



EWI Fellowship Research Programme

**GENDER, SOCIAL AND MEDIA DIALOGUE IN THE
CROATIAN MEDIA: Have the COVID-19 Pandemic and the War in
Ukraine Changed the Position of Women in the Media Discourse?**

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Abstract

In its consideration of the media reality in Croatia through the prism of two global social crises – the coronavirus pandemic and the war in Ukraine, this paper illustrates the media presentation of women, with a special focus on whether their portrayal is distorted, marginalised and/or simplified, and whether, within the framework of gender, social and media dialogue, they are equal participants in discussions on relevant topics and issues.

It is clear that crisis situations put journalistic professionalism, objectivity, independence, and media ethics to the test. For this reason, the research topics are addressed in terms of adherence to the postulates of professional associations regulating the methods of reporting in and on the situations mentioned, and with respect to the universal human rights and responsibilities as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The empirical study (divided into two parts) includes an analysis of the content published in the Catholic weekly Glas Koncila (Voice of the Council), the content posted on the website of the Catholic Press Agency (Croat. Informativna katolička agencija, IKA) and the media content published on the websites vecernji.hr and jutarnji.hr (i.e. in online versions of two of Croatia's most popular daily newspapers) during the second six months of 2020, and from the first reports of war in Ukraine until September 2022.

Key words: COVID-19, war, Ukraine, women, the media

Introduction

The paper aims to provide an analysis of media reporting methods against the backdrop of two major global social crises – the coronavirus i.e. COVID-19 pandemic and the parallel war on the territory of Ukraine – by considering the representation, media treatment, and the scope of media, gender², and social³ dialogue within the media discourse, as it is evident that the role of the media is, on the one hand, to represent a mirror of the society, and on the other, to impact both social and political developments (Mataušić, 2001). Pope John Paul II emphasises the increasing accessibility of the media to all and the great possibilities of mass media, as the sources of reciprocal knowledge of cultures, in promoting a dialogue of solidarity and peace between groups and peoples (John Paul II, 2005:10-12), in the context of which the Church must tend towards a constructive dialogue at multiple levels (including its communication with the media, and its approach to social and gender issues) so as to promote a correctly-informed and discerning public opinion (2005: 12).

In this regard, it should be noted that numerous communicological studies have shown that the production and distribution of media content frequently involve the reproduction of the same and/or stereotypical ideological views (patterns) concerning a particular topic (cf. Zillmann and Bryant, 1985; Donsbach, 1991; Donsbach, 2004), and reporting on crisis situations can implicitly point to a crisis of the media itself, revealing the (low) level of journalistic ethics in them. The latter concept, according to the Vatican *Document on Ethics in Social Communications*, implies that, in the context of the contemporary world, media professionals face the difficult task of adjusting to market and ownership requirements, as most of them are still professional and conscientious individuals who wish to act in the service of the *human family*, but at the same time recognise the growing economic and ideological pressures to lower ethical standards in the media

² In the context of this paper, the term gender shall be used within its meaning as understood in Church documents, which implies the “cultural dimension in the distinction between women and men” in the broader sense of the word (Anić, 2011: 87-104).

³ With particular regard to “the roles and places of Christians and religion in public life as well as the role of the Catholic Church concerning events in public life” (Baloban, 2017b: 577). This concerns the social dimension of faith, which also implies the participation of ecclesiastical and theological experts in public discourse, who, through their theological social perspectives and inputs, can contribute to the development of society, while relying on the social teachings of the Church, that are aimed at (re)affirming the role of faith and religion in the public life, in shaping a culture of dialogue and reconciliation (Baloban, 2017b).

that contribute to the deterioration of their professional dignity (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2000: 4).

