“IS IT POSSIBLE THAT PEOPLE ARE SO IRRESPONSIBLE?”: TABLOID NEWS FRAMING OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SERBIA

“Da li je moguće da su ljudi tako neodgovorni?": Uokvirivanje pandemije COVID-19 u srpskim tabloidima

ABSTRACT: Starting from the observation that the COVID-19 pandemic is a socio-cultural and health phenomenon, in this paper we analyse the tabloid news framing of the pandemic in Serbia. Our study examines a month-long period following the first identified case, during which the government introduced preventative measures deemed to be some of the strictest in the world. Applying a news framing analysis to front page news of the three tabloid newspapers Alo, Informer, and Kurir (N = 387), our study identifies nine frames employed in the media reporting about the pandemic. Supplementing the framing analysis with an examination of the narrative roles of heroes, victims and villains in which different social actors are placed, we add to the nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural frames of reference in pandemic reporting. Our analysis establishes that the most prominent frames in the tabloid news stories on COVID-19 in Serbia are prevention and human-interest frames. It shows that the attribution of responsibility frame is used to present citizens as villains who undermine successful state measures, while China and Russia are portrayed as the heroes in the fight against the virus.

KEYWORDS: tabloid newspapers, news, media frames, COVID-19, Serbia

APSTRAKT: Polazeći od toga da je pandemija virusa kovid-19 podjednako socio-kulturni i zdravstveni fenomen, u ovom radu analiziramo uokvirivanje pandemije u vestima tabloidnih novina u Srbiji. Istraživanjem je obuhvaćen jednomesečni period koji prati pojavu prvog identifikovanog slučaja epidemije, posle čega je usledilo uvođenje preventivnih mera koje su ocenjuju kao najstrictnije u svetu. Primjenjujući analizu medijskih okvira na vesti sa naslovnih strana tri tabloida, Alo, Informer i Kurir (N=387), istraživanje utvrđuje devet okvira koji su korišćeni

1 jelena.kleut@ff.uns.ac.rs
2 norbert.sinkovic@ff.uns.ac.rs
u medijskom izveštavanju o epidemiji virusa korona. Kako bi se ponudilo nijansirano razumevanje socio-kulturnih okvira predstavljanja epidemije, analiza medijskih okvira dopunjena je analizom narativnih uloga heroja, žrtava i zlikovaca unutar kojih su pozicionirani različiti društveni akteri. Istraživanje pokazuje da su okvir tople ljudske priče i okvir prevencije najzastupljeniji u tabloidnim vestima o kovidu-19, te da se okvir odgovornosti koristi u predstavljanju građana kao zlikovaca koji sprečavaju sprovođenje uspešnih državnih mera. Kina i Rusija su predstavljene kao heroji borbe protiv virusa.

KLJUČNE REČI: tabloidne novine, vesti, medijski okviri, kovid-19, Srbija

Introduction

The importance of media in communicating health related risks has long been established in various disciplines from risk management studies to journalism and media scholarship (Glick, 2007). When the risk is urgent, the use of media increases as the public turns to news to learn about preventative measures. The role of media is deemed beneficial for informing the public, but studies show that media reporting is a double-edged sword because the media frequently exaggerate risks and places minority groups in the position of blame-takers (Lupton, 2003). These general observations come under further scrutiny as the COVID-19 pandemic affects the population across the continents.

In the first six months of the pandemic we have seen how policing of societies follows not just health concerns, but also local interests and social frames of reference. The case in point is the very naming of the virus and the disease it causes, being first called the Chinese virus or Wuhan virus until the WHO adopted the labels COVID-19 and SARS-CoV-2 (Prieto-Ramos, Pei, Cheng, 2020). Just as the official response to the health risks became entangled with social, cultural and political circumstances, previous studies have found that characteristics of media systems and news cultures affect how the pandemic is represented in the media (Klem, Das, Hartmann, 2016).

Analysis of media frames during pandemic outbursts are prolific when researchers want to assess the quality of health risk communication (An, Gower, 2009; Dudo, Dahlstrom, Brossard, 2007) and when the aim is to understand journalistic roles in mediating reality (Luiski, Barker, Geana, 2018; Shih, Wijaya, Brossard, 2008; Tian, Stewart, 2005). Following the second strand of research, our aim is to expand the existing scholarship, which primarily draw samples from quality broadsheet newspapers (Luiski et al., 2018; Clarke, McLellan, Hoffman-Goetz, 2006; Dudo et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2013), by shifting attention to the tabloid media. In Serbia, the orientation towards tabloids is relevant not only because they account for the largest share of readership (Media Ownership Monitor Serbia, n.d.), but also because the tabloids serve as the primary platform for the articulation of government and the ruling party’s position (Damjanović, 2020; Jarić, Laban, 2019; Subotićki, 2014). This makes tabloids partisan media, similar to those examined by Lee and Paik (2017) and Zhang and Fleming (2005),
and allows for an analysis of the entanglement of health related reporting with other socio-political issues. To account for tabloid and partisan news framings of COVID-19, we supplement the media framing analysis with an examination of the narrative roles of heroes, victims and villains in which different social actors are placed, hoping to add to the nuanced understanding of the frames of coronavirus news.

