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Social Actors and Storylines in the Coverage of Russian-Ukrainian War in English and Polish-Language Tabloids

Katarzyna Molek-Kozakowska [a,b]

[a]Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Sibiu, Romania; [b]University of Opole, Opole, Poland

ABSTRACT

The article explores editorial practices regarding the formulation of headlines in the tabloid coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian war. On the basis of a purposive matching dataset of 568 headlines harvested between 2022 and 2024 from the online versions of two popular English-language tabloids, *The Mirror* (UK) and *The New York Post* (US), and two top Polish-language outlets, *SuperExpress* and *Fakt*, the study focuses on the representations of social actors and the schematic narratives they are involved in. Both social actor analysis and transitivity analysis performed for each outlet/language map how tabloids simplify and polarize war-related reporting to engage audiences. The findings include a spectrum of identified discursive strategies of polarization, personalization of conflict, and of moral evaluation. These patterns underlie the tabloid format's reproduction of binary oppositions and stereotyping, as well as prominence of human-centered narratives anchored in clear moral distinctions. The study helps raise linguistic awareness of how tabloids, with their editorial practices and audience-oriented design, entrench polarized representations that aggravate conflict and impede a nuanced understanding of political relations needed for reconciliation.

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Tabloids; headlines; war coverage; Russian-Ukrainian war; social actors; polarization

Introduction

In the last few decades (online) tabloid journalism has been established as an autonomous cultural and discursive formation with a commanding influence on public opinion. As a result, scholarly attention has been directed towards the characteristics of tabloid editorial practices, notably their forms of representation of social realities and user engagement strategies. Tabloid outlets have been studied to find out how, among others, they manage to appeal to broad audiences through infotainment, to replace complex representations of political reality with simplified human-centered narratives, or to catalyze voting decisions (Johansson 2007). Also the language of tabloid headlines has been analyzed to raise awareness of stylistic devices that make news items resonant and attractive to users (Bednarek and Caple 2017; Molek-Kozakowska 2013). While

CONTACT Katarzyna Molek-Kozakowska molekk@uni.opole.pl

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research has already shown that tabloids engage in war-related publicity stunts and petitions, and oscillate between opposing the war and maintaining patriotic attitudes by demonizing the enemy and supporting the troops (Buckledee 2020; Freeman 2007; Tulloch 2007), the underlying linguistic patterns behind war coverage still need attention.

This study explores how the complex social implications of international armed conflict in Ukraine tend to be represented and evaluated in tabloid formats in selected countries. It reports on the results and implications of the analysis of a purposive sample of tabloid coverage of the war, which has been collected within the international project CORECON (The coverage and reception of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in Polish, Romanian and English-language media: A comparative critical discourse study with recommendations for journalism training). The project aims to compare how conflict discourses are shaped by various media outlets through language choices and how this results in the way conflicts are received by various groups of media users. For this study, a representative corpus of highly relevant and engaging media texts on Ukraine has been compiled from mainstream Polish-language outlets and social media portals, together with a matching English-language reference corpus. Both datasets have been validated for calibrated cross-linguistic comparative analyses, including those regarding the characteristics of tabloid journalism in the present study. The insights offered here are based on the analysis of 568 headlines harvested from the online versions of four popular tabloid outlets, *The Mirror* (UK) and *The New York Post* (US), as examples of English-language media, and *SuperExpress* and *Fakt*, as examples of Polish-language outlets. The headlines in the sample were ranked top in relevance regarding the keyword "Ukraine," according to monthly searches of the internet domains of the four outlets between February 2022 and June 2024.

In order to map the positioning and evaluation of social actors that populate the tabloid coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the study reconstructs the social actor typology behind this reporting (Van Leeuwen 2008) and undertakes a transitivity analysis of the actions reported in headlines (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004). Given the capacity of tabloid journalism to frame and simplify complex issues, the study identifies some editorial practices deployed to represent the agency of key war-related social actors and the schematic narratives around them. This is studied at the level of the headline, which often takes the form of a clause, and which represents a given event as an instance of the agency of one social entity exerted upon other participants in either a legitimate or problematic manner.

A social actor of a tabloid headline is not equivalent to the noun being the grammatical subject of a clause. Rather, social agency is a positioning that is recoverable from the semantic relations between participants engaged in actions under certain circumstances. Agency could be ascribed to named persons (e.g., Zelensky), organizations (NATO), or collectives or social groups (Ukrainian troops), provided that their intentional actions, behavior or speech constitute the source of causality that drives the narrative (Traugott 2010). This is because, in tabloid human-centered news, the verb phrases in the headline will often stipulate who did what to whom, where, when, why and how. Hence, this study is based on the understanding that the actions of social agents are perceived as schematic storylines that prime media users to accept a given representation of war or political conflict.

Additionally, storylines often attribute (polarized) evaluations and causal relations to social agents, participants, objects, actions and circumstances (Dahlstrom 2014). This allows even schematic narratives to be imbued with sentiment (e.g., sense of outrage, fear, or blame), thereby boosting the likelihood of users embracing the story's "point," together with the ideological commitments that are attached to it (Forchtner 2021). On the basis of a detailed analysis of social actor representation, one may formulate further recommendations for responsible war coverage that is sufficiently nuanced and inclusive and that enables the audience's understandings of conflicts that can help mitigate, not aggravate, them (Filardo-Llamas, Morales-López, and Floyd 2021).

This article is structured as follows. Firstly, it briefly revisits the characteristics of tabloid reporting and the ongoing debates about the merits and issues of tabloid representation of social reality. It also focuses on the problem of a fundamental mismatch between entertaining tabloid formats and war reporting. Then it explains the research design by providing the characteristics of the dataset, the sampling and coding protocols and the analytic categories used for social actor analysis and transitivity analysis. In the results section, it offers an aggregative and qualitative analysis of the identified patterns of social actor representation regarding the coverage of the war in Ukraine and the interpretation of certain headline-level storylines in the four outlets studied here. The discussion section is devoted to exploring the implications of the types and levels of simplification and polarization evidenced in the data, as well as broader implications of the identified conventions of tabloid war coverage regarding ethical editorial practices, cultural and economic contexts, national differences, and media literacy recommendations.

