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## “But then the war started”: The value of diversity in editorial practices during times of war and crisis

„I wtedy zaczęła się wojna”: wartość różnorodności w praktykach redakcyjnych podczas wojny i kryzysu

**Abstract:** In this article, we analyse the impact of disruptive media events on the perceived value of diversity in editorial practices, with a specific focus on the Polish media debate following the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian war in February 2022. We do this based on a unique dataset derived from in-depth interviews with eight editors representing four different newsrooms conducted before, immediately after, and approximately one year after the start of the war. Our research answers the question of whether newsrooms can defend the value of diversity during the coverage of war and crisis. We also assess the impact of the changed geopolitical context, characterised by nation-building mobilisation and public sentiments of solidarity with Ukrainians, on editorial decisions to mute, delay, or opt out of publishing certain stories. We contribute to research on the epistemologies of journalistic news production during times of crisis, news diversity, and the role of the media in democratic societies.

**Keywords:** crisis, war, editorial practices, diversity in editorial practices, disruptive media event, value of diversity during times of crisis, Ukraine, media

**Streszczenie:** W artykule analizujemy wpływ dysrupcyjnych wydarzeń medialnych na postrzeganą wartość różnorodności w praktykach redakcyjnych, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem polskiej debaty medialnej po wybuchu wojny ukraińsko-rosyjskiej w lutym 2022 r. Robimy to w oparciu o unikalny zbiór danych, pochodzący z pogłębionych wywiadów z ośmioma redaktorkami i redaktorami reprezentującymi cztery różne redakcje, przeprowadzonych przed, bezpośrednio po i około rok po rozpoczęciu wojny. Nasze badanie odpowiada na pytanie, czy redakcje są w stanie obronić wartość różnorodności podczas relacjonowania wojny i kryzysu. Oceniamy także wpływ zmienionego kontekstu geopolitycznego, charakteryzującego się mobilizacją na rzecz „budo-

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wania narodu" i społecznym poczuciem solidarności z Ukraińcami, na decyzje redakcyjne o wyciszeniu, opóźnieniu lub rezygnacji z publikacji niektórych artykułów. Wnosimy wkład w badania nad epistemologią produkcji wiadomości w czasach wojny i kryzysu, ich różnorodnością oraz rolą mediów w społeczeństwach demokratycznych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** kryzys, wojna, praktyki redakcyjne, różnorodność w praktykach redakcyjnych, dysrupcyjne wydarzenia medialne, wartość różnorodności w czasach kryzysu, Ukraina, media

## Introduction

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. The biggest European invasion since World War II, it was referred to by Russia as a *special military operation to demilitarize and denazify* Ukraine, and left millions of Ukrainians displaced inside their own country or seeking refuge abroad<sup>1</sup>.

Polish society reacted to the situation with unprecedented speed and support. Within weeks the Polish government adopted a special law regulating the principles applicable to Ukrainian citizens in connection with the war, retrospectively effective from 24 February 2022<sup>2</sup>. From the start of the war, 13.75 million Ukrainian refugees have crossed the Polish-Ukrainian border<sup>3</sup>. Thousands of Poles volunteered to welcome refugees into their homes<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, the Polish media embraced and reinforced a message of solidarity, transforming both mainstream and social media platforms into arenas where rituals of compassion and unanimity took place<sup>5</sup>. For a short while, the dominant coverage in media aligned with Poland's new image of the *moral and material*

- 1 P. Kirby, *Has Putin's war failed and what does Russia want from Ukraine?*, BBC.com, 24 February 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56720589>.
- 2 K. Schiffer, *Poland's answer to Ukrainians fleeing the Russian invasion*, International Bar Association, 22 April 2022, <https://www.ibanet.org/polands-response-to-ukrainians-fleeing-the-russian-invasion>.
- 3 *Aktualna sytuacja granicy ukraińsko-polskiej*, Ukrainians in Poland, 18 July 2023, <https://www.ukrainianinpoland.pl/how-many-ukrainians-have-crossed-the-ukrainian-polish-border-since-the-beginning-of-the-war-current-data-pl/>.
- 4 L. Tondo, W. Strzyżyńska, *We understand what war means: Poles rush to aid Ukraine's refugees*, The Guardian, 5 March 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/mar/05/poland-rush-to-aid-ukraine-refugees-russia-war>.
- 5 B. Erling, M. Kozielski, M. Niedbalski, *Atak Rosji na Ukrainę w polskich mediach. Reakcja na wojnę*, Press, 25 February 2022, [https://www.press.pl/tresc/69539,polskie-media-i-wojna\\_-inne-ramowki\\_-podcasty\\_-flaga-ukrainy-i-rezygnacja-z-rosyjskich-seriali](https://www.press.pl/tresc/69539,polskie-media-i-wojna_-inne-ramowki_-podcasty_-flaga-ukrainy-i-rezygnacja-z-rosyjskich-seriali).