Pandemic, media, and politics: COVID-19 in Serbia

In Serbia, the first official response to the growing concerns over the global spread of COVID-19 was denial. Speaking from the official president’s press conference, at the end of February 2020, a pulmonologist said: “I cannot believe that the people who survived sanctions, bombing and other harassment are now frightened of the funniest virus in the history of mankind, that exists on Facebook” (Istinomer, 2020). Ten days later, on 6 March 2020, the first local case of infection was identified, and in another ten days a state of emergency was declared. In the first month, the government imposed lockdown measures, which were at the time some of the strictest in the world (Coronavirus Government Response Tracker, n.d.). The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the campaigns for parliamentary, regional and local elections scheduled for 26 April 2020. Although the elections were postponed, the epidemic and the measures taken by the government resulted in complex relations in a politically polarised society.

The curfew was not introduced by a decision of the Serbian Parliament, but as a result of an agreement between the president of Serbia, the government and the president of the assembly. The parliament only subsequently approved the measure on 29 April 2020. Although appeals were submitted to the constitutional court against such a declaration of the state of emergency, the court determined its legality (Constitutional Court, IUo-42/2020).

Among the first measures after the declaration of the state of emergency was a night time curfew, then a complete ban on movement for people over the age of 65 in urban areas, and in rural areas for those over 70. At the end of March, three weeks after the first case, a curfew during the weekend was introduced for all citizens. Temporary hospitals were established in larger cities as additional resources for the care of the infected. During the first month of the COVID-19 pandemic the country had registered 2,200 cases of infection and 58 people had died.

The government of Serbia prepared a package of economic measures, which included a one-time payment of 100 euro to all adult citizens, as well as a three-month moratorium on debt repayment to banks. As a special measure, assistance to entrepreneurs was introduced in the form of three minimum wages per employee, with the obligation to maintain the same number of employees.

In parallel with the promulgation of these measures, Serbia established communication with the People’s Republic of China, which, in addition to medical equipment, sent its own team of doctors (The Government of the

At the beginning of the state of emergency, the Serbian government tried to centralize information about the epidemic. Introducing new regulations, it wanted to prosecute those who published information related to coronavirus, unless the information originated from the state Crisis Group. With this move, the government briefly disabled the work of journalists, and their activities were reduced to following press conferences that were held daily. This measure was lifted after two days under the pressure of non-governmental organizations.

Alongside the health crisis in Serbia, an election campaign was conducted, and parliamentary elections were held. Postponed from 26 April to 21 June 2020, these elections were the first in Europe during the pandemic. Although the campaign was officially suspended, in its report on the regularity of the election process, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung pointed out that “numerous irregularities that greatly influenced the electoral outcome were documented on election day and during the electoral campaign, which unofficially continued during the State of Emergency” (Burazer et al., 2020: 1). The Centre for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA) also pointed to the problems related to the election process. The main challenges were “major changes in the key rules of the game just before and during the election process, unequal representation of political actors in the media, intense public officials’ campaigning at all levels, misuse of public resources and inertia of institutions” (CRTA, 2020).

Both the outbreak of COVID-19 and the elections took place amidst growing concerns about the rule of law and media freedoms. Freedom House highlighted the erosion of democracy in Serbia in its report on the state of democracy in 2019. The organization estimated that “one of the biggest problems facing Serbia is the deterioration of media freedoms. The majority of Serbia’s print and electronic media remain under the control of the ruling SNS” (Damjanović, 2020, para.7). The same report pointed out that among the most controlled media outlets is the tabloid newspaper Informer, which – together with tabloids Alo and Kurir – is analysed in this paper.

**Theoretical framework**

For some time the representational aspects of diseases have been of scholarly interest (Lupton, 2003; Philo, 1999; Sontag, 1989). The abundance of studies investigated media reporting on HIV/AIDS have established that the media linked the disease with the behaviour and morality of those affected, leading to social exclusion and stigmatisation. More recent scholarship on pandemics has found that contagious diseases receive heightened media attention compared to other health-related risks (Berry, Wharf-Higgins, Naylor, 2007), while the
prevailing concepts used to describe media coverage are crisis, dramatization and panic (Finn, Palis, 2015; Klemm et al., 2016; Ungar, 2008).