Consequently, media discourse should be observed in two ways: as an implicit initiator of an immediate and non-reflexive response of the media audience (content users) to emotions (Turkle, 2008: 131), but also as a motor of world-wide social and cultural change (Laurebach, Fetzer, 2007: 13), which consists of a performative journalistic discourse, as the baseline of more complex approaches to content creation. The analysis of the content included in the empirical part of the study relies precisely on the latter concept, starting from the premise that media content is able to create prejudices and/or distorted perceptions. Within the initial premise of this paper, the choice of reporting approaches, the selection of content, and recognition of the news value⁴ and news relevance⁵, as well as intrinsic⁶ and extrinsic selection criteria⁷, are associated with certain key factors based on which journalists decide on the selection and appropriateness of reporting on particular events, situations or people (Kunczik and Zipfel, 2006: 132), that consequently point to “propaganda bias” (McQuail, 1992, as cited in: Street, 2003: 19) with regard to certain topics, actors or trends.

The research topic of this paper is addressed on three levels. In order to investigate and possibly prove or refute the presence of a *disturbed* media, gender and social dialogue in public discourse in terms of presentation of the position of women in view of the two global crises, the study draws on the basic postulates of professional associations. On the one hand, these include guidelines, which require from media professionals, both in their daily work and, particularly, in conditions of crisis situations⁸ and tragic events, accurate, verified, precise, responsible and, in all,

⁴ The newsworthiness i.e. news value theory analyses the content of the media and, based on this, makes conclusions about the selection criteria. The news value is essential for the relationship between journalists and their sources of information and involves intuitive assumptions of media workers about what interests the audience at a given moment and what will capture the attention of content consumers (Lippmann, 1992, as cited in: Kunczik and Zipfel, 2006: 132).

⁵ Which implies a relationship negotiated between the journalist and the audience addressed (*ibid.*).

⁶ Objective reasons, such as the characteristics of a particular event or situation in the context of the news as a whole (Flegel and Chaffee, 1971, as cited in: Kunczik and Zipfel, 2006: 129).

⁷ Primarily individual reasons, such as the journalist’s subjective attitudes and perceptions (*ibid.*).

⁸ Crisis situations constitute (an) event(s) or process(es), which pose a potential threat to a large number of persons and their lives and property, and reporting on such a crisis implies the protection of the public interest and of the right of media content consumers to be given accurate, timely, and objective information in an ethically acceptable manner (Barović, 2010:119).

cautious reporting, free of sensationalism and panic spreading and aimed at encouraging readers/listeners/viewers to stay healthy by avoiding ways to get infected (UNICEF, 2020). On the other hand, special emphasis is placed on promoting the right to timely information in situations of war and war-related afflictions (UNESCO, 2020) and, certainly, on balanced reporting in terms of gender and social inclusion. With the emergence of crisis situations and tragic events, people's rights to be informed and protected are often relativized and violated in reporting (Barović, 2010: 119), and reporting methods are reduced to a trivial presentation of dominant content on topics of (alleged) public interest. Furthermore, for media professionals, crisis situations represent a trial of sorts, a test of their professionalism, objectivity, independence and, also, of their respect of journalistic ethical standards (Malović, Ricciardi and Vilović, 2007: 11), while the great possibilities of the media in promoting dialogue, as one of the three fundamental tasks of the Church in relation to the media according to Pope John Paul II (2005: 10-12), are reduced to the level of control and analysis in the context of mutual cooperation, which will be discussed in more detail further on in the paper.

The wave of global expansion of multiple impacts and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic recognized so far, from November 2019 onwards⁹, has not only sparked debates in public discourse but has, on the one hand, also divided the public opinion, and on the other, partly brought the public together on the issue of the status and position of *women* – as stakeholders¹⁰ – who were directly and/or indirectly involved in or affected by the changes, decisions and their consequent treatment in the media space. Similarly, in order to empirically examine whether and in what way women's media portrayals are *distorted*, marginalised and/or simplified in reports on the current war in Ukraine and bearing in mind the strong presence of the Catholic tradition in the Republic of Croatia¹¹, we also start from the position of the Catholic Church¹², whose head, Pope Francis, has repeatedly pointed out that the war in Ukraine “goes against the sacredness of human life, especially against defenseless human life, which must be respected and protected, not eliminated, and this comes before any strategy!” (Pope Francis, 2022), and has also said, speaking

⁹ For the purposes of the paper: the study covers the period from June 2020 onwards.