*frontier for the West*<sup>6</sup>. The first cracks in this image began to emerge swiftly with stories of racism against non-white refugees at the Ukrainian border, Ukrainian women who, as victims of war rape, faced Poland's restrictive abortion law, or the government showing no support to groups offering assistance for LGBT+ refugees<sup>7</sup>.

Our aim in this paper is twofold. Firstly, most research examining media in the aftermath of disruptive events<sup>8</sup> primarily focuses on analysing content and textual elements<sup>9</sup>. In this article, we examine the transformation of editorial decisions and strategies of selected newsrooms to uphold the value of diversity in a period when a certain consensus or master narrative is expected to be conveyed by the media<sup>10</sup>. We contribute to the small but growing body of research that specifically investigates the choices and challenges faced by editors and journalists when dealing with the aftermath of major traumas<sup>11</sup>. Secondly, we look at the decision-practice processes used by editors to provide knowledge during times of war and crisis, while aiming to "diversify" the debate by bringing complementary or competing interpretations of the crisis into the public discourse<sup>12</sup>.

- 6 *Ukraine war hands Poland new international role*, France24.com, 21 February 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230221-ukraine-war-hands-poland-new-international-role>.
- 7 See: A. Njai, M. Torres, M. Matache, *Ukraine: The Refugee Double Standard*. *Foreign Policy in Focus*, Foreign Policy in Focus, 15 March 2022, <https://fpif.org/ukraine-the-refugee-double-standard/>; A. Ferris-Rotman, *Ukraine's Women Refugees Face the Harsh Reality of Poland's Abortion Restrictions*, Time, 21 June 2022, <https://time.com/6188502/ukraine-women-poland-abortion-ban/>.
- 8 Disruptive events are traumatic, unwelcome by almost everyone and don't follow any script. They are mediated (broadcasted) but not ceremonial. They are described as the radical contrast to other media events, including transformative ones, see: G. Bolin, P. Ståhlberg, *Managing Meaning in Ukraine: Information, Communication, and Narration since the Euromaidan Revolution*, Cambridge 2023, p. 105, <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14147.001.0001>.
- 9 K. Riegert, E.-K. Olsson, *The importance of ritual in crisis journalism*, "Journalism Practice" 2007, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 143-158.
- 10 K. Thorbjørnsrud, T.U. Figenschou, *Consensus and dissent after terror: Editorial policies in times of crisis*, "Journalism" 2018, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 333-348.
- 11 K. Thorbjørnsrud, T.U. Figenschou, *Consensus and dissent after terror...*; G. Bolin, P. Ståhlberg, *Managing Meaning in Ukraine...*; N. Uusitalo, K. Valaskivi, J. Sumiala, *Epistemic modes in news production: How journalists manage ways of knowing in hybrid media events involving terrorist violence*, "Journalism" 2022, vol. 23, no. 9, pp. 1811-1827, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849211015601>.
- 12 M. Ekström, S.C. Lewis, O. Westlund, *Epistemologies of digital journalism and the study of misinformation*, "New Media & Society" 2020, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 205-212, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819856914>; C. Callison, M.L. Young, *Reckoning: Journalism's Limits and Possibilities*, Journalism and Political Comm Unbound, Oxford 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190067076.001.0001>.

It must be stressed that the existence of master narratives or framing practices in journalism is not something journalists accept lightly, particularly when it is perceived as being at odds with objectivity<sup>13</sup>. Research discussing strategies adopted by the media which aim to provide “distinct” perspectives of the world while maintaining professional journalistic standards is scarce<sup>14</sup>. And while epistemological questions in journalism research continue to receive attention, studies looking at the ability of newsrooms to frame issues, actors, problems, and solutions “differently” while maintaining professional journalistic standards are critically needed. With this article, we fill that void by answering one major research question: How do disruptive media events affect the value of diversity in editorial practice?

## 1. Literature review

The crisis in journalism is increasingly discussed from the perspective of the epistemologies of journalistic news production. Issues related to power, structure, epistemological blind spots, gaps, and exclusions in journalism’s prevailing epistemology of objectivity are investigated under the overarching term of “diversity”<sup>15</sup>. Embracing it as an epistemology means valuing and incorporating diverse voices, viewpoints, and approaches in the pursuit of knowledge and truth<sup>16</sup>. However, studies looking at the ability of newsrooms to frame issues and actors, problems, and solutions “differently” while maintaining professional journalistic standards during disruptive media events are missing.

### Diversity in journalism as epistemology

Having a range of perspectives and opinions included in the media agenda is considered essential for a functioning democracy. This re-

13 J. Boesman, B. Van Gorp, *An Insidious Poison or a Door to the Story?*, “Journalism Practice” 2017, vol. 11, no. 5, pp. 559-576, DOI: 10.1080/17512786.2016.1159920.