An important concept for the analysis of mediated representations of health and illness in general (e.g. Seif, 2002; Van Gorp, Vercruysse, 2012), and for pandemics specifically (Gadekar, Krishnatray, Ang, 2014; Gao, Zhang, Sadri, 2011; Jung Oh et al., 2011), is the concept of media frames. Framing theory has been associated with various scientific roots in sociology, communication scholarship, and psychology. Since Goffman’s (1974) first introduction of framing as a sociological concept, which explains how individuals interpret different information using their primary framework based on their experiences, this concept has become one of the fastest growing in the field of communication (Weaver 2007). Although it gained popularity in scientific research, there are still ongoing discussions about the definition of framing and frames (Entman, Matthes, Pellicano, 2009). The common definitions see frames as “organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time” (Reese, 2001: 11), providing “meaning to an unfolding strip of events” (Gamson, Modigliani, 1987: 143). At the interface between the world of events and the expectations of the audience, the frames are “working routines for journalists that allow the journalists to quickly identify and classify information” (Scheufele, 1999: 106).

Media framing studies differentiate between generic frames to be found across media coverage of different topics (Semetko, Valkenburg, 2000), and issue-specific frames that are limited to a set of related phenomena (Nelson, Willey, 2001). In relation to previous pandemic outbreaks, the generic frames of conflict, attribution of responsibility, human interest and economic consequences have been found in media reporting (Gadekar et al., 2014; Gao et al., 2011; Luisi et al., 2018; Luther, Zhou, 2005; Lee, Paik, 2017). Following the initial conceptualization by Shih, Wijaya and Brossard (2008), several other studies have examined the frames specific to the issue of pandemics: consequence, uncertainty, action, reassurance, and news evidence (Gadekar et al., 2014; Gao et al., 2011; Jung Oh et al., 2012). Across media reporting on three pandemics (avian flu, mad cow disease, and West Nile virus) in the New York Times, Shih and colleagues (2008) concluded that action and consequence were the two most salient frames. In a subsequent study examining H1N1 influenza in US newspapers and comparing it to blog posts, Gao and colleagues (2011) showed that action and severity frames are dominant in such media coverage.

The global nature of pandemics has allowed comparative insights, which indicate that media reporting is highly dependent on proximity to the outbreak (Fung, Namkoong, Brossard, 2011: 902) and that media coverage is linked to journalistic cultures and social and political factors. For example, Luther and Zhou (2005) concluded that Chinese newspapers were less likely to present an economic consequences and responsibility frame compared to US newspapers. Comparing US and South Korean news on the H1N1 pandemic, Jung Oh and colleagues (2012) found that in US news coverage the responsibility frame prevailed, while the Korean media most frequently employed a bare statistics frame. In one of the rare studies which has examined differences between the outlets of different
ideological leanings within one country, Lee and Paik (2017) observed that in covering the MERS outbreak left-oriented South Korean media used severity, economic consequence and statistical data frames, while right-leaning media relied more frequently on human interest and reassurance news frames.

Research pertaining to the media framing of COVID-19 has just started to emerge. One such study has noted that representation of Africa in media coverage of COVID-19 differs between Chinese and Western media, since the Chinese media mostly reported about the pandemic through novelty, impact and eminence frames, while in French, US and UK media the prevalent frames were those of impact, negativity and conflict (Gabore, 2020: 12). Differences in the global media were found by Matua and Ong’onga (2020) who identified the economic frame as more prevalent in Al-Jazeera and BBC reporting, while human interest stories were more frequently picked up by CNN. Ogbodo and colleagues (2020) examined media reporting from America, Africa, Asia and Europe and noted relatively similar representations of the COVID-19 pandemic through the prism of economic and ethnic issues, as well as through conflict and fear-mongering frames. However, there were some notable differences as the frames of hope and morality were more prominent in the Vatican’s media, the human interest frame was more frequent in America and Europe, while the politicisation frame was mostly used by Chinese media (Ogbodo et al., 2020).

This review of previous studies shows that there are framing differences between countries and their media outlets. However, until the outbreak of COVID-19, the global differences in relation to media coverage of pandemics have mainly been researched with a focus on the US, Asia and Africa. Further, although newspapers are the medium that is most commonly analysed, there is stark absence of tabloid media, which have different news routines compared to broadsheets and cater to different, much wider audiences in Serbia’s case.