Characteristics of Tabloid Reporting

Tabloidization of news media is often approached from the position of socio-cultural critique, with tabloid outlets being blamed for undermining the public sphere, as they tend to dwell on dramatically bad news, such as corruption, crime, violence and disaster, or sensationalize the coverage with the focus on the scandalous and the saucy (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995). It has been noted that citizens in democratic systems, instead of being informed of the issues of public concern, are flooded with infotainment that causes confusion and overload, or alienation and polarization (Newton 1999). Indeed, there have been examples of sustained tabloid media campaigns steeped in biases that helped to "flip" referenda (see Foos and Bischof 2022, on Brexit). Yet, despite the focus on some social consequences of the "media malaise," such as silencing minority views and engendering cynicism (Cappella and Jamieson 1997), it is also noted that tabloids open the public sphere to audiences that would otherwise be excluded from democratic deliberations by offering them accessible frameworks for interpreting abstract social processes and distant political events (Conboy 2006). In this way more media users are able to make sense of the social reality and participate in structured and cohesive, even if not single-minded, political debates (Johansson 2007). In fact, the research into the media practices of the so-called "silent majority" (Scheufle and Moy 2000) indicates that social capital that stems from a better understanding of conflicts and competing interests through exposure to a variety of media narratives is related to a higher political engagement (Dalisay et al. 2012).

Since the 1990s, when tabloid journalism became established as a fairly autonomous discursive formation with cultivation capacity and increasing institutional power, researchers' critical attention has been directed towards its means of expression and engagement (Mayr 2008). Tabloid news presentation is often contrasted with the so-called quality press's objective journalism, especially regarding the separation of "fact" from "opinion" (Bingham and Conboy 2015). However, the notion of objectivity is deeply problematic for discourse analysts, who point out that it is more of a textual practice foregrounding some human-independent circumstances or aspects of the event than a professional property of journalistic focus on facts (Richardson 2007, 86–88). After all, news reporting requires opinion-driven decisions at any stage of production: from news gathering, to news selection, writing, editing and disseminating (Dahlstrom 2014). Indeed, unlike quality press reports that tend to withhold judgments, tabloids make stronger evaluations and verbalize competing truth claims in order to resolve the controversy, rather than leave the audience to evaluate the facts on their own (Molek-Kozakowska 2013). Last but not least, tabloids tend to refer to alternative, witness, vox populi, or celebrity sources, rather than only to institutional social actors, in which they may build a resonant sense of commonsensical "truthiness" of the coverage (Zelizer 2009).

Since the advent of online and social media as competitors, market-driven tabloids have become even more textually engaging while abandoning any pretensions to professional journalism. This is evident in the editorial preference for explicit evaluation—even theatrical emotionality—introduced by highly charged, often informal terminology. In some cases, tabloid news-breaking is predicated on exposing "the hidden" or "the dirty" with revelations expressed with the air of moral superiority (Johansson 2007). Tabloid texts also exploit stereotypes and cater to prejudices by discursively perpetuating such social divisions as the government vs. the people, immigrants vs. citizens, or the working class vs. the middle class (Conboy 2006). In the recent international or geopolitical context, this is transposed into grand conflicts between West and East, or the US/Europe and Russia or China (Filardo-Llamas, Morales-López, and Floyd 2021). Tabloid texts often use "transparent" everyday idiom compatible with audience's lived experience and traditional, sometimes morally conservative, values (Biressi and Nunn 2007). The work on tabloid headlines and leads reveals the mechanisms that foreground human-centered information, simple narrative sequences, conversational phrases and pre-digested conclusions (Dahlstrom 2014). These characteristics will be revisited in the analysis and discussion to interpret how social actor positionings and narratives in the Ukraine war coverage are projected linguistically.

Given a range of editorial practices in tabloid journalism, this study seeks to identify how such an alienating issue as armed conflict in Europe is currently reported by selected tabloid outlets, given their overall penchant for negativity, simplifying, sensationalizing and moralizing, as well as using stereotypes for national identification (Zarycki 2004). The issue of Russian interventionism (Chechnya, Georgia, eastern Ukraine, Crimea), and recently the full-scale Russian invasion on Ukraine has been studied extensively with respect to heritage media, political commentators and online bloggers around the world (e.g., Knoblock 2020; Le 2002; Molek-Kozakowska 2011). As multiple social media channels were created to engage audiences to closely follow the developments in this conflict, research has focused on exposing the explicit ways how propagandas were disseminated for ideological control (Oleinik 2024). In this dynamic media landscape, less

attention has been paid to tabloid outlets, which could not avoid taking up the issue of Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict and representing it in ways that are compatible with their respective formats and audience designs. As a result, there are two broad questions this study aims to contribute to address:

> How is the complex issue of war and conflict (political, social, economic) adapted to tabloid formats to inform and create (ethical) engagement?
>
> How is human interest—social positioning and narrativity—realized in war coverage to lessen the cognitive burden and alienation?

These questions are approached from the perspective of linguistic patterns that underlie headline editorial practices, which aim to prime public knowledge about social realities (Mayr 2008, 8). Through editorial practices, texts may vary in how much of the social world they include and exclude, what actions or whose voices are foregrounded (made salient) or backgrounded (made silent). Hence, tabloid journalism is a "gatekeeper" of available points of view, storylines and evaluations that are applied to represent war (Bednarek and Caple 2017; Chiapello and Fairclough 2002).

Materials and Methods

Sources

The texts for this study were collected between February 2022 (the onset of the full-scale war in Ukraine) and June 2024, within the international research project CORECON (https://grants.ulbsibiu.ro/corecon/) which aims to study how war-related coverage is shaped through editorial and textual choices and how this results in how conflicts are received by various audiences in Poland and the English-speaking countries (among others). The full details of how the corpus for the undertaken cross-linguistic comparisons was compiled, calibrated and used can be found on the project's website. This study draws on a special-purpose dataset of tabloid headlines from four outlets only: *the Mirror*[1] (UK) and *The New York Post*[2] (US), as examples of English language media, and *SuperExpress* and *Fakt*,[3] as two examples of Polish language outlets. These outlets will be abbreviated to M, NYP, SE and F henceforth.

The data were obtained following a protocol designed in the project: up to six top relevant articles in 2022 and five top articles in 2023 and 2024 were downloaded for every month from internet domains of https://www.mirror.co.uk and https://nypost.com as well as https://www.se.pl/ and https://www.fakt.pl/ using the incognito mode in Google search with the keyword "Ukraine/Ukraina" (see Table 1). The four outlets in the two languages representing a range of political affiliations and social realities are taken to be able to reveal national and linguistic specificities (especially between audience-driven reporting

Table 1. Study dataset details.