14 See: S. Plaut, *Reshaping the Borders of Journalism*, “Journalism Practice” 2017, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 1-32, DOI: 10.1080/17512786.2015.1092391.

15 C. Callison, M.L. Young, *Reckoning...: S. Steensen, Journalism’s epistemic crisis and its solution: Disinformation, datafication and source criticism*, “Journalism” 2019, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 185-189, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918809271>.

16 C. Callison, M.L. Young, *Reckoning...*

lies on the principles of representation, the availability of unbiased information, and opportunities for public discussions. Research on diversity in the media as such is approached from the perspective of multiple and varied media landscapes or complementary and competing interpretative repertoires and voices.

If the media landscape is not varied enough, complementary or competing viewpoints cannot find resonance, remain marginalised, or are represented as deviant in the mainstream public sphere<sup>17</sup>. In this context, Poland has been making international headlines since 2015 when the conservative United Right camp took power. On the one hand, a decline in public interest in news, together with a rise in government interference with independent media organisations, and declining standards of press freedom have been reported<sup>18</sup>. On the other hand, many editors and journalists who were either purged or resigned from their positions due to political interference with media freedom in Poland have opted to start independent ventures or collaborate to launch new media outlets. They are using crowdfunding campaigns and embracing emerging technologies to create a diverse and multifaceted media landscape<sup>19</sup>. Regarding diverse perspectives, including both in news sources and amongst journalistic staff, achieving diversity continues to be a challenge for the Polish news media. For instance, the representation of women in the news media has remained at approximately 27% since 1995. Additionally, the voices of minorities, including ethnic, sexual, and people with disabilities, are virtually absent in the news media, even in stories directly related to them<sup>20</sup>.

- 17 R.M. Entman, *Cascading activation: Contesting the White House's frame after 9/11*, "Political Communication" 2003, vol. 20, no. 4, pp. 415-432.
- 18 J.M. Stolarek, *Poland: Freedom of the press in free fall*, Heinrich Böll Foundation, 8 May 2020, <https://eu.boell.org/en/2020/05/08/poland-freedom-press-free-fall>; J. Wiseman, *Democracy Declining: Erosion of Media Freedom in Poland. Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) Press Freedom Mission to Poland (November-December 2020)*, Mission Report, 11 February 2021, [https://ipi.media/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/20210211\\_Poland\\_PF\\_Mission\\_Report\\_ENG\\_final.pdf](https://ipi.media/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/20210211_Poland_PF_Mission_Report_ENG_final.pdf).
- 19 B. Erling, *As Polish public radio becomes politicised, presenters are creating independent crowd-funded alternatives*, Notes from Poland, 20 July 2020, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2020/07/20/as-polish-public-radio-becomes-politicised-presenters-are-creating-independent-crowdfunded-alternatives/>.
- 20 G. Gober, M. Ohia-Nowak, *Globalny Projekt Monitorowania Mediów 2022. Polska. Raport Krajowy*, Whomakesthenews.org, January 2022, <https://whomakesthenews.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/GMMP-POLSKA-2020.pdf>.

Research on strategies employed by journalists and editors to offer diverse perspectives while upholding professional journalistic standards is limited. Journalists who introduce alternative interpretative repertoires to the traditional newsroom, offering complementary or competing worldviews, often face accusations of bias or being labelled as activists<sup>21</sup>. Shayna Plaut's study of transnational people journalism demonstrates how the Saami and the Roma manage to develop robust journalistic practices that both preserve their distinct perspectives of the world while maintaining professional journalistic standards<sup>22</sup>.

### **Diversity in journalism as epistemology during times of war and crisis**

Katz and Liebes mention three types of disruptive events: terror, disaster, and war<sup>23</sup>. Three key phases are said to follow crisis and disaster reporting: immediate sense-making, ritualising, and transformation back to normalcy<sup>24</sup>. Existing research extensively covers the crucial role of mainstream media in the aftermath of disruptive events, particularly in the initial two phases of crisis reporting<sup>25</sup>. In this period, those who hold positions of power and influence play a crucial role in constructing and promoting master narratives that are next convened by the established news media to help people make sense of the events, and provide reassurance, explanation, and guidance<sup>26</sup>. As society finds its balance, so too do journalists reclaim their customary, expert, and diligent position as guardians of information and perceptive observers<sup>27</sup>.