Research design and method

Analytical categories for identification of news frames

Scholarship on media framing of current and past pandemics does not offer a single toolkit for the analysis of news. After conducting a meta-analysis of research articles about media framing of N1H1 influenza in 2009, Stainland and Smith (2013: 219) concluded that the systemic application of news frame analysis across several studies was uneven. In part, the divergent approaches to framing can be attributed to different disciplinary tenets from which the notion of framing emerges, and in part, differences arise from inductive formation of framing categories to reflect local specificities and news cultures (Cacciatore et al., 2016). Our review of existing literature presented in the previous sections shows that researchers used the set of generic media frames developed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) as the overarching framework for examination of journalistic routines of news making, while at the same time introducing issue-specific frames to accommodate specificities of reporting on pandemics.
In our study we have taken the generic media frames – human interest, economic consequence, conflict, attribution of responsibility, and morality – and combined them with the issue-specific news frames proposed by Ogbodo and colleagues (2020) specifically for news about COVID-19: politicisation, ethnicization, fear/scare-mongering, and hope. Due to the nature of tabloid reporting in Serbia we have made several adjustments: the conflict and politicisation frames have been merged into one category; the hope frame is substituted with the solidarity frame; and we added the prevention frame. What follows is the explication of the nine categories of framing devices we used in our analysis.

When they use the human interest frame to tell a story, the media give “a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue, or problem” (Semetko, Valkenburg, 2000: 95). We have identified this frame when media reported on any aspect of COVID-19 – death, illness, isolation, or everyday life – from the perspective of a single individual or a family.

The economic consequences frame is used when journalists package the information in such a way to highlight economic consequences of an issue to individuals or societies (Semetko, Valkenburg, 2000: 96). We have identified this frame when media referenced the economic impact of COVID-19, measures taken by the government to remedy this impact, as well as when media reported on the individual level economic aspects of the crises, such as shopping for longer lockdowns or shortages of certain products.

In framing an issue or event as a conflict, the media presents the opposing views of two or more sides and emphasizes the disagreement between them (Luther, Zhou, 2005; Shih et al., 2008). In our study, we have recognized such disagreement between country leaders – such as US vs. China – and between the Serbian government and opposition parties. Since these conflicts place the COVID-19 pandemic within the existing lines of (geo)political disagreements, we decided to treat this frame as a politicisation frame.

The attribution of responsibility frame is found in news stories in which journalists and their sources assign blame or credit for the action to individuals, social groups, institutions and the government (Kilgo, Yoo, Johnson, 2018; Luther, Zhou, 2006). This frame includes both causal responsibility (blaming someone) and treatment responsibility (demanding a solution from someone) (Iyengar, 1996). Previous studies have identified the responsibility frame when news stories emphasize responsibilities attributed to government agencies and officials regarding causes and treatment such that the public will expect the government to take action to solve the problem (Jung Oh et al., 2011). Following the initial conceptualisation of this frame (Iyengar, 1991; Semetko, Valkenburg, 2000), we have identified it as causal responsibility manifested when the responsibility was attributed to government, individuals, and social groups, blamed for allowing the virus to spread.

The morality frame, which “puts the event, problem, or issue in the context of religious tenets or moral prescriptions” (Semetko, Valkenburg, 2000: 96), has been the least studied among the five generic news frames with the conclusion
that this frame is only covertly present in the media (Neuman, Just, Crigler, 1992). However, the scope of the COVID-19 pandemic has taken the media in a direction of more overtly expressed morality. For that reason, we have identified the morality frame when the media has highlighted the (un)desirable behaviour of citizens within the broader categories of good and bad, beyond specific prevention measures.

For these prevention measures we have conceptualised a prevention frame as a synthesis of what other scholars have labelled action and new evidence (Shih et al., 2008), safety and scientific information (Gadeker et al., 2014), or preventive information, treatment information and medical research (Lee, Basnyat, 2013). We have decided to view this as a single frame because the primary aim of our study is not to assess the quality of risk-related information but to examine the entanglement of health-related issues with social issues in the media’s reporting. Thus, we identified the prevention frame when journalists highlighted the measures taken by the government to prevent the spread of the virus, medical findings, information and advice on medication, treatment of the disease, use of personal protective equipment, and similar concerns.

The fear/scare-mongering frame (Ogbodo et al., 2020) was identified when there is an emphasis on threat and risk accompanied by the use of emotionally charged language and speculation about future apocalyptic scenarios (Ungar, 2008; Kilgo et al., 2018). In terms of reporting on COVID-19, we have identified the fear-mongering frame in all instances when media stressed the consequences by providing worse-case scenarios and did so using alarmist vocabulary and exclamation marks.

The ethnicization frame was recognised by Ogbodo and colleagues (2020: 259) as the frame which “foregrounds ethnic terms while interpreting stories”. We have identified it when the media highlighted race, nationality or any other social group identifier (other than age) and used it as a key to explain group behaviour, understanding causal links between events, or reasons to be reported about.

