the elites? They believe sensationalism in Serbia started because of the same causes as in Western countries – the demand side, enhanced by the Internet appearance. However, according to the journalists, it is now being used to draw attention to aspects of the stories that are not relevant for public discourse and those that will not cause any deep reflection. They believe this is happening because the elites want to drive the society’s attention from the problems of society to sensationalistic aspects of the stories, giving less incentive for the people to question the authorities and the political elite. In order to do this, the message has to be clear and involve as small amount of reasoning as possible. This is done – hand in hand with sensationalism - often by presenting the story as black and white, not respecting the “rule of the other side”, and, most

concerning, obviously constantly breaching ethical codes, which are supposed to be one of the cornerstones of modern journalism.

Apart from the elite influence, another difference is presented in journalistic belief the audience in transitional, post-communist countries – specifically, Serbia – is *more prone* to accept sensational news once they appear. This happens because sensational news has the potential to distract them from the confusing political and social circumstances, as well as bad shape of the transitional economy their country experiences.

The interviewed journalists expressed serious concerns about the legal framework and slow implementation of the existing laws – especially connected to the ethics in the media. Their opinions are that this kind of environment does not prevent outlets from breaches – it actually incentivizes them, because they know they will not be punished.

The journalists also expressed the belief that pressuring them to work differently than they actually would comes from editors, who are forced to do so because of the market situation and the dropping revenues. On the other hand, they expressed a general opinion that these trends are supported by the political elite of whoever is leading the country at the moment – also through the editors' voices. This is why most of them reflect on editorial offices as a distant organization that does things differently than they should.

Because of these issues, the “ideal role” of a journalist in the respondents' opinions became somewhat less demanding – as if they considered simply objective and truthful reporting as an “ideal”, the most you could ask from a journalist in these circumstances. This is a negative trend, because the journalists start perceiving themselves as powerless, as if they did not have

any possibility for investigating and reporting. This is one of the first signs of something going wrong with democracy and the freedom of reporting in the country.

As with their ideal perspective, the actual role of the journalists is reduced to simply following what the editors want, without any independence in investigating. The changing of their work after they submit it to the editorial office discourages them from writing as they would like to, so they conform to the current situation and start producing low-quality, sensationalistic news by themselves, knowing what is demanded from them.

As presented in the limitations, sensationalism is the most visible, but certainly not the only problem journalists are facing in Serbia. This is why, in order to complete the picture, other investigations (for example, about self-censorship) are needed. Nevertheless, sensationalism in Serbia presented in this work affects journalistic work and habits by forcing them to lower the quality of writing against their wishes. This has consequences of changing even the “ideal role” they strive for. The negative development explored in this study points to two main policy recommendations.

The first one is examining exactly which media laws are not respected and ensuring their implementation. This appears to be an important problem allowing sensationalism and other problems of the press to flourish. Strict rule of law is a necessary condition for creating a healthy media environment and preventing ethical breaches as well as other negative consequences examined in this work. The second recommendation is continuing to work on editors’ independence from the political forces that are affecting the way sensationalism is being used. Combined, these recommendations present crucial parts of a hard, but necessary process for the democratic development of the media system in Serbia.

Appendix

1. The questionnaire

Personal data:

1. The newspaper you are working for?
2. How long have you been working as a journalist in general?

1. How would you describe current situation in Serbian press?
2. What are the biggest problems the press is facing?

Probe: Why is this happening?

Probe: Is Serbia specific in those problems?

*if mentioned sensationalism: a) Tell me something more about it.

b) How would you define sensationalism?

c) What do you think about this development?

d) How does it influence the society?

3. What are the visible manifestations of the problems you mentioned?
4. What should be the role of a journalist in a society?
5. What are the main obstacles for journalists in Serbia to fulfill this role?
6. How do the problems you have mentioned affect your work and habits?

Probe: Could you give me an example?

7. Is there anything else you would like to mention?

Note: The semi-structured questionnaire served as a guideline for the conversations, in order to cover all of the topics. The probe questions included here are the most recurring ones. In specific cases, I asked additional explanatory ones, in order to understand the answer better.

2. Profiles of the journalists

A: *Informer*, 8 years of journalistic experience

B: *Vecernje Novosti*, 30 years of journalistic experience

C: *Kurir*, 8 years of journalistic experience

D: *Srpski Telegraf*, 22 years of journalistic experience

E: preferred for the outlet to stay anonymous, 1 year of journalistic experience (volunteer position)

F: *Blic*, 7 years of journalistic experience

G: *Danas*, 6 months of journalistic experience

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