¹⁰ Actors in the published content analysed.

¹¹ Hereinafter: Croatia

¹² According to the last census in 2021, believers make up the majority of Croatia's population. The largest percentage of them (78.97%) declared themselves as members of the Catholic Church (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

about the role of women in the Church and society in general, that they should be full participants in the various occasions of social and ecclesiastical life. In turn, the paper considers the role and responsibility of the media in the representation of refugees and the population exposed to the aforementioned war conflict and its consequences with regard to the fact that insufficient and incorrect information on the context and reasons for the arrival and transit of refugees lead to prejudices about them (Georgiou and Zabarowski, 2017:5-8), and such portrayals and the creation of false images may result in dehumanization, which “involves the denial of full humanness to others, and their exclusion from the human species” (Messés et al., 2018:16).

According to a previous study on the visibility of women theologians and their advocacy of human rights, interfaith dialogue, and peace in Croatian media discourse, the responsibility of the media is largely divided and certainly affects the trust of its audience (Raguž, 2020), which is closely associated with the effectiveness of the media, specifically with changes brought about in society and the individual as a result of the consumption of media messages (Črpić and Mataušić, 1998). At the same time, a prerequisite of responsible media is the understanding of the relationship between the media and their audience (Hrnjić Kuduzović, 2015).

Starting from the assumption that crisis situations included in the analysis have changed the way women are portrayed in the media, firstly in terms of methods of reporting on them and, secondly, in the sense that during the period observed for the purposes of this study, women were not given enough space for equal participation in dialogue, the paper aims to explore the visibility of women in Croatian secular media and in the media owned by the Catholic Church. The empirical research consists of two separate studies. The results of the first study are viewed in relation to the previously conducted analysis of media content from the first six months of 2020, exploring the position of women theologians in advocating for human rights, interfaith dialogue, and peace in the Croatian media at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic (Raguž, 2020). The second part of the empirical study includes the period from 23 February 2022, which marks the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, until September 2022. The content analysis includes content published in some of Croatia’s most popular news media: the Catholic weekly *Glas Koncila* (Voice of the Council), the content posted on the website of the Catholic Press Agency

(ika.hr), and the media content published in the online versions of the daily newspapers *Večernji list* (The Evening Paper; *vecernji.hr*) and *Jutarnji list* (The Morning Paper; *jutarnji.hr*)

Reporting on the coronavirus: *manipulating the media space*

The proliferation of the coronavirus demanded an emergency response and, at least partly, a systemic approach. Many countries were therefore forced to adopt a number of recommendations and guidelines targeted at monitoring and curbing the rapid spread and transmission of the virus among the population and the global crisis that ensued as a result. Although the recommendations of the competent authorities were mostly targeted at the day-to-day functioning of people's lives, they also served as a kind of implicit framework for a set of guidelines adopted by professional journalists' associations both in regard to objective, fair, balanced, and impartial reporting on the coronavirus, the COVID-19 disease and the work of medical staff, as well as regarding the transparent transmission of information on the pandemic containment measures implemented by the authorities. It should be noted in this context that the main characteristics of modern journalism are: "aggressiveness¹³, followed by three gnoseological characteristics – substantiation, credibility, and objectivity, by which journalists shield themselves from lies and the manipulation of facts" (Sapunar, 2004: 10) and the ethical dimension, which implies impartiality and independence from any centres of power in reporting.

Namely, as demonstrated further on in the paper, the results of the analysis conducted in 2020, and partly also of the second part of the longitudinal study, have shown that the media have played a significant role in the way they framed the pandemic, by creating and pushing a terminology that explicitly presented the virus as *mysterious*, *lethal* and *deadly*, ignoring the recommendations of professional associations which pointed out that any emotional tinge, ideological overtones or value-laden media messages create an atmosphere of fear and anxiety among the public and contribute to moral panic.

¹³ In terms of the readiness of media workers to address even the most difficult topics.