Finally, the solidarity frame emerged as a reformulation of the hope frame (Ogbodo et al., 2020) and the reassurance frame (Shih et al., 2008). It was identified in the news which focused on good deeds, donations, volunteer work, and individual or community support in addressing the challenges posed by COVID-19. The solidarity frame included the global solidarity actions of governments, non-profits and individuals, as well as small scale local actions.

Relying on the existing scholarship, which suggests viewing frames and framing devices in unison (Kilgo et al., 2018), we have observed the existence of each news frame at the within-story micro level. This allowed us to examine RQ1: What are the prevalent tabloid media frames in news stories about the COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia?

In addition, we were interested in the weight of each frame as the relative importance of one within-story frame among the others that occurred in the same news story (Tewksbury et al., 2000). In order to examine this aspect of media framing we examined RQ2: What are the prevalent tabloid media frames
in the news story headlines? This operationalisation of frame salience, which relies on headlines as key framing devices (Pan, Kosicki, 1993) is well suited to our sample which is limited to front page news.

Analytical categories for social actor representations

Framing analyses often include sourcing patterns to reveal correspondence between news sources and employment of the frames (Pan, Kosicki, 1993). In research on news framing of pandemics, recognition of social actor representations is deemed important and some studies develop sub-framing devices to distinguish attribution of responsibility between individuals, society, or medical agencies (Lee, Paik, 2007). As concluded by Kilgo, Yoo and Johnson (2018: 813), “The blame/praise dynamic creates the need for an additional investigative inquiry about who or what was blamed more often and who was praised more often”.

Following this call, we have conceptualized three social actor roles – heroes, victims, and villains – to supplement the questions pertaining to the use of news frames. Our decision, firstly, derives from the fact that tabloid newspapers in Serbia are infamous for their use of unknown sources (Janjić, Šovanec, 2018) and almost exclusive orientation towards government sources (Jarić, Laban, 2019). This means that sourcing patterns would not provide sufficient information about the actors, since they are not used as sources (but nevertheless are portrayed in the news). Secondly, previous research about blaming and praising points to two distinct roles: villains who are to be blamed and heroes who are to be praised. In order to make a more comprehensive overview of the narrative roles, we added the role of victims. And thirdly, tabloid news is especially well suited for examination of these role because it often relies on news schemata that uses socio-dramaturgical events to portray issues, events, and processes (Brookes, 2000).

As already established in the scholarship about COVID-19 representations, the main villain ‘fought against’ by governments worldwide is the virus itself (Craig, 2020). However, as the ‘invisible enemy’ is hard to target, the discourse is aimed at individuals or groups. We have thus identified the role of villain when individuals, groups, or indeed entire countries are assigned blame for jeopardizing society, creating and spreading the virus, and undermining the efforts of the authorities and health specialists. The role of victim has been identified when individuals, groups, or countries were reported about with a focus on deaths caused by COVID-19, health complications, suffering caused by the pandemic or portrayed as needing and deserving help. If individuals, groups and countries were praised for their decisions and actions to mitigate the risks posed by COVID-19, or enduring the hardship by helping others, we have recognized the role of heroes.

In order to examine RQ3: Which social actors are represented as heroes, villains and victims? we have identified ten groups based on an in-depth reading of the sample and following the global and local socio-political circumstances. In terms of global actors, we have examined the roles in which China, US, Russia
and the EU were placed. As the local actors, we have identified the president, the government and other authorities, opposition parties, health workers, celebrities, and citizens.

**Sample and coding procedure**

The sample consists of news stories published on the front pages of the most popular Serbian tabloids. The tabloid press was selected for several reasons. First, since the majority of previous research has examined broadsheet newspapers (Luisi et al., 2018; Dudo et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2013), there is a lack of understanding about how the routines of the media based on simplification and sensationalism (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Brookes, 2000) manifest in the framing of pandemics. Second, tabloids in Serbia account for the largest share of readership (Media Ownership Monitor Serbia, n.d.). Third, the tabloids’ existence in the Serbian media market is frequently motivated by political and partisan – rather than economic – reasons (Matić, 2012: 174), which means that in media reporting on COVID-19 there is “synchronisation of the media agenda and the agenda of the governing elites” (Jevtović, Bajić, 2020: 555).