- 21 C. Baden, N. Springer, *Conceptualizing viewpoint diversity in news discourse*, "Journalism" 2017, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 176-194, <https://doi-org.ezp.sub.su.se/10.1177/1464884915605028>.
- 22 She uses the term "transnational" to refer to people who identify as belonging to the same group and/or nation yet span two or more states (ibid., p. 2).
- 23 E. Katz, T. Liebes, "No more peace!" *How disaster, terror and war have upstaged media events*, "International Journal of Communication" 2007, vol. 1, pp. 157-166, <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/44>.
- 24 K. Thorbjørnsrud, T.U. Figenschou, *Consensus and dissent after terror...*
- 25 K. Thorbjørnsrud, T.U. Figenschou, *Consensus and dissent after terror...*; K. Riegert, E.-K. Olsson, *The importance of ritual in crisis journalism...*; S. Waisbord, *Journalism, risk, and patriotism*, [in:] *Journalism after September 11*, B. Zelizer, S. Allan (eds.), London, New York 2002, pp. 201-219.
- 26 K. Thorbjørnsrud, T.U. Figenschou, *Consensus and dissent after terror...*, p. 335.
- 27 E. Zandberg, M. Neiger, *Between the nation and the profession: Journalists as members of contradicting communities*, "Media, Culture & Society" 2005, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 131-141; H. Nosseck,

A limited body of research has discussed changes in professional principles within journalism and news media, as they strive to adapt to shifting sociopolitical contexts and evolving societal values in order to accommodate more diverse perspectives<sup>28</sup>. In the context of Poland, as the government gained international attention for actions such as refusing to comply with EU refugee quotas or tightening abortion laws, commercial media organizations have noticeably intensified their efforts to promote diversity. Unprecedented in the Polish media market, editorial statements like the one authored and signed by journalists from a prominent digital media outlet, have begun to be published, declaring:

*...freedom of non-public media has also been trembling in its positions. There is no reason why we should not speak out about it. We will continue to support our colleagues from other newsrooms in the face of any attack on freedom, independence, and media diversity, just as we have done so far. We will not only report on reality but also explain it – pointing out false statements, and deceptive theories. We will present as many perspectives as we discover, but you will also read our comments on current events. We want to share not only knowledge but also the opinions of our journalists. In the name of poorly understood objectivity, we do not want to stand between evil and good, denialism and ecology, unverified theories, and facts<sup>29</sup>.*

During disruptive events, journalists often assume more traditional roles as helpers, consolers, and organizers of expressions of solace and solidarity, in service to a society in crisis<sup>30</sup>. Lastly, a small body of research exists that specifically investigates choices and challenges faced by editors and journalists when dealing with the aftermath of major traumas. Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou conducted in-depth interviews with debate editors in Norway in the aftermath of the Oslo

*"News media" – media events: Terrorist acts as media events, "Communications" 2008, vol. 33, no. 3, pp. 313-330.*

28 E. Zandberg, M. Neiger, *Between the nation and the profession...*

29 *Deklaracja redakcyjna*, Gazeta.pl, n.d., [https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/o\\_nas/7,174552,27943986,nie-musimy-byc-pomiedzy-by-opisywac-rzeczywistosc-deklaracja.html](https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/o_nas/7,174552,27943986,nie-musimy-byc-pomiedzy-by-opisywac-rzeczywistosc-deklaracja.html).

30 C. Kitch, *Mourning in America: Ritual, redemption, and recovery in news narrative after September 11*, "Journalism Studies" 2003, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 213-224; K. Riegert, E.-K. Olsson, *The importance of ritual in crisis journalism...*; E. Zandberg, M. Neiger, *Between the nation and the profession...*



terror attacks, to understand if and how editorial decisions were influenced by a perceived climate of public opinion, expressed through social media and online debates<sup>31</sup>. They stressed that existing research *has largely ignored the conflicting types of input and influences that mould any type of editorial process, epitomised in times of crisis*<sup>32</sup>. Additionally, Uusitalo et al. analysed how news organisations manage knowledge production during coverage of terrorist violence in Finland<sup>33</sup>.

## 2. Methodology

We write this article based on a unique dataset. We include an analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with editors of news media outlets in Poland who work with the objective of “diversifying” public debate with complementary or competing interpretations of the world<sup>34</sup>. In total, we conducted 16 interviews with eight editors-in-chief and editors representing four different newsrooms (six women and two men). Amongst the studied newsrooms are two liberal mainstream national media outlets, one digital local media outlet, one newly established crowdfunded media outlet, and one newly established news portal written by and for Ukrainians in Poland.

The interviews span a period of one month before the war (five interviews), two months after the outbreak of the war (eight interviews), and approximately one and a half years thereafter (three interviews). The 16 interviews, lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes, were conducted by either one or two researchers using a semi-structured interview guide. In the analysis of the verbatim transcripts of the interviews, we followed the principles of grounded theory<sup>35</sup>. The analysis involved two coding phases; initial (open) and focused (theory-driven) coding, carried out by two researchers. To facilitate the theory-driven coding

31 K. Thorbjørnsrud, T.U. Figenschou, *Consensus and dissent after terror...*

32 *Ibid.*, p. 335.