	The Mirror	The New York Post	SuperExpress	Fakt
No of headlines	132	136	150	150
Average headline length in words	43	12	11	12,5
Total word size	5,536	1,547	1,703	1,899
No of social actor positionings coded	132	133	143	149

in a country neighboring the war zone—Poland, and the global public of the English-speaking outlets). However, the focus of the study is to trace social actor and narrativity patterns through qualitative interpretations and generalizations regarding the commonalities in tabloid editorial practices. The study is not designed to provide an exhaustive comparative analysis of the four outlets; however, it is believed that through well-designed purposeful calibration of datasets, new insights can be obtained from such aggregative comparisons.

As the focus here is on how the social actors featuring in the coverage are represented, or positioned through linguistic means in the complex reality of the military conflict (Fairclough 2012; Mayr 2008), the study engages in transitivity analysis and provides a social actor typology (Van Leeuwen 2008). These analytic results are then used to interpret the discursive implications of representing a polarized spectrum of positionings and simplified storylines.

Social Actor Analysis

The lexical choices and grammatical functions, including processes of naming, attribution of agency, predication and active/passive voice, play a major role in the representation of social actors in news (Van Leeuwen 2008), as do rhetorical constructions and argumentative schemata (Wodak and Meyer 2015). Due to the fact that editorial practices often limit references to social actors in ways that match the outlet's interests and ideologies, analysts can attend to possible biases in that respect by reconstructing typologies of social actors that populate the texts. A social actor positioning is recoverable from semantic relations between participants engaged in actions under certain circumstances in a clause (or its equivalent). In the context of a headline, subject positioning is given to the entity whose intentional actions or mental activities constitute the source of causality that drives the narrative (Traugott 2010), rather than the grammatical subject of the clause.

Van Leeuwen (2008) identifies the textual roles of social actors by drawing on socio-semantic categories rather than pure grammar. This framework helps to identify how the media coverage represents social actors through such linguistic processes as for example genericization and specification, individualization or collectivization, association and dissociation, nomination and categorization, as well as functionalization and identification, which are discussed below.

Van Leeuwen (2008, 22–39) highlights the different linguistic choices editors make when choosing between generic and specific representation. This happens when participants in a narrative are seen as either a part of a class of people, or as identifiable individuals. Social actors can also be referred to as discrete or unique through a process of individualization, or as groups in a process termed assimilation (e.g., "Russian soldiers," "Ukrainian refugees"). There are two types of assimilation: aggregation, which draws on statistics and numerical data, and collectivization, which relies on seeing people as put together according to one feature (e.g., ethnicity). Social actors can also be represented as groups of certain characteristics or sizes through association and dissociation, for example when individuals are brought together due to a specific circumstance ("homeless refugees") or location ("inhabitants of bombed Kharkiv").

Indetermination occurs when social actors featured in headlines are anonymized ("girl, 13") while determination is a process whereby their identity is specified ("Ukrainian President Volodymir Zelensky"), often by using names, official titles, identities or positions they hold (Van Leeuwen 2008, 42). The process of categorization relies on two subcategories: functionalization and identification, which is the characterization of social actors either in terms of what they do or in terms of what they, more or less permanently, are. These identifications can be realized by classifying social actors according to systems established by a society (gender, religion, profession, political affiliation), or by relational identification, which represents social actors in terms of their personal, kinship or work relations to each other ("Putin's troops"). Meanwhile, personal identification usually occurs in stories and entails the mention of a personal attribute ("a poorly trained soldier," "a recent widow"), which is designed to trigger specific cultural connotations (Van Leeuwen 2008, 43).

Other editorial practices that may play a role in the representation of social actors include (im)personalization, which concerns how many human-like semantic features are attributed to the entity ("movement of troops" vs. "soldiers riding tanks"). Here Van Leeuwen (2008, 47) points to the processes of abstraction and objectification: the former occurs when social actors are represented in terms of an abstract quality that is assigned to them in the representation (e.g., describing a tactical military mistake as "a problem"). Meanwhile, through objectification social actors are represented by means of reference to a place, thing, body part, expression or activity they engage in (soldiers as "drone operators," Russian generals as "Putin's yes-men"). Finally, Van Leeuwen (2008) points to overdetermination as a process in which the same social actors are represented as participants in more than one social practice or as belonging to various groups, often labeled with multiple terms (Ukrainian "migrants," "refugees," "families"). This may influence whether they are perceived by the audience with more or less sympathy (Torkington and Ribeiro 2019). Figure 1 summarizes the above-discussed social actor typology, which is relevant for the analysis of positionings in this study.

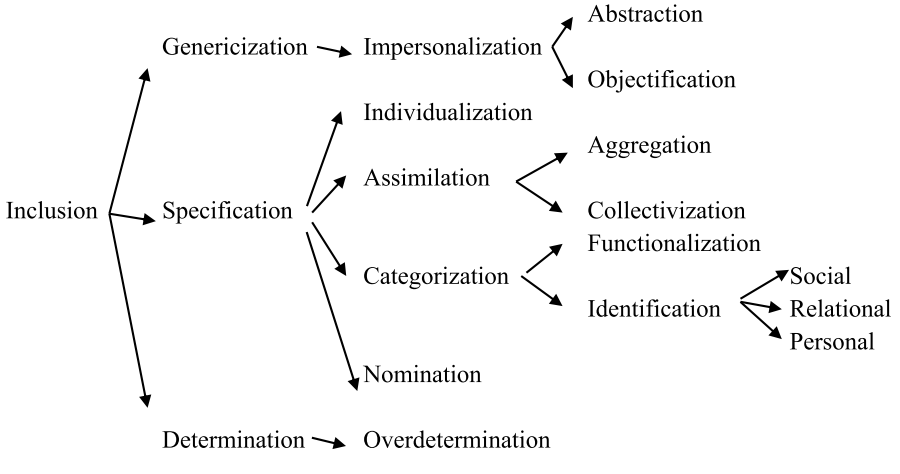

Figure 1. Social actor typology and processes relevant for the study (own adaptation from Van Leeuwen 2008).

Transitivity Analysis

Transitivity analysis of predication (verb forms in a sentence) and the identification of participants is a useful entry point for the study of social actor positionings in the narrative structure of the news headlines. The way a given aspect of reality is represented points to "who did what to whom" in journalistic storytelling within war coverage. These positionings should not be regarded as simply filling the grammatical subject/object position in the clause, but as a semantic or discursive function of initiating or controlling the action (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004, 181), being at the center of action, or having agency in a given sequence of actions as represented through editorial accounts. For example, if the *consequences* of actions initiated by Russia are thematized, this means that Russia takes the subject positioning, even if the word "Russia" is not the grammatical subject.