The news stories were selected from newspapers *Alo*, *Informer* and *Kurir*. The oldest of the three, *Kurir* was founded in 2003 by local businessman Radisav Rodić. It championed the era of new tabloids established after the democratic changes of 2000 (Milivojević, 2000), characterized by a mix of celebrity and political news. Following the arrest of the original owner over tax fraud, his son Aleksandar took over the newspaper. “Ever since its founding, *Kurir* has been changing its editorial policy numerous times” (Ranković, n.d.), aligning and breaking up with the government in power. *Informer* was founded by former journalist Dragan Vučićević in 2007 and is currently part of his company Insajder tim. The newspaper is widely seen as partisan and close to the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and is highlighted as a central platform from which SNS articulates its position (Damjanović, n.d.; Matić, Maksić, 2013). *Alo* was established in 2007 as part of the portfolio of German-Swiss company Ringier Axel Springer before being sold to businessman Saša Blagojević in 2017. Like the other two outlets, *Alo*’s editorial policy is to avoid criticizing the government (Mladenov Jovanović, 2018) because this allows access to ample indirect government funding, allocated through subsidies for media pluralism and through state advertising (Raković, 2020).

The individual issues of *Alo*, *Informer* and *Kurir* were accessed through the Novinarnica.net Internet service, which provides digital formats of print copies. The sample includes all issues published from 7 March to 7 April 2020, covering a one-month period after the first case of COVID-19 was registered in Serbia on 6 March. The analysis was performed on the news stories that were published on the front pages of the three tabloids. This yielded the sample of N=387 news items. The unit of analysis was a single news story.

Presence or absence (yes/no) of each news frame and social actor role was coded on the basis of the code sheet and the accompanying coding guidelines based on the analytical framework presented above. As the framing devices
were observed at the within-story micro level, this type of coding allowed for the existence of several frames within a single article or comment. For the frame of the news headline, we identified the manifestation of one of the nine frames. Social actor roles in one text were coded when an actor was placed in the dominant role (identified in the headline or news lead, presented in a photograph or occupying half of the text). We allowed for social actors to take only one role, meaning that the roles of villains, heroes and victims are generally mutually exclusive roles. When two roles co-occurred, we selected the one that was most prominent: articulated in headline or lead, photographs, and/or afforded more space in the text.

Coding was performed by the authors. Due to the manageable sample size, we each coded half of the sample separately, and then jointly discussed each news story to resolve any discrepancies in coding. For that reason, a reliability test was not performed.

Results

In answer to RQ1: What are the prevalent tabloid media frames in news stories about the COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia? the analysis shows three media frames that are most frequently used (Table 1): prevention, human interest, and attribution of responsibility frames. The frequency of the prevention frame reflects the fact that the state and health authorities held regular press conferences and proactively informed the public about the current situation and the measures that were being introduced. The media also took the role of educator and advised the public on how to behave. The human interest frame brought an individual and intimate perspective to the COVID-19 pandemic, usually reported in an emotional tone. “Kokeza [Slaviša, President of the Football Association of Serbia] has caught the virus during the Milano fashion show”, “Stanija [Dobrojević, television personality] in strict isolation” or “He does not have anyone to hug and cry” are some of the typical headlines for the human interest frame.

While the prevention and human interest frames are frequently employed by all three tabloids, the attribution of responsibility frame is prevalently used in Informer (in 35.34% of texts in this outlet, compared to 25.81% in Kurir and 16.38% in Alo). The responsibility is usually placed on the citizens who do not follow the rules introduced by the government. For example, in the news story entitled “Murderers, premeditated or without meditation”, the newspaper writes about the people who went to parks and “endangered themselves and others”. In a similarly reprimanding tone, Informer published an image of an elderly couple on the street (wearing face-masks) with the caption “Stubborn. Elderly people ignore the order to stay indoors”. The image accompanied a statement by the Serbian president, who asked: “Is it possible that people are so irresponsible” and announced a curfew from eight o’clock in the evening until five o’clock in the morning.
A more uneven pattern of distribution can be observed with the remaining six frames. The fear-mongering frame appears in a quarter of news published by Informer, but it is less frequently used by Kurir and Alo. The fear-mongering frame is employed to report global news (“Hell in Italy, the army is cremating the dead”, “Catastrophe in Spain”) or to describe the situation in Serbia in alarmist language (“Valjevo like Serbian Wuhan”). The morality frame is used in every fifth news story in Kurir, while it is less frequent in Informer and Alo. Within this frame, the tabloids report stories of celebrities who think they can get away with breaking the rules or citizens who use the pandemic to make a profit. The morality frame is also found in the messages of religious leaders, or in the statement of the president of the Serbian Academy of Science, who is reported as saying: “This is a good opportunity for us to become a better society”.