33 N. Uusitalo, K. Valaskivi, J. Sumiala, *Epistemic modes in news production...*

34 Interviews were conducted as part of a project “Diversity management as innovation in journalism” (funded by Norway grants) which aims to study cases of innovative approaches to diversity management in journalism, launched by newsrooms in Poland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom with the objective of increasing newsrooms’ discursive diversity. The fieldwork for the study in Poland started in January 2022 and was interrupted by the military invasion of Ukraine by Russia on 24 February 2022. It was subsequently subsumed in March.

35 K. Charmaz, *Constructing grounded theory. 2nd edition*, Thousand Oaks 2014.



phase, we used N-Vivo software. To protect the anonymity of the interviewed editor-in-chief and editors, we have changed their names.

## 3. Analysis

### The value of diversity in editorial practices before the war

#### Moral, political, and reputational value of diversity

The value of diversity was defined by editors of media organisations participating in the study as a journalistic principle of enhancing and enabling a diverse public debate. Above all, however, interviews revealed a clear value-laden approach to diversity.

The interviewees emphasised that diversity was a moral imperative, *the right thing to do*, with human rights and dignity at the core of their editorial and managerial decisions. Iwona, a journalist with 16 years of experience and currently heading two large editorial teams in a major Polish digital media outlet, explained that creating space for marginalised and discriminated individuals involves representing their voices in a way that challenges prejudice and stereotypes. For media-facilitated debates to be considered *just*, they not only need to include marginalised voices and combat prejudice but must also take a moral stance against views that challenge human dignity and rights. According to all interviewees, this stance was considered modern, transcending traditional journalistic standards and representing a novelty, even a revolution, in Poland. Iwona describes how the diversity strategy she was tasked with developing by her company aimed to revolutionise their brand:

*It relates not only to language but also to communication style, selection of topics, and discussing stereotypes, which is particularly important in Poland. I'm working on a sort of revolution to modernize (our company).*

Marta, with a quarter-century of experience in the Polish news media, now serving as a Program Director at one of the well-established digital mainstream media outlets, points out that openly endorsing liberal values is a recent development in Poland. Such declarations are not commonly practised by journalists in the country due to *outdated views on objectivity such as giving voice to both sides even if they say*

*nonsense and quoting such statements without commentary.* Therefore, advocating for diversity necessitates a redefined journalistic standard that is unafraid of emotions, normative declarations, and transcends the traditionally understood value of “impartiality”. Joanna, the deputy editor-in-chief at one of the recently established crowdfunded media outlets in Poland, explains:

*We openly advocate certain values such as human rights. You would not see fascists invited to a debate here..., we are inflexible when it comes to our core values, and we will not give equal weight to both sides of the argument.*

The highly polarized political situation in Poland before the war, marked by The United Right camp’s assaults on non-public media and the propagation of hate campaigns against specific societal groups such as immigrants, the LGBT+ community, and women’s abortion rights<sup>36</sup>, also meant that the significance of diversity became political. Joanna describes how her company addresses diversity through the lens of exclusion and discrimination and adds that:

*When PiS (Law and Justice Party)<sup>37</sup> started its hate campaign against the LGBT community, it was a direct impulse for us to cover it more extensively.*

There was also a conviction that audiences and journalists select their media based on the values they resonate with. Therefore, openly declaring one’s values and taking a stand on certain issues was seen as beneficial for both the outlet’s audiences and its employees. Justyna, one of the younger editors interviewed, explains:

*My current boss is also very understanding and attentive to the needs of her employees; she is always on our side. I believe that if the work environment is friendly, open, and responsive to people’s needs, diversity will thrive.*

36 P. Pacewicz, J. Szymczak, *Homofobia PiS. Jak rozbudzali nienawiść do LGBT prezydent, prezes, ministrowie, poslowie*, OKO.press, 28 July 2019, <https://oko.press/homofobia-pis-jak-rozbudzali-nienawisc-do-lgbt-prezydent-prezes-ministrowie-poslowie-33-cytaty>; *Grabiec: Temat imigrantów pogrąży PiS*, Rp.pl, 5 July 2023, <https://www.rp.pl/polityka/art38698271-grabiec-temat-imigrantow-pograzyl-pis>.

37 Law and Justice (PiS) is the biggest party in The United Right camp.

### Editorial practices and decisions to uphold the value of diversity

Editorial practices and decisions aimed at upholding the value of diversity are, however, flexible, particularly when the role of the audiences and the type of publications are taken into account. In the context of audiences, flexibility pertained largely to a newsroom’s openness towards their expectations and feedback. Diversity was defended on the one hand as a value that educates and broadens the audience’s horizons, tames their social fears and phobias. On the other hand, it was said to respond and respect the audiences’ sometimes very progressive and sometimes very conservative expectations. Editors walked a fine line between what they or the audiences perceived as *inclusive* or as *ideological* and *confusing*. In such moments, they referred to diversity as a dialogue and agreed that it was not always easy to manage. Marta explained that context was always decisive in such discussions. For example, when writing a guidebook for parents on how to provide psychological support to children potentially affected by depression, the decision was to prioritize clarity:

*We had discussions about whether to introduce the non-binary language (in the guidebook). Ultimately, we decided against its inclusion. We felt that because this was intended as a basic manual and a first aid, it would be premature to divert the (parents’) attention with additional clarifications on the concept of non-binary. Many people don’t understand this, and we don’t want to disorient our readers, as well as other journalists. (Marta)*

In the context of the type of publication, the balance between market expectations and the needs of democracy was evident in editorial discussions and decisions. All the interviewees were convinced that certain articles should be written, regardless of whether they generate clicks or website traffic. These texts were referred to as identity-driven, mission-driven, premium, or niche, but they shared a common characteristic: they were consistent with the values the outlet aimed to align with. For instance, Iwona explains:

*We have a pool of topics that are important to us. We know that we need to publish them, and we want to. Whether they will be widely read or not doesn’t really affect our decision to commission them. These texts may not generate much rev-*

*enue, but our approach is such that it doesn't matter. Other articles will compensate for them financially, while these articles are essential for ideological reasons.*

Emotional or moral engagement with a story often meant opposing market pressure as well as resisting the practice of writing content solely for algorithms or for the sake of SEO<sup>38</sup>. Iwona emphasized that there are certain topics that require thoughtful and well-executed writing. If the newsroom lacks the resources to do them justice, it's better not to cover them at all. One example of balancing the value of diversity against market pressures is the use of inclusive language. This language sets the outlet apart from other media (as per the declaration of the value of diversity). However, in practice, it does not always align with the demands imposed on newsrooms by SEO departments. Marta explains how her newsroom had to negotiate a working model with their SEO department, agreeing on when and where to compromise and where to prioritise inclusive language:

*Writing with SEO optimisation in mind means writing like everyone else. However, as we've chosen to distinguish ourselves through our language, our SEO department often wants to murder us. Today, we have a better understanding of which news stories are genuinely worth the struggle, and the SEO department now accepts our arguments that it can't harm our image and needs to align with our declaration on linguistic progressiveness.*

Crucially, all interviewees believed that their capacity to defend editorial decisions for their diversity values was only possible due to the publisher's agreement on this. This provided a level of comfort to the editors, which they found *very cool*, and it ensured that the sales and marketing departments tended to work with them in tandem, rather than against them.

**38** SEO (search engine optimisation) refers to processes that aim to improve the outlet's website visibility in search engines, whenever people search for certain keywords that are currently trending on the web.

## **Analysis: The value of diversity in editorial practices after the start of the war**

### **The moral and political value of diversity**

All interviewees agreed that the value of diversity in their editorial work did not change following the war. The role their outlet needed to assume in the new geopolitical situation was clear. Similar to the period *before the war*, editors primarily aimed to defend human rights, challenge prejudice and stereotypes, including by mitigating potential hostility towards Ukrainians, and toning down negative aspects of the debate on Ukrainian refugees in the country. This responsibility to challenge prejudice and stereotypes aligned with the editors' conviction that it was their role to reshape the image of Ukrainians in Poland. Historically, Ukrainian immigration to Poland was predominately for economic reasons, and Poles were accustomed to Ukrainians working in service roles<sup>39</sup>. The new wave of immigration included affluent, well-educated people with a strong command of English, for whom Poland was not necessarily the last or desired destination. Joanna explains:

*We need to debunk stories that all Ukrainians are poor, and we only offer them pity-work. We need to create a new image of Ukrainians in Poland. That they are regular people, just like us, meaning that there are both wealthy and poor individuals among them.*

The responsibility to mitigate negative aspects of the debate on Ukrainian refugees in the country manifested in editorial decisions to censor or delay discussions about historical and problematic events between the Polish and Ukrainian nations. The argument of certain voices and debates being untimely, inappropriate, or inconsiderate was highly visible. Julia, editor-in-chief of a newly established portal written by and for Ukrainians in Poland, explains:

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39 A. Anagnostopulu, *Migranci ekonomiczni, czyli kto?*, Business Insider, 29 November 2021, <https://businessinsider.com.pl/gospodarka/migranci-ekonomiczni-czyli-kto-oto-warunki-zycia-osob-ktore-szukaja-w-polsce/258xs64>.