Consequently, the transitivity system enables editors to choose verbs and add tense and aspect markers to represent experiences and processes in a particular way. For example, for verbs that represent *material* processes, the Actor is positioned as doing something, bringing change in the world and affecting a Goal, a Recipient or a Client. In a *verbal* process (common in the reporting media), the Sayer addresses a Verbiage through all modes of expression or indication, sometimes targeting it at a specific Receiver. In a *mental* process, a Senser may think, feel or perceive a Phenomenon. In an *existential* process, something is claimed to exist under some circumstances, whereas in a *relational* process it is identified as having specific traits, functions or values. In a *behavioral* process (with mostly intransitive verbs) the participant is represented in a psychological state that leads to a specific reaction (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004).

In tabloid journalism, which is often characterized by negativity, moral outrage or emotionality, the subject positionings and their attendant processes may be strategically yielded to entities whose actions are open to controversy, criticism, or condemnation (Molek-Kozakowska 2013). For example, in a 17th Nov. 2022 headline of SE (1), while the pronoun "they" does not explicitly name the Actor, the place adverbial "in Russia" makes it possible to infer that some Russian individuals, agencies, and the whole Russian regime, are responsible for the cruel and criminal actions that are thematized:

(1) *They* were kidnapping and transporting children out of Ukraine. Now they advertise their adoption *in Russia* [Porywali i wywozili dzieci z Ukrainy. Teraz reklamują ich adopcję w Rosji!] (SE).[4]

If each clause is assumed to be a particular representation of an experience in the social reality, then analyzing how the transitivity system is used in the war-related tabloid headlines helps to identify dominant social actor positionings and their ideological entailments.

The Coding Protocol

The headlines that constitute the basis for this study were coded to identify the Actor of a material process in the clause/phrase, as in (2) or (3) below. If the Actor is not overtly mentioned, the Sayer/Behaver/Senser were coded (4). On rare occasions, when these were still not directly retrievable from the headline, the coding identified prominent entities on the

receiving end of the action (Receiver), especially when they were thematized as central to the story (5). The coded entities, in their socio-semantic sense, are cumulatively labeled as "social actor positionings" in the subsequent analysis (as also in Table 1).

(2) *Elite Iranian troops* [Actor] secretly enter Ukraine frontline to help Putin's horror blitz (M).
(3) Photographs of burnt bodies found after village near Kharkiv is liberated appear to show evidence that *Russia's soldiers* [Actor] have been torturing innocent Ukrainians (M).
(4) Ukraine town found with horrors "more dreadful" than Bucha, says *Zelensky* [Sayer] (M).
(5) Inside Ukrainian hospital where *newborns* [Receiver] receive care with missile blasts in background (M).

Such coding is not mechanical and has required close reading and interpretation of the headline in the context of the whole news item. For example, sometimes the most prominent participant had to be found (the actual Actor rather than its "proxy" or a less agentive entity) (6):

(6) Ukraine [Actor] could develop own nuclear weapons' to stop Vladimir Putin's [Token] war: As the war in Ukraine rages on, Dr. Paul Maddrell [Sayer/Senser] believes Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky ["proxy" Actor] could soon look to develop nuclear weapons in a bid to end the Russian invasion (M).

In line with the overall action representation of example (6), even if the modal verb "could" represents a possibility, and even if the ideas reproduced here are attributed to an expert, rather than to Ukrainian authorities, it is Ukraine as a geopolitical Actor that could initiate a strategic nuclear defensive action, which is what constitutes the newsworthy core of this headline. Hence, example (6) has been coded as pertaining to Ukraine [nation/state] as subject social actor positioning.

Results

The coding for social actor positionings of the headlines in the four tabloids revealed that most entities in the Ukraine war coverage belong to five identifiable classes or types (see Table 2). This will be used to structure the presentation of results.

Specific characteristics and discourse distributions of subject positionings and storylines in which they are involved are presented below, as they occur in each outlet slightly differently. Given the focus on Russian-Ukrainian war in the sample, there is no wonder that Russian/Ukrainian participants tend to outnumber other participants, but the proportions and characteristics of social categorizations may vary. In the course of the analysis below, some comparisons are made to highlight salient differences or unique discursive strategies across the outlets.

The Mirror

The M subcorpus consisted of 132 headlines and lead-ins. The average length of each item was 43 words and the overall number of words was 5,536. The coding yielded 52 instances (tokens) for Russia-related subject positionings of 22 different types (with

Table 2. Types of participants with the indication of super/subordinate processes of social actor representation and exemplary tokens.

Types	Superordinate process(es)	Subordinate proces(es)	Tokens (exemplified in data)
Grouped participants (nations, states, region/ city inhabitants, professions, movements)	assimilation	collectivization, aggregation	"The US" "Warsaw" "artists"
Russian participants	specification (by ethnicity)	collectivization individualization	"Russian troops" "Putin"
Ukrainian participants	specification (by ethnicity)	collectivization individualization	"Ukrainian families" "Zelensky"
Individual participants (politicians, experts, celebrities, charity campaigners)	identification	social, relational, personal	"PM Rishi Sunak" "Generał Polko"
Organizations, alliances	functionalization	political, corporate	"NATO" "the West" "McDonalds" "Shell"

"Vladimir Putin" presented as Actor 16 times), 39 instances of Ukraine-related positionings with 25 distinct participants, of which the top three participants are "Ukraine" (8 instances), "Volodymyr Zelensky" (6 instances), and "Ukrainian refugees" (3 instances). Besides these, there were 11 instances of other states or social groups in subject positionings as principal participants (Actors, Behavers, Sayers), 21 mentions of individual politicians, leaders or celebrities and 9 organizations (e.g., "NATO"), or corporations ("Ikea") (aggregated summary in Table 3).

Participants with the most agency were often collective rather than individual, identified at nation/state level ("Russia," "Ukraine"), or international/multinational level ("WHO," "UNICEF"). Some grouped participants were categorized with respect to their prominent attributes—gender ("Ukrainian women"—more likely to be considered refugees), location ("residents of Yakutsk"—indicating a community), profession ("troops"—aggregating soldiers of various ranks and specialties), age ("newborns"—more vulnerable as victims), and other relevant attributes ("households"—presented as destroyed, "mercenaries"—as materialistic, "trolls"—as malicious) in relational verbal processes.