The coronavirus pandemic caused a media deficit not only in terms of reduced distribution of print editions of (daily) newspapers, which contributed to more users developing the habit of seeking news and information in the virtual space, but also in the sense that digital content, i.e. the online versions of newspapers and social media (Van Dijck, 2013: 4)¹⁴ served as a platform for the rapid (but also uncontrolled) dissemination of (false) information and (fake) news, resulting in manipulations by and of the media, which have been observed as a prominent controversy (Jurčić, 2017: 128-129). Many media manipulations are, however, woven skillfully into the text and thus go unobserved by readers. As they contain personal attitudes, comments, and opinions on a particular topic, they also present the audience with the author's value judgments. Furthermore, in addition to comments, media manipulation techniques that are especially typical of print editions include oversimplified reporting, showing only one side of the story, deliberate omitting or falsifying of facts, selection of unsuitable conversation partners, covert advertising, and neglect of relevant information (Malović, Ricchiardi, Vilović, 2007: 60-61). The media workers' perception of events covered in media articles certainly depends on their professional competence, life experiences, education, on intellectual, sociological, and psychological factors, their ability to observe and synthesize the observed (Žlof, 2007: 40), and even on moral categories, such as their sense of justice and desire to serve the common good (Poler Kovačić, 1998: 34).

Starting from the assumption that the topics of the coronavirus pandemic are not only labelled in a specific way, but are also given a certain "tinge" by the media, the results of the study will also be observed in the context of social responsibility and credibility of the media, both of which imply a dimension of mutual trust, as one of the cornerstones of "social capital in a media society" (Bauer, 2007:30). The journalists' profession and the media industry have in the last decade, namely, been largely publicly criticized by professional associations, media audiences, and content users (creators) alike¹⁵. Consequently, this has raised the question of the efficiency of journalistic work, the credibility of the media as a platform for public debate, and their role as the

¹⁴ Social media are defined as a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Although they were originally created as applications, they have undergone a transformation into self-communication platforms which, rather than being finished products, are dynamic objects that are adjusted in response to their users' needs and their owners' objectives, but also in reaction to competing platforms (Van Dijck, 2013: 4).

¹⁵ Largely through reader comments.

so-called “Fourth Estate” or the “fourth power” in a democratic society in giving (equal) space to all who should contribute to social, gender, and media dialogue, to begin with – by being involved in it. The criticism of media is by no means a recent social phenomenon. However, as noted by Jo Bardoel and Yael de Haan (2011: 234-237), in the first decade of the new millennium, the tone of the criticism has become sharper and its sources more diverse. According to research on the image of the journalists’ profession and trust in the media, a generally low level of trust in the media is expressed among Croatian citizens (Črpić and Mataušić, 1998), while later studies have, in turn, shown that journalism has, for some time now, been placed at the end of the list of most respected professions (Kanižaj and Skoko, 2010).

When interpreting events, phenomena, or persons, the media set frames.¹⁶ The selection of content, and consequently the responsibility for the published content, are the main factors for achieving and maintaining trust in the media, which ultimately contribute to the “construction of social reality” (Scheufele, 1999: 117).

Reporting on the war in Ukraine: *media space as a platform of violation of ethical and professional principles*

Looking at the role and consequent responsibility of the media in reporting on the war in Ukraine, the question arises whether media workers have the right to publish inappropriate photos and videos of killed persons, wounded soldiers, and injured civilians, to reveal the victims’ faces and publish interviews with distressed family members – knowing that such content is often a *bait* for advertisers, sponsors, and the *spectacle-craving public*. Crisis situations are unplanned, challenging, and dangerous situations that trigger a feeling of fear and threat among people. Globally, the protection of fundamental human rights, obligations, and freedoms is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of 1950, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966.

¹⁶ *Media frames* are defined as “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organise discourse, whether verbal or visual” (Gitlin, 1980: 7).