*There are people who want to write about the tragedy in Volhynia. It's a very difficult topic, and it's not wise to discuss it now. It's not a good moment. What matters is the present. Now, Ukrainians and Poles are friends, and that is important. We have a common enemy.*

Solidarity with Ukrainians meant that Polish editors agreed that the newly established digital portals, written by and for Ukrainians in Poland, were essentially a *Ukrainian kingdom*. Marta explains:

*Ukrainians shape the narrative there. It's quite evident, you can see it in the language, in the narrative, somewhat reminiscent of wartime propaganda. So, when we promote texts written by Ukrainians on our main page, we need to tone down emotional titles to ensure our (Polish) readers receive the information first. But on their page, it's a Ukrainian kingdom. For now, at least. They write what they need.*

Interviews conducted in 2023 confirmed a shift in this dynamic. The portal for Ukrainians remains active, but the Polish publisher has assumed greater control, including by changing its editor-in-chief. This was explained by the need to ensure professional journalistic standards were upheld and less space was given to wartime propaganda. Justyna clarifies:

*Information (published on the Ukrainian portal) is very challenging to verify, really. The whole situation is complicated by the fact that, of course, Russians have their propaganda, but the Ukrainians also have their own propaganda. This is understandable because this war is also being fought on the information front. But as journalists, editors, and publishers, we must acknowledge this reality, and there's some sort of a mental and moral barrier here. Some of us don't want to see Ukrainian propaganda. It's clear that we're on Ukraine's side, but this seems to close some journalistic eyes to the fact that it's also necessary to verify what Ukrainians are reporting.*

### **Editorial practices and decisions to uphold the value of diversity**

Editorial practices and decisions aiming to uphold the value of diversity continued to be flexible. The changed geopolitical context affected the way diversity was defended and argued. This was particularly evident when decisions on certain publications and the changed role

of the audiences were considered. In this new context, editorial diversity decisions were influenced by the climate of nation-building, heightened mobilization, and strong public solidarity sentiment with the Ukrainian nation. Anyone who disagreed or presented deviant voices that Poland was doing great work helping Ukrainians was often labelled as "anti-Polish".

Editors faced dilemmas regarding the publication of stories that were otherwise aligned with the newsroom's diversity values. Examples include reporting on hate speech against Russian residents in Poland, exploring the nature of Russian propaganda *so that people understand why Russians don't protest the war so much* (Joanna), and shedding light on the mistreatment of non-white immigrants at the Ukrainian-Polish and Belarus-Polish borders. Joanna, whose newsroom had previously covered the situation at the Polish-Belarusian<sup>40</sup> border, grappled with a feeling of incongruity when covering the help Poles offered to refugees arriving at the Polish-Ukrainian border:

*... suddenly the border was at the centre of media attention, and we were all so very awesome because we helped. At the same time, others are still there, trapped and dying (at the Polish-Belarus border). We write about the Polish-Belarusian border all the time, but I admit that in the beginning, it was very difficult. It was like poking a hornet's nest. Here everyone was saying how great Poles are, how much we help Ukrainians and here I wanted to scream, yes, it's all great, but!* (Joanna).

The anti-Polish arguments are not new in Poland. The right-wing government's previous attempts to discredit and editorially control privately-owned media often relied on *foreign* and *anti-Polish* arguments<sup>41</sup>. However, in the context of the war, these accusations began to influence how the value of diversity was weighted against the outlet's reputation and well-being. Here, Iwona describes a situation when a different newsroom from her outlet wrote a story based on a survey conducted on Instagram. They asked young Poles if they would be will-

40 The humanitarian crisis on the Poland-Belarus border has deepened significantly since September 2021, see: Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, *Situation on the Polish-Belarusian border*, 5 January 2022, <https://hfhf.pl/en/news/situation-on-the-polish-belarusian-border>.

41 W. Czuchnowski, K. Korzeniowska, *Poland's free media is shrinking*, International Press Institute, 3 February 2022, <https://ipi.media/polands-free-media-is-shrinking-gazeta-wyborcza/>.



ing to fight if Poland were attacked and apparently, a large proportion of those who participated in the survey said they wouldn't:

*This story became a story about us in state-controlled media and a major controversy, accusing us of being anti-Polish. After this, I felt there was a lot of pressure also on me, on everything we publish in my newsrooms. I was instructed (by superiors) to make sure we don't spread fear, that we monitor our sources closely, that we don't spread fake news (Iwona).*

Lack of resources, time constraints, concerns about fake news, and fear of being manipulated by Russian trolls meant that editors were more likely to opt-out or delay publishing certain stories. One example, cited by a few of the interviewees, was a story about rape crimes committed against Ukrainian women by Russian soldiers. The time needed to build relationships with Ukrainian journalists and establish trust with sources meant that the story was delayed in Poland. Joanna explains:

*The topic we neglected due to staff shortages is the wartime rape of Ukrainian women. Now, we are picking up on these stories with the help of Ukrainian journalists. This is also a way to include the Ukrainian perspective in our work, by hiring journalists from Ukraine. They have different contacts and can provide different angles to news stories.*

Iwona similarly explained that she was concerned about being exposed to fake news and chose not to publish stories if she wasn't completely certain about their sources. Other editors confirmed feeling frustrated over a lack of resources and the deluge of fake news, including opinions from laypeople who believed the crisis was the perfect moment to initiate discussions about media credibility. Here, Marta explains:

*We fell for one of these fakes, and the consequences were very harsh. It involved a guy from a reality show who faked his own death, labelling it as a social experiment to expose how the media work. So now, we not only have to deal with armies of trolls but also with these self-proclaimed "Robin Hoods" who try to prove that the media are unreliable. It creates immense pressure on us, and it's an un-*

*pleasant situation because we strive to inform as objectively as possible, yet we feel like no one believes us.*

The new geopolitical context also influenced the newsroom's approach towards their own audiences. Editors were more inclined to disable comment sections and disregard letters written by *God knows who* (as mentioned by Marta) rather than actively engage their audiences in diverse discussions. As Ewelina explained, *sometimes it's simply not necessary to let everyone talk*. Iwona added that the views spread on social media were much more likely to be muted by her newsroom. For a while, they even opted out of actively scouting social media for stories.

*I believe we handled that situation effectively. There were many refugees in Warsaw, so I told my reporters to simply go out and cover their stories, and focus on genuine human stories, to bring the human dimension of war closer to the audience. We didn't take anything from social media (Ewelina).*

## Conclusions

Our study found that disruptive media events, in particular war and crisis, influence the value of diversity in editorial practices.

What remained constant was the newsroom's commitment to the value of diversity, seen as a moral and ethical stance with human rights and dignity at the core of the editorial and managerial decisions. Prior research has shown that newsrooms reporting on disruptive media events undergo an adaptation phase where the need for flexibility in response to new circumstances is evident in their operations<sup>42</sup>. Similarly, in the immediate aftermath of the war in Ukraine, editors in Poland had to shift their focus from their usual topics and instead work tirelessly to provide real-time information and adapt their coverage to the unfolding events. Many interviewees noted that their editorial work underwent changes, with an increased emphasis on live coverage, news stories, investigative reporting, and a focus on hiring war

42 K. Thorbjørnsrud, T.U. Figenschou, *Consensus and dissent after terror...*

correspondents. New diversity initiatives, campaigns, and editorial plans had to be postponed or modified to address the current circumstances. However, even during the “repair work” phase, the value of diversity remained high among the editorial staff, although disagreement and dissenting voices appeared to receive less journalistic attention than before the war.

The perceived climate of public and political opinion, as expressed through social media and online debates, with nation-building exceptional mobilisation and strong public solidarity sentiment with the Ukrainian nation, influenced editorial decisions to opt-out or delay publishing certain stories or mute certain audience voices. This restricted flexibility of editors to engage dissenting voices appears to be a significant change in the editorial practices of newsrooms that otherwise declare a commitment to valuing diversity. However, even before the war, flexibility in editorial diversity decisions was evident.

Before the war, the value of diversity was often measured against market forces and audience expectations. Editors agreed that the publication of certain stories could be postponed or delayed if the newsroom lacked the resources to do them justice. Similarly, there was also a shared agreement that giving space to voices not allied with the newsroom’s core values was not a definition of good journalism. *Quoting nonsense* is not what journalism is about, we were told. However, in the new geopolitical context, the enthusiasm for *publishing against the current* appeared to be tempered, and newsrooms seemed to temporarily opt out of allowing certain voices to flourish. The value of diversity remained important to educate and broaden the audience’s horizons and mitigate social fears and phobias. However, due to resource constraints, fear of fake news, and concerns about trolls, newsrooms were more inclined to mute views circulating on social media and refrained from actively scouting social media for stories.

The ability of the studied newsrooms to frame issues, actors, problems, and solutions differently while upholding professional journalistic standards was influenced by the new geopolitical context. During times of war and crisis, practices and decisions used by editors to provide relevant, accurate, and verified public knowledge took precedence over “diversity”. Decisions to introduce complementary or competing interpretations of the crisis into public discourse were delayed due to resource constraints, time limitations, fear of fake news, and

concerns about manipulation by Russian trolls. However, as newsrooms regained stability, built new contacts, and established trusted sources, their enthusiasm for providing diverse perspectives in their coverage and enabling complementary or competing opinions to be heard was rekindled.

One limitation of our research is the relatively small number of interviews conducted and the limited number of newsrooms represented. However, given the thematic scope of the study and the timing of the conducted interviews, the data obtained is unique, and expanding it could be challenging, if not impossible. Nevertheless, future studies examining newsrooms' capacity to uphold the value of diversity during the coverage of disruptive media events could broaden the scope of this research by incorporating content analysis. This approach would provide a more data-rich analysis of how editorial diversity is affected during times of war and crisis.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The research leading to these results has received funding from the Norwegian Financial Mechanism 2014-2021. Research project no. 2020/37/K/HS2/03773 titled Diversity management as innovation in journalism (<https://managingnewsroomdiversity.com/>).

### **Acknowledgement**

The task was subsidized by funds from the Local Government of the Lower Silesian Voivodeship, Wrocław University of Science and Technology and the Municipality of Wrocław – Wrocław Academic Center.

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