Individual actors of M can be divided into political and military decision-makers ("Putin," "Blinken"), as well as experts ("Professor Rory Cormac"), and celebrities in various walks of life ("the Pope," "a Ukraine tennis star"). Some crime perpetrators are identified by name and with extended attributions ("convicted murderer Yevgeny Nuhzin hired by Vladimir Putin to fight Ukraine"), while the victims mostly remain indeterminate or anonymous ("girl, 13").

The early reporting of Russian invasion cemented a storyline with a distinct position for Russia as a militarized Actor under the autocratic leadership of Vladimir Putin (16 instances), and with the executive role of his political and economic henchmen and subordinated army commanders. The frequent individualization of Putin foregrounds a tabloid-like inclination for blame attribution and the need to entrench the moral order by identifying evil-doers and creating outrage around their actions and statements (examples (3) and (5) above). The atrocities and tortures attributed to Russian soldiers

Table 3. Subject positionings in *the Mirror* (no of tokens = 132).

Grouped participants	Russian participants		Ukrainian participants		Individual participants	Organizations
11 tokens	52 tokens	**22 types**	39 tokens	**25 types**	21 tokens	9 tokens

(aka "Putin's troops") in M pit them against innocent "civilian Ukrainian population," particularly women and children.

Russian citizens are not given much agency except in the rare cases of resisting conscription or of suffering the economic sanctions and social consequences following "Putin's war." Other important collective Russian Actors directly complicit in the aggressive action are "FSB," "energy industry," "Wagner group," "special forces," and "Russian trolls." With few exceptions, Russian-related positionings are heavily tied to criminality, brutality, exploitation, autocracy, and inflicting suffering with irrational motivation and on unprecedented scale (examples (3) and (4) above).

Ukraine, both as a victim and a fighter, is overdetermined in comparison to Russia, given a variety of mentioned entities—from "refugees" to abducted "children" and from large groups of inhabitants of some Ukrainian regions to famous Ukrainian sportspeople and celebrities. However, the Actors are mostly collectivized and rarely identified by names. Sometimes negative Ukrainian Actors are indicated ("incompetent general"), but the negativity is overwhelmingly compensated by the coverage of the heroic Ukrainian nation/military that resisted relentless Russian attacks, often with insufficient weaponry and military aid. President Volodymyr Zelensky (often in the Sayer function) is represented as a voice of the nation and of the administration that (successfully) pleads for Western support, as in (7):

(7) Zelensky WILL get fighter jets as Western allies agree to give planes to Ukraine.

Among other national actors in M, the UK and the US, as well as NATO and international organizations and corporations, are positioned as Actors that shape the war reality to a large degree. It is notable that a British tabloid would sanction British politicians, celebrities or individuals if they were in some way to forego the moral obligation to protect the victim and align with the aggressor (8):

(8) British traitors fighting for Vladimir Putin in Ukraine exposed and branded "an absolute disgrace."

Nevertheless, M's headlines tend to put well-known UK individuals in subject positionings, even if they are relatively removed from the war itself. The stature of some artists, sportspeople, religious and political leaders as well as economic experts and security analysts is sufficient for M editors to make them responsible for shaping the representations of war for the UK readers (9):

(9) Rishi Sunak urges world leaders to "double down" on support for Ukraine. The Prime Minister said "the whole world must hold Russia to account" for war crimes against Ukraine and criticized the agreements of the "post-Cold War era" for failing Ukraine.

The New York Post

NYP subcorpus consists of 136 headlines (without lead-ins) of 11.4 words on average (1,547 words in total). In four instances, no specific participants related to war coverage could be identified (e.g., "Why political gridlock is gold—and what that means for

Table 4. Subject positionings in the *New York Post* (no of tokens = 136).

Grouped participants	Russian participants		Ukrainian participants		Individual participants	Organizations
22 tokens	46 tokens	**16 types**	33 tokens	**10 types**	22 tokens	12 tokens

stocks in 2024"). There was one case of two parallel Actors (e.g., "As Ukraine assesses damage in Kherson, Russia bans ship traffic in key waterway"). Subject positionings of Russian-related entities amount to 46 instances, with only 16 participants, the top three being "Russia" (14), "Putin" (12), and "Russians" (4). In the case of Ukraine-related entities, there are 33 instances invoking 10 participants, with the top mentions being unequally distributed to collective "Ukraine"—16, and then to "Zelensky"—7, "Ukrainians"—2, and "civilians"—2. 22 instances of references to other states and groups of people are recorded, followed by 20 instances of named political leaders and celebrities, and 12 instances of organizations and corporations (see Table 4).

As with M, Russian army and regime are shown in NYP as targeting innocent civilian Ukrainian population (10), and engaging in inhumane and criminal actions (11):

(10) Ukraine civilians continue to die in Russian strikes as experts warn US aid is needed.
(11) Zelensky says millions could starve as Russia blocks Ukraine's ports.

Due to the cryptic nature of NYP's headlines, there are high proportions of national, political or ethnic shortcuts or metonyms ("US," "China," "Europe," "the West," "foreign volunteers"). In a similar manner, surnames are predominantly used ("Biden," "Trump," "Xi") instead of expanded attributions and titling. The exceptions to this rule include individuals that American readers may find obscure, e.g., "EU president Ursula von der Leyen," or "Japan's Kishida." NYP refers to corporate American or multinational stock-traded actors (12) in the context of war, particularly the economic sanctions induced by it, quite consistently. This stands in contrast to M, which was more likely to mention whenever British celebrities become engaged in war-related charities or declarations of support.

(12) Heineken, Shell, Carl's Jr. dubbed "wartime profiteers" for still operating in Russia despite vowing to leave.

It is through the actions of corporate entities (NYP) or celebrity figures (M), respectively, that the two English-language tabloids are likely to draw readers' attention to the Ukraine war coverage and narrate the stories of possible social or economic aftermaths of the invasion from alternative (non-politicized) points of view. The English-language outlets are also likely to explicitly invoke morals and values, rather than limit themselves to purely geopolitical or military assessments (13):

(13) Ukraine accuses Elon Musk of "committing evil" by thwarting attack on Russian fleet.

SuperExpress

The Polish-language tabloid subcorpus consisted of two sources, one of which encompasses150 headlines from SE, with the average length of 11.4 words and total word

Table 5. Subject positionings in *SuperExpress* (no of tokens = 143).