The entanglement between the media and war is best manifested in their mutual dependence on communication technologies. The media have an indispensable role in preparing the public for an emerging conflict and are equally important in the course of conflict as channels through which the political and military leaders address the public. At the same time, the information they select and transmit represents a potential space for ethical disputes (Čerina, 2012: 110). Reporting on the war in Ukraine has shown beyond doubt that modern media have a tendency to provide 24-hour coverage of the war, focusing largely on “live” reporting, and turning war, as such, into a *media spectacle* of sorts. “Such reporting impacts the credibility of (...) news reports as journalists don’t have time to check the information obtained from other sources. The lack of full access to information leads to manipulation, and the exclusion of personal points of view on reported events becomes the main factor in winning over the audience for engagement in the conflict” (Čerina, 2012: 102).

As media propaganda has the power to manipulate the public, credible, truthful, objective, and human-rights-oriented reporting of conflicts is vital in this context (2012: 114).

Image of women in the media through the prism of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine

The contemporary media portrayal of women is framed by and subject to the fact that the media are not exclusively state-owned, and that media owners and interest groups associated with the ownership structures compete for audience attention, trying to attract as many readers, viewers, and listeners as possible at the expense of freedom in the digital media community (Brautović, 2011) in which the heterogeneity of the online platforms represents a global catalyst of change, but also sets the trends, with no significant (self-)regulation, all in the spirit of the increasingly present “re-ghettoization of religion” (Baloban, 2017b: 581). Digital technology and acceleration not only affect the weakening of communication controls at the regulatory level, but also impact the social, cultural, and democratic factors that shape the dimension of the gender, social, and media paradigms in public discourse depending on the selected stakeholders and the approach and access to them, consequently conveying a message that constructs the reality. Finally, “one of the major issues in an increasingly divided (...) society is that of creating a culture of dialogue and

reconciliation, on which the successful development of ... peoples and society largely depends. By virtue of theological social discourse, the Church (...) can create an atmosphere of dialogue and reconciliation and become an agent in bringing together all people of good will around the common good” (*ibid.*, p. 579). Nevertheless, religiously educated stakeholders are becoming much less present in the Croatian secular media, but also in the public space in general, while at the same time criticism of “the Church’s impact on the functioning of society and the society’s alleged clericalization” continues to be voiced with the same fervour (*ibid.* p. 583).

Although online versions of daily newspapers and modern media are indisputably at the forefront both in terms of frequency of informing and as shapers of public opinion, the question remains how consistent they are in this respect and whether manipulation of information is synonymous with the modern presentation of events, actors and the position of women in the media. Jurčić notes in this regard that, more and more, news are based on emotions and targeted at attracting clicks, reactions, and shares, so “media manipulations may be indicated by the following characteristics: there is a greater demand for shorter news, which are easier to convey than longer and more complex information; superficiality is easier than in-depth content; the bizarre attracts more attention than the ordinary; the media sends messages about consumption as a primary human need” (2017: 133). To keep the public’s interest and focus, the media coverage of the coronavirus pandemic introduced a terminology that explicitly presented the virus as *mysterious*, *lethal*, and *deadly*, ignoring the previous recommendations of professional associations which pointed out that any emotional tinge, ideological overtones or value-laden media messages create an atmosphere of fear and anxiety among people (Raguž, 2020). The sum of such constants in reporting results in a trend of fake and false news that are based on manipulation – of both the choice of media topics and content and of the forms and methods of their presentation.

Research methodology, objectives, and sample

Objectives, hypotheses, and methods

The context of two global crises, specifically the two-year-long coronavirus pandemic and the war launched in Ukraine on 24 February 2022, will be used to examine, through empirical

research, the methods of media presentation of women and the women's position in the media, with particular regard to the representation, media treatment and the scope of media, gender, and social dialogue in the discourse of selected online versions of Croatia's secular and religious newspapers i.e. journals. The media content will be operationalised for quantitative analysis by focusing on the question of how the *image of women* was shaped by media workers in reporting on the events mentioned, whether women were marginalised or stereotypically presented in the media portrayals or if the media themselves were creators of certain social norms in devoting space to women? The contextualization phase of the study implies observing the content of analysis through the prism of the research objectives. The *research objective* is to analyse the methods of media coverage of women as participants i.e. actors in media content from the perspective of guidelines and codes of honour of professional associations, which, among other things, lay down the rules and scope of reporting on citizens in circumstances of disease and war. The compliance of media reports with the professional standards of journalism is analysed through examples of dubious or violated standards and the presence of positive and/or negative attitudes¹⁷ in reporting that have contributed to non-objective media portrayals of women as actors of the two events with a global impact.