Presenting COVID-19 in terms of economic consequences is more frequent in Kurir and Alo, while in Informer it is one of the least frequent frames. Politicisation, solidarity and ethnicization frames are rarely used by Alo, but they appear more frequently in Kurir and Informer. By presenting COVID-19 through the political lenses, the tabloids refer to global disputes (e.g. “China: American soldiers brought coronavirus to Wuhan”), or point to the Serbian opposition parties who undermine state measures or profit from the pandemic (“Dragan Đilas makes fun of Chinese, and calls people to go out”; “Sick opposition plan: they spread lies about the virus and migrants to postpone elections and bring down Vučić”). The solidarity frame is mainly used to portray the assistance provided by Russia and China (e.g. “Thank you China. Chinese experts come by the end of the week”, “Putin sends doctors and equipment”) or celebrity donations.
(“Novak [Đoković] donates one million euro for ventilators”). The ethnicization frame mainly focuses on the diaspora community returning to the country, as the authorities targeted this group as a health risk and called on citizens working abroad not to come back. Iterating the trope of official discourse, a journalist from Kurir combined ethnicization and responsibility frames by reporting: “Many Gastarbeiter did not follow the ordered self-isolation rules, many walked freely, hugged, partied, and spread the disease”.

Compared to the somewhat dispersed distribution of the frames in news stories, the analysis answering RQ2 – What are the prevalent tabloid media frames in the news story headlines? – provides a sharper image (Table 2). It shows that Alo and Kurir most frequently employed prevention and human interest frames, which together account for more than half of news stories. In Informer, there is a more even distribution between prevention and fear-mongering frames, followed by the human interest frame. All other frames are employed to a lesser extent, although with some differences among the three analysed tabloids: politicisation and solidarity frames are marginally present in Alo’s headlines, while the frame of economic consequences is almost absent from Informer’s headlines.

Table 2: Frame distribution in headlines across three tabloid newspapers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>Kurir %</th>
<th>Informer %</th>
<th>Alo %</th>
<th>Total %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Human interest</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic consequence</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attribution of responsibility</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politicisation</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morality</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevention</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solidarity</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear-mongering</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicization</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No frame</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>387</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* % of the total number of articles from the outlet

The analysis in relation to RQ3: Which social actors are represented as heroes, villains and victims? shows that the roles of villains and victims are primarily given to citizens, while the role of heroes is most frequently given to China (Table 3). The hero – “Brother Xi” as called by the Serbian president and the
media – provides medical equipment, know-how and teams of doctors. In his role as hero, the Chinese president is accompanied by Russia (and its president Putin), and to a lesser degree by health workers. The citizens and the President of Serbia have the same frequency of appearance in the hero roles.

Table 3: Heroes, victims and villains in tabloid reporting on COVID-19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Heroes</th>
<th>%*</th>
<th>Villains</th>
<th>%*</th>
<th>Victims</th>
<th>%*</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citizens</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10.84</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>55.67</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>40.74</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrities</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7.23</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22.68</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>18.52</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10.84</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.02</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6.79</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health workers</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14.46</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9.88</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition parties</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8.25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26.51</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7.22</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>14.20</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18.07</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.94</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>342</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* % of the total number of actors placed in the role

The villains are predominantly citizens and celebrities – they are the ones jeopardizing public health, not observing the measures introduced by the government, or using the people’s misfortune to make a profit. To a lesser extent the same behaviour is attributed to the opposition parties and to the EU. While the opposition parties are accused of looking for political gains, the EU is blamed for not offering enough support to its member countries and Serbia.

The most dominant social actor role is the role of the victim, slightly less than the other two categories taken together. When portraying the victims of COVID-19 pandemics, the three tabloids mainly focus on the citizens of Serbia, and to some extent on celebrities and health workers. As the pandemic reached its first peak in Northern Italy, the EU had a prominent role as victim, especially when compared to its roles of hero and villain.

Discussion

The results point to the key contours of tabloid reporting about the COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia. Tabloid routines of reporting that prioritize private over public life (Macdonald, 2000; Örnebring, Jönsson, 2004) are generally
preserved in all three tabloid outlets. Although they provide ample space for the government, health authorities and specialists to inform and educate the public about the crisis by using the prevention frame, one third of the news stories present the pandemic through the human interest frame. Narrated from the first person of those affected, their friends, relatives and neighbours, human interest aspects are found to be one of the central frames both in their frequency and strength. The focus on ordinary people and celebrities as victims and villains further supports this finding.

Understanding partisan allegiances is needed to interpret the distribution of the remaining frames between the three tabloids. With the highest frequency of attribution of responsibility, fear-mongering and politicisation frames, the tabloid Informer has followed the government’s lead more closely than the other two outlets. As the subsequent analysis of social actor representations shows, it is citizens and celebrities, and not the authorities, who are attributed blame and vilified. From this we can conclude that the attribution of responsibility frame mainly served the purpose of diverting possible responsibility from the government to other social actors – most notably the reckless and unreasonable citizens, and the diaspora community. This underlying logic of the COVID-19 blame-game is perhaps best illustrated by the quote: “We would need 58 days to fully defeat coronavirus, but only if all the citizens would follow the proposed measures” (Informer, 24 March 2020: 2).