Grouped participants	Russian participants		Ukrainian participants		Individual participants	Organizations
13 tokens	54 tokens	**10 types**	47 tokens	**13 types**	24 tokens	5 tokens

size of 1,703. During the coding, it was possible to identify 143 social actor mentions (see Table 5). Two headlines had two parallel actors e.g., "Eksplozje na Krymie! Wielka akcja Ukrainy. Putin mści się w Kijowie i Lwowie!" [Explosions in Crimea! Ukraine's grand action. Putin takes revenge in Kyiv and Lviv]. Nine headlines did not have an identifiable social actor (e.g., "Skutki wojny. Mniej urodzeń, coraz więcej patologii ciąży" [War's consequences. Fewer births; more pathological pregnancies]). The grammatical characteristics of the Polish language also required coding for latent categories that agree with predicates' suffixes for number and grammatical/semantic gender (e.g., Ukrain*ka* = Ukrainian woman).

Russia-related entities in subject positionings are mentioned 54 times, with "Putin" invoked 25 times, "Russia" –13 times, and "Russians"—9 times. The Ukrainian participants were mentioned slightly less frequently, namely 47 times, of which the top three were "Ukraine"—20, "Ukrainians"—6, "Ukrainian refugees"—6. As with the English-language tabloids, Ukrainian actors were frequently overdetermined, with mentions of Ukrainian "ministers," "soldiers," "refugee representatives," or "victims." Unlike in the English-language outlets, the Polish tabloids focus more on the lived experience of displaced Ukrainians in Ukraine and in Poland than on what Volodymyr Zelensky is saying or doing (only 6 instances). Also, Ukrainian social actors are given more agency to defend themselves, fight back, rebuild their lives, and campaign, given the SE editors' choice of verbs representing them in material processes.

There are 13 examples of grouped participants, states and collective actors, with "the US" and "Poland" leading the list, together with a few mentions of Polish cities (e.g., Warszawa, Kraków, Bydgoszcz) where the inhabitants organized "solidarity with Ukraine" fundraisers. The 5 instances of organizational actors, mainly business-oriented entities, are highlighted in the context of either the Polish-Ukrainian trade and transit dispute or the Ukraine rebuilding effort. Finally, regarding individual participants, Polish military experts (3 instances), officials (5 instances), artists and TV personalities are featured, alongside world leaders such as President Biden and King Charles (14). Two mentions of a highly popular clairvoyant Jackowski and four cases of Polish mercenaries in the Ukrainian army made SE's headlines.

(14) Król Karol III wspiera Ukrainę. Oto, co powiedział na temat wojny Putina [King Charles the third supports Ukraine. Here is what he says about Putin's war].

While it is not surprising to see Russian military actors and propagandists vilified in the Polish tabloid coverage (with such adjectives as "shocking," "brutal," "powerful," "horrendous"), and the solidarity with Ukrainian refugees and victims expressed in very emotional ways, it is interesting to note that SE presents Ukrainians as mainly as survivors, defenders and attackers, not just victims. Some verbal relational processes represent their successful military attacks ("Ukraine's drones," "Ukrainian precision shelling"). Headline clauses report on Ukraine's strategy and mastery of military technology, and the skillful tactics

that the outnumbered Ukrainians deploy to battle the Russian invaders. In addition, Ukrainian political and cultural elites are shown as campaigning relentlessly for military and humanitarian aid abroad, and for the world's attention to the destructive consequences of the war. These headlines appeal to audience's lifeworld with storylines in which Russia is blamed for the loss of "historical monuments," or the attacks on "civilian infrastructure," and the "supermarkets" where many "ordinary people" get their supplies.

SE's headlines seem to favor fear appeals and strategic ambiguity when it comes to making the readers follow the coverage despite the fatigue that the war reporting might have generated over the course of two years. As many as 31 headlines (out of 150) refer to predictions that Putin/Russia will attack another country, perhaps Poland (15). Some claim that Ukraine may not be able to resist the invasion much longer (16). Fears of economic complications and social consequences are also foregrounded, especially in the context of energy crises and upcoming waves of refugees (17).

(15) Rosja już ma plany zmiany nazw polskich miast! Warszawa, Kraków, Wrocław to początek listy [Russia already has plans how to change names of Polish cities. Warszawa, Kraków, Wrocław top the list].
(16) Putin może zwyciężyć w 2024 roku? "Na krawędzi upadku. Świat stoi w ogniu" [Putin may win in 2024? "On the brink of fall. The world on fire"].
(17) Czy jeszcze w tym roku z Ukrainy wypłynie nowa fala uchodźców? [Is another wave of Ukrainian refugees coming this year?].

Due to the clipped version of SE headlines, as seen in the examples above, one can also note that their wording strategically invites the audience to follow the article to find out exactly what exactly was done or meant by the social actors mentioned in the headline, as well as what the further negative consequences might be. Given the relative frequency of question forms, phrases used instead of clauses, exclamations or enumerations, SE tabloid headlines may have a higher clickbait capacity than the previously analyzed English-language cases.

Fakt

To illustrate the range of tabloid editorial practices, another well-established Polish-language tabloid has been analyzed according to the same transitivity analysis and social actor protocol to achieve additional triangulation and insight. The subcorpus of F's headlines ($N = 150$) encompassed 1,899 words with a typical headline averaging 12.5 words. There were 147 headlines with identified participants, and three headlines without explicit attribution (e.g., "Koszmarny koszt wojny w Ukrainie. Kwoty szokują" [The nightmarish costs of the war in Ukraine. These sums are shocking]). Two headlines had double parallel attribution to Ukraine/Ukrainians and Poland/Poles (e.g., "Polak i Ukrainiec dwa bratanki. Henryk i Vladislav z fundacji 'Braterstwo' pomagają Ukraińcom

Table 6. Subject positionings in *Fakt* (no of tokens = 149).

Grouped participants	Russian participants		Ukrainian participants		Individual participants	Organizations
10 tokens	51 tokens	**14 types**	53 tokens	**8 types**	30 tokens	5 tokens

w obliczu wojny" [A Pole and a Ukrainian like two cousins. Henryk and Vladislav are helping Ukrainians in the face of war through "Brotherhood" foundation]). As a result, 149 subject positionings were coded. F is the only outlet that makes slightly more references to Ukrainian-related participants (53) than the Russian ones (51) (see Table 6).