Four *hypotheses* have been set forth, to be confirmed or refuted through the results of the study:

1. In many cases, the media coverage of women involves a sensationalist approach to the coronavirus topic.
2. In many cases, refugees are portrayed as victims in daily newspapers.
3. News articles about refugees appeal to readers' emotions.
4. Women are not given equal media space nor positioned equally in media dialogue when reporting on the war in Ukraine.¹⁸

In order to verify the hypotheses, a quantitative analysis of the content (the media articles) was carried out, which allows the possibility of longitudinal observation of the content with a certain

¹⁷ In the sense of being pejorative.

¹⁸ It should be noted in this regard that the hypotheses do not distinguish between secular and religious texts, but the method of reporting is approached generally. However, as part of the interpretation of the results, a distinction is made with regard to the topics and sample covered by the study, within the realistic scope of this paper.

distance, as the characteristics of textual and/or visual content (of a larger number of texts) are expressed in quantitative values, which then indicate the total share of the characteristics observed in the sample selected from a particular population (Lamza Posavec, 2006: 152). By answering the questions of what the media message aims to achieve, what is needed to determine the psychological state of an individual or group, and what to discover the scope of propaganda (Plenković, 1993: 226) within a certain interval of time, a (broader) critical analysis of media discourse is also given, which as a method, according to van Dijk “integrates theoretical explanations of critical discourse theory with the analysis of social contexts, and the language of specific speech/research participants” (2001: 303).

Although quantitative research findings (to a certain extent) cannot be considered statistically significant or generalized, they do represent a significant indicator of social trends and changes. To that effect, this paper uses a quantitative-qualitative methodological framework based on a feminist approach that, in addition to being “women-centred” (Campbell and Wasco, 2001: 773), implies a methodological component of critical reflection that is applied in examining “the ordinary and extraordinary events of women’s lives” and their role in society (*ibid*:775). By relying on a feminist approach, a qualitative contribution was made to the interpretation of the research findings.

Time frame, sample, and unit of analysis

The empirical part of the study involves an analysis of content published from 1 June 2020 to 1 October 2022 and from 24 February 2022 to 1 October 2022.

The sample of the first part of the study consists of a total of 1125 press articles¹⁹ referring to the coronavirus pandemic that were published and announced in online versions of Croatia’s most popular daily newspapers: *Jutarnji list* with 604 and *Večernji list* with 521 articles. The unit of analysis were all press articles on the topic published in the period from 1 June 2020 to 1 October 2022 which included selected keywords as reference elements. The content analysis also included press articles published in the Catholic weekly *Glas Koncila* (98 articles) and content posted on

¹⁹ The term ‘press article’ is an approximate translation of the Croatian *napis*, which the *Croatian Encyclopaedic Dictionary* defines as a “newspaper text that falls under no binding notions of style, length or topic” (Jojić et al., 2003:791), so it is used here as a general term referring to the text itself and all the associated graphics i.e. visual features (headlines, headings, captions, frames, photographs, and infographics).

the official website of the *Catholic Press Agency* (390 articles). The mentioned media were chosen as newspapers with the highest circulation which, in the changed global and market conditions, have shifted to *online* platforms that secure the largest viewership and reader numbers. As such, they are “bearers of general information to citizens (...) and thus constitute an extremely important factor in the formation of public opinion” (Plenković, 1993: 152).