By placing the contestation of government decisions and actions within the politicisation frame and by framing the criticism from the opposition parties as the acts that undermine state efforts and jeopardize public health, it could be interpreted that Informer attempted to divert attention from the government’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. In a similar manner, the fear-mongering frame interacts with the attribution of responsibility frame. First, by dramatizing future scenarios it creates a context against which the citizens can evaluate rather strict government measures. Second, it serves as a juxtaposition to the topic of irresponsible citizens whose actions are deemed even worse in the face of an apocalyptic future.

Quite dissimilar to Informer, Alo shied away from politicisation and used attribution of responsibility and fear-mongering less frequently. The key frames employed by this outlet are prevention and human interest frames, as would be expected in tabloid portrayals of a pandemic (Brookes, 2000). At least in part, this can be interpreted as the remnant of professional routines that outlet obtained when it was part of a foreign-owned media corporation. In other words, in crises times, Alo detached itself from partisan reporting and resorted to its previous journalistic practice.

Finally, the third tabloid outlet Kurir sits between these two different approaches. It provided less space for the attribution of the responsibility frame, when compared to Informer, but in comparison to Alo it employed the prevention frame more frequently and the human interest frame less frequently. We are prone to conclude that by focusing on prevention, Kurir allowed ample space for government and health officials to voice their positions. However, it
did not lend further support to the government and did not pick up attribution of responsibility frame and politicisation frames.

Despite these differences between the tabloids, their perspectives on friends and foes in the global arena is very similar. Traditionally Euro-sceptic (Drašković, Prodanović, Pavkov, 2016) and incentivized by the situation in Italy, they have represented the citizens of the EU as victims and its leadership as the villains who would not assist member countries, and Serbia as the candidate. Due to its proactive campaign, China was embraced as a saviour, with no critical and dissonant tones generally found in reporting on China’s role in the spread of COVID-19 (Ogbodo et al., 2020). Furthermore, the traditional ‘brotherhood’ with Russia, promoted by the tabloids, found its articulation in the news of COVID-19 as they searched for a hero warrior to save the world.

Conclusions

Our study points to the conclusion that in a politically polarised media environment tabloid orientation towards human interest stories goes hand-in-hand with their orientation towards the government. Although the election campaign was officially suspended, the partisan tabloids Alo, Informer and Kurir opted for personalized accounts and event-led reporting that has prioritized celebrities and vilified ordinary citizens at the expense of the closer scrutiny of government measures. The controversial and contested decisions and actions of the government, such as the introduction of the state of emergency and the limitation on media freedoms, were not to be found on the front pages of the tabloids.

Contrary to the findings of some previous studies which showed that government responsibility is the key ingredient of media reporting (Jung Oh et al., 2012; Kilgo et al., 2018), our study indicates that attribution of the responsibility frame was used to shift the responsibility of the government to the citizens. However, framing social issues through the lens of government responsibility is not the universal trait of journalistic cultures. In that sense, our results confirm the findings of Luther and Zhou (2005), who demonstrated that Chinese media, in comparison to media in US, avoid economic consequences and government responsibility frames. Although media freedoms are indeed under more pressure in China, reporting by the Serbian pro-government tabloids resembles the practice of Chinese etatist media. In a similar manner, we reach conclusions that are in line with Lee and Paik’s study (2017). Although the authors’ examination of the ideological orientation of newspapers in South Korea is not easily transferred to the Serbian media system, they too found that outlets with the same ideological leaning as the government used human interest and reassurance frames at the expense of attribution of responsibility.

These findings come with several notable limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, for a more robust understanding of partisan tabloid reporting about the COVID-19 epidemic in Serbia we would need a parallel sample of the media critical towards the government’s handling of the crises, as well as a sample of the quality press. In this respect, we should also account for the
fact that this study captured the early stage of COVID-19 coverage. Subsequent analysis, which would also include the period just before the elections took place, would no doubt provide more comprehensive insights both in terms of frame distribution and in terms of social actors representation. Finally, our study is limited to front-page coverage, and although this gives us an indication of editorial priorities, it does not provide the entire spectrum of the news stories to which audiences were exposed.

References


Jelena Kleut, Norbert Šinković: “Is it possible that people are so irresponsible?”


Smith, Katherine C., Rajiv N. Rimal, Helena Sandberg, John D. Storey, Lisa Lagasse, Catherine Maulsby, Elizabeth Rhoades, Daniel J. Barnett, Saad B. Omer, and Jonathan M. Links. 2013. ‘Understanding Newsworthiness of