Out of Ukraine-related positionings, the top scores are for the collective noun for "Ukraine" (17 instances), "Ukrainians" in various gender and number forms (18 instances), and Ukrainian military—"soldiers," "defenders," "leaders" (7), closely followed by references to Ukrainian "refugees" and "civilians" (5). Volodymir Zelensky is mentioned only 4 times in the headline, even though a follow-up corpus study shows that his name and position are the highest ranking collocations in the full-text Polish tabloid corpus (Molek-Kozakowska 2024). On the Russian side, the top subject positionings are "Russians" (16 instances), "Putin" (11), and "Russia" (6), closely followed by the label of "Russian regime" (5), and military officials, generals and propagandists (5). In a rather unusual manner, F's editors do not focus on the heads of states involved in the conflict, which is a way for many tabloids to make the coverage more personalized and newsworthy. However, it appears that F has developed a compensatory strategy of focusing on Poland and Polish collective actors (10 cases) or individualized political, military or celebrity figures (30 cases, of which 21 are Polish figures). The way F's war reporting is filtered through the Polish national interest, responded to by Polish experts, and commented by Polish officials and celebrities is helping to make the war coverage relatable to Polish tabloid audiences. Interestingly, the tabloid uses the interview genre relatively often, so public figures are asked for their opinions or predictions on the war in Ukraine, which diversifies the coverage.

Stylistically, F's headlines seem to strike a balance between human interest and strategic obscurity that drives curiosity and clickability. There are some examples of characteristic headlines that hide as much as they reveal, with emotional reactions of a celebrity (18), a revelation of supposedly hidden information (19), creating outrage over an atrocity (20) or expressing compassion and solidarity (21):

(18) Barbara Kurdej-Szatan wsparła Ukrainę. Pod jej wpisem rozpętała się prawdziwa burza: "Nie przestaniecie, prawda?" [Barbara Kurdej-Szatan [a Polish actress] has supported Ukraine. A real storm developed under her post: "You cannot let it go, can you?"]
(19) Tajna misja ukraińskich żołnierzy w Rosji skończyła się tragedią. Gen. Polko rzuca nowe światło [A secret mission of Ukrainian soldiers in Russia ended in a tragedy. General Polsko reveals]
(20) Putin znów zabił dziecko. Wiele ofiar wśród dorosłych. Atak rakietowy na kawiarnię i dom kultury niedaleko Kijowa [Putin killed a child again. Many victims among adults. A rocket attack on a cultural center near Kyiv]
(21) Wojna w Ukrainie. Dzieci znalazły schronienie w polskim hotelu. Potrzebna pomoc [War in Ukraine. Children sheltered in a Polish hotel. Aid needed]

The focus on children victims, the stirring of moral outrage over brutal Russian actions and alluding to dire future when introducing experts' predictions can be found among characteristic attributes of F's headline storytelling.

Table 7. Polarization in social actor representation in tabloid war coverage.

Process (level) of social actor representation	Polarization dimension	Example
Genericized (geopolitical)	US vs. THEM	Ukraine vs. Russia
Personalized (political leadership)	GOOD vs. EVIL	Zelensky vs. Putin
Collectivized (social experience of war)	VILLAINS vs. VICTIMS/ SURVIVORS	Russian army/regime vs. Ukrainian civilians/ forces
Functionalized (military expert opinion)	TRUE vs. FALSE	analysts vs. propagandists
Individual aggregated experiences	SUBJECTIVE vs. OBJECTIVE	personal stories vs. facts and statistics of war
Individual personal involvements	ELITE vs. NON-ELITE	celebrity involvement vs. anonymous heroes

Discussion and Conclusion

Instead of recounting the findings indicated in the results, which were interspaced with interpretative and comparative observations, this section aims at accounting for the social actor positionings that are characteristic of the headline patterns in the four outlets. The findings are in line with the characteristics of the tabloid format and reveal how the overall discursive strategies of polarization, personalization of conflict and moral evaluation are instantiated. The discussion also reflects on the broader cultural and editorial factors shaping tabloid coverage, given the different implications of tabloid conventions adversely influencing the representation of war in Poland, as opposed to the English-speaking audiences. Finally, it engages more deeply with the broader implications of tabloid coverage for conflict understanding and media literacy.

Subject positionings in the coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian war, when interpreted cumulatively through the lens of social actor typology (Van Leeuwen 2008), lend themselves to hierarchies or levels of binary oppositions that reproduce a relatively simplified representation of war reality (see Table 7). Given the oppositional positionings that can be identified across the data, the tabloid coverage can be seen as perpetuating socially salient divisions and further enforcing the black-and-white evaluation of war experience.

While such polarized spectra should be studied further regarding the full-text copies of the tabloid articles, and in accordance with other dominant characteristics of tabloid journalism (see section 2), social actor analysis confirms the actual textual enactments of binaries within headline schematic storylines. With much overlap in the ways they position war-related actors, all four outlets tend to vilify Russian actors, blame Putin for the atrocities and represent Ukrainian actors as victims. The Polish outlets additionally highlight Ukrainian's agency and Zelensky's determination. It must be noted though that a polarizing strategy based on ethnic genericization may lead to blatant stereotyping, when all individuals of a given nationality are aggregated and ascribed common (opposite) characteristics in the headline.

Another insight is that the polarization spectra superimposed on social actors are rarely neutral, either in terms of emotionality or moral evaluation. They are usually marked with opposite polarity, with only few cases of factual representation (e.g., Wojna na Ukrainie. Pociski spadły bardzo blisko polskiej granicy [Ukraine war: Missiles falling very close to the Polish border] SE), which can be explained with resorting to editorial practices aimed at preventing media panic, especially pertinent for Polish-speaking audiences directly impacted by such incidents. While mainly focused on the official sources and developments in the war in Ukraine, the tabloids also feature "lesser stories" that may

not aid the understanding of geopolitics or military strategy, but allow readers to get to know the downplayed aspects of experiencing life in war, as recounted by emotional witnesses and non-elite interviewees reporting either heroic or brutal acts.