For the purpose of analysing the empirical material included in the sample, an analytical matrix was developed containing a total of 20 classification categories, divided into five thematic units. The content of the press articles was analysed based on the following thematic units: 1) descriptive media characteristics of the articles, 2) professional reporting criteria, 3) objectivity, 4) balance, 5) presence of the topic in the content²⁰. The keywords i.e. reference words for the analysis were: *coronavirus*, *Covid-19*, *vaccine*, *measures*. Given the scope of the content analysed, only findings from articles that explicitly and/or implicitly included *women* as actors, discussion partners, or experts will be presented in the following part of the paper.²¹

The sample of the second part of the study consists of press articles concerning the circumstances of the war in Ukraine, which were published in the period from 24 February 2022 to 1 October 2022. A total of 765 corresponding articles were found in online versions of Croatia’s two daily newspapers, *Jutarnji list* with 389 and *Večernji list* with 376 articles. The analysis also covered corresponding articles published in the same period in *Glas Koncila* (47 articles) and content published on the official website of the *Catholic Press Agency* (108 articles), as two media owned by the Catholic Church.

Given the research criteria set forth, nonprobability purposive sampling was employed and, with respect to the time frame, a cross-sectional study was conducted, as it involved observing the frequency of media reporting on a particular topic, as a phenomenon, over a certain period of time. The results of such studies provide insight into the characteristics of the phenomenon or process of interest at the time of research (Milas, 2009: 507). It should be noted that a longitudinal study

²⁰ The third, fourth, and fifth points were selected as research criteria to establish whether there was a shift away from a neutral approach, that is, whether a tendency towards trivial content and/or sensationalism could be observed in the way the articles were framed.

²¹ Out of the total number of the published articles analysed, 49% met the research criterion set forth.

of media content at the same time represents a way of examining the gender, social, and media dialogue at the social level (Elezović, 2012: 63).

Research results

The study of press articles included in the sample primarily points to an uneven representation of women and to non-objective reporting on the real and potential roles of women, both during the coronavirus pandemic and in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. A similar approach, with clear indications of sensationalism, is seen in the mentioned media when reporting on refugees from Ukraine.

Reporting on women in the context of the pandemic

The content analysis has shown that the texts published on the *jutarnji.hr* portal in reference to the coronavirus crisis, which included women in the media content, were neutral in character in 63.7% of the articles, as was the case with most of the content published on the *večernji.hr* portal (55%).

When it comes to the media representation of women in relation to men, the results are similar to those of the study carried out in 2020, with mostly superficial coverage of women and a ratio of 3:2 in favour of men represented in the content, both on online platforms of the secular, but also of the Church media. This also means that media workers did not go into the broader context of the topic by analysing the events more deeply and that they did not create a (gender-)equal, or at least partly the same, media space. In not doing so, they failed to fulfill one of the fundamental requirements of the journalists' profession – that of balanced reporting both on the coronavirus/COVID-19 disease and on the afflictions of war.

Out of the total number of articles analysed, 67% contained certain features of *clickbait* content. Unlike the content from the *večernji.hr* portal, the analysed articles published on the *jutarnji.hr* portal displayed different approaches to the content. A negative tone was observed in 111 articles, 76 of them had a positive tone, while the rest of the content was neutral in tone. It should by all means be noted, that the content analysis did not only show the under-representation

of women, but also indicated an inappropriate approach to women in terms of the journalists' standards of professional ethics.

As previous research has shown, the voices of women are not heard enough – or almost at all – in religious, social, and media dialogue (Raguž, 2020). More or less the same has been confirmed by the empirical findings of this study, where as many as 69% of the cases in which media space was given to women involved a sensationalist approach, by presenting women in the context of trivial topics or by avoiding to include them in the public space as equal participants and discussion partners, rather than merely as (side) actors affected by a particular topic.