The tabloid personalization of conflict is evident particularly at the level of the headlines, where the warring leaders—Putin and Zelensky—are blamed or praised, respectively. The tabloids champion a human-centric construction of the war storyline, as if it was Putin primarily attacking Ukraine and (to a lesser degree) Zelensky defending it, by what he says to international leaders and Ukrainians (see Wilk and Molek-Kozakowska 2024). Obviously, the clashing armies are shown as principal actors too, tied in a fight between evil and good, and fiercely attacking/defending specific territories and their inhabitants. The focus on territory, for obvious geopolitical reasons, is likely to be more pertinent for Polish-speaking audiences.[5]

While exploring the wider cultural dimensions and professional editorial practices of tabloid coverage of conflicts is beyond the scope of this study, it can still be observed here that market pressures and the increasing competition from digital media have influenced how headlines both simplify and sensationalize the conflict (Richardson 2007), most often by reducing it to the archetypical "good vs. evil." With the war always being a morally charged issue, it is, however, problematic to see content "being sold" through amplification of outrage and moral panic, especially in a country that neighbors the war zone, as is the case for Poland. This leads to the conclusion that the strengthening of journalistic freedoms and a stable financing of the media in young democracies is especially important to protect popular outlets from becoming commercially dependent on propaganda. Recent research in both the UK and Poland also indicates that as news is perceived as biased or superficial, and popular journalism becomes mere infotainment, the public trust in media institutions declines, with ample negative consequences for democratic deliberation subverted by shifting audience sentiment and (in)attentiveness (Chmielewska-Szlajfer 2024).

The study has exposed the linguistic patterns responsible for how tabloids, with their editorial practices and audience-oriented design, shape a polarized, emotionalized, moralized and simplified war coverage. Such war representations need scrutiny and critique, as they may aggravate conflict and impede a more nuanced understanding of the roles of various social actors and political forces. By aiming to lessen the cognitive burden and the sense of alienation inherent in war coverage, tabloids have a capacity to shape opinions and potentially mobilize public resentment. The risk is, however, that while enabling a moral connection with various dimensions of war, the tabloids may entrench social actor hierarchies and highly polarized divisions that are hard to shed in the context of any future attempts at post-war reconciliation. This finding resonates with a larger critique of tabloidization in line with Mouffe's (2000) notion of "agonistic pluralism," where entrenched ideologies are represented as irreconcilable, which leads to societal divisionism.

Finally, it needs to be observed that, while tabloidization is not the cause of polarization, it may act as a powerful amplifier of societal fragmentation. With headlines that provoke outrage, polarized content is likely to spread faster and build informational silos that either silence or delegitimize alternative views (Dalisay et al. 2012). When politically polarizing information is closely tied to identity and cultural values, it transcends politics and breeds cultural divides, sometimes inevitably pitting "people" against

"institutions," "elites" or "experts" (Steppat, Castro, and Esser 2021). To forestall the further development of tribalized public spheres, media literacy specialists suggest not only teaching about media biases and financial interests derived from clickthrough rates founded on algorithmic polarization, but also encouraging media users to reflect on their own media consumption practices and emotional reactions to media content, both tabloid and otherwise-sourced (Buckingham 2019). This recommendation echoes Papacharissi's (2015) warnings about the consequences to democracy of the rise of "affective publics" that are volatile and easily driven to act irrationally.

If tabloids were to better shape the public opinion, especially with regard to the segment of media users they are said to cater to (Conboy 2006), this study recommends that the editors should acknowledge and mitigate the undue limitations or imposed hierarchies in social actor choices and address the simplifications in narrative structures that result in polarization-enhancing practices. While there is little empirical evidence of tabloids significantly de-politicizing the public and by themselves causing a "media literacy crisis" (Buckingham 2013), their current formats of conflict representation can be considered as suboptimal. To from a better understanding of complex war reporting, audiences should be exposed to a far bigger variety of social actors and related narratives. This could facilitate a more nuanced judgment and conclusion-drawing needed for informed political engagement that might help to mitigate, not aggravate, the existing conflicts.

Notes

1. Founded in 1903 and owned by Reach company (known previously as Trinity Mirror), is a British national daily tabloid newspaper that was established after the merger of the *Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Mirror* in 2012. It caters to the working class audience and has consistently endorsed the Labour Party for elections, and liberal politicians worldwide. With its vivid style, crime, sports and celebrity coverage, and occasional controversial claims, the tabloid has been involved in some libel cases and criticism. In circulation figures, it has been the highest-selling non-conservative tabloid in the UK. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_newspapers_in_the_United_Kingdom_by_circulation).
2. One of the oldest American newspapers (founded in 1801 and the New York Evening Post), operating in New York City, which adopted a tabloid format in the mid-20th century. Bought by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation in 1976, it became known for its conservative editorial line and sensationalist style that involves gossip and human-centered entertainment stories. *The Post* has been involved in a series of controversies regarding publishing unverified news, incendiary headlines, racial bias, private information, but is the ninth most widely circulated newspaper and the most prominent American tabloid (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_newspapers_in_the_United_States#Top_10_newspapers_by_subscribers_and_print_circulation).
3. *SuperExpress* was established in 1991 in Warsaw as a daily newspaper and made its name by publishing about political and economic scandals at the time of Poland's rapid transition from post-communist to democratic free-market society. It is currently owned by ZPR Media Group that specializes in entertainment media from music radio and television, to lifestyle and hobby outlets related to health, beauty and childcare as well as interior decoration and architecture. Until 2003 it ranked as the second most circulated daily newspaper in Poland, changing its profile after the introduction of Fakt, another tabloid outlet, owned by Axel Springer AG conglomerate's division in Poland. *SuperExpress* self-identifies as populist center-left, similarly to *Fakt*, which boasted almost twice as many readers in 2022 with its centrist editorial line, topping other daily newspapers in circulation in Poland. Like its sister *Bild-Zeitung*,

Fakt has stirred controversy with its sensationalist publications and controversial imagery (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Super_Express_(newspaper) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fakt).

4. All translations of Polish headlines provided by the author using literal translation. All italics added by the author to illustrate relevant linguistic markers.
5. To validate this initial observation, the insights about headline-specific individualization, polarization, and, in addition, "territorialization," have been confirmed quantitatively through an analysis of the Polish subcorpus of tabloid materials (headlines, leads and full-text copy of 300 texts) with the use of Sketch Engine to identify 50 strongest multiword collocations as determined against the backdrop of a reference corpus of Polish Web 2019 (plTenTen19) (Molek-Kozakowska 2024).

Author contributions

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Data Availability

(1) Corpus: Data from media outlets that consented to their material being publicly available is https://corecon.omeka.net/
(2) Corpus compilation protocols and analytic categories are explained in an OA text https://grants.ulbsibiu.ro/corecon/how-we-collect-manage-and-process-our-research-material-for-corecon/

ORCID

Katarzyna Molek-Kozakowska http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9455-7384

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