Both under- and over-dimensioning of media content, as one of the characteristics of sensationalism in the contemporary context, has been observed in reporting on the virus in the period from the beginning of 2020 to October 2022. Sensationalism was also present in as many as 31% of the articles, where no meaningful relation could be established between the headline and the text itself, in the sense that they promoted two different values: the message that was conveyed in the very text and the one presented merely to capture the readers' attention, often with a tendency of "blowing events out of proportion" (Bobić, 1987: 59). Media professionals also tried to attract the readers' attention by using hyperbole, slang, trivialisation and/or unusual ways of framing a topic. This is well illustrated by an article published on the *jutarnji.hr* portal on 5 November 2021, stating in the headline: "While the British claim that women do not wax during COVID-19, our salons are overbooked: And the men come in for...". Similarly, in a text published on 8 June 2022 on the same portal, under the headline: "Experts explain why some people have never 'caught' the coronavirus: 'There are several reasons...'", the (female) author never once relies on women as experts or relevant discussion partners on the topic. The online version of the competing secular newspaper, *večernji.hr*, approaches the coverage of women through a similar frame, highlighting, for example, in an article published on 29 April 2021, the connection between the existence of the virus and the business success of women as opposed to men: "Women have lost \$ 800 billion due to the coronavirus pandemic". The headline and text itself are, however, in contradiction as the article speaks about the women's treatment and type of work, without even touching on the reasons for the mentioned decrease in income. Furthermore, through their trivial approach, as demonstrated in the headline "A 50-year-old says she's looking forward to the

coronavirus vaccine ‘for all the sex with married men...’²², it is quite evident that the secular media have used the situation of the coronavirus proliferation to frame the image of women as a subject *suitable* for lightweight topics.

On the other hand, in as many as 45% of the cases in which their content involved women, the religious media included in the study devoted media space to women who were experts in a given field, especially to female theologians, which indicates the same positive trend recorded in the first part of 2020. It is evident that, in their selection of valuable and relevant content²³, the editorial boards of Catholic media did grant space to women theologians and female experts in other fields. The findings, therefore, confirm that no sensationalist approach was recorded in the case of the religious media analysed when reporting on the coronavirus.

The Catholic Press Agency (IKA), specifically, published 57 news stories explicitly mentioning women theologians and female scholars or women who are experts in other fields. In doing so, it did not marginalise the importance and role of women in Croatian society, but rather enabled them to publicly present, and even indirectly popularise their scholarly disciplines through a wide range of different topics. In some of the articles, women were included just to comment on the coronavirus and its impacts. However, articles in which women appeared in their professional and scholarly roles addressed a number of different issues, from the impacts of Covid-19 on mental health²⁴, the consequences of the pandemic containment measures on the physical and mental state of children²⁵, as well as the topics of forgiveness²⁶, family-centred catechetical encounters and evangelisation²⁷, communication in families with and without children²⁸, domestic violence and the rising domestic violence rates during the pandemic²⁹,

²² 19 January 2021, *večernji.hr*

²³ The basic criteria of content selection according to the news selection theory.

²⁴ Caritas Italy - Women and COVID Report (10 March 2022)

²⁵ A panel discussion held in Zadar on ‘COVID measures – consequences, dilemmas and their impact on the psychophysical development of children’, with doctor Marija Divić as one of the speakers (IKA, 20 February 2022)

²⁶ The Pope: Women are the protagonists of a Church that goes forth (8 October 2020)

²⁷ The pandemic is an inspiration for *online* evangelisation (IKA, 6 May 2020)

²⁸ Dr. Skoko: The power of communication in the family and in the workplace (IKA, 30 November 2022)

²⁹ Empowering mothers and children through the project “Little School of Courage” (IKA, 31 December 2020)

culture³⁰, empathy and communication³¹, the relationship between religion and culture³², and the aspects of learning in children and young people³³.

The Catholic weekly *Glas Koncila* has for years been working with several prominent women experts, who are regular columnists for the paper. One of them is Đurđica Ivanišević Lieb, who writes weekly columns in the section “Zapažanja (Observations)”, where she offers a broad overview of current topics, including the coronavirus.

A regular columnist for *Prilika* (Opportunity), the monthly special of the *Glas Koncila* weekly, is also psychologist Lovorka Brajković, who published 27 articles during the period analysed for the purposes of this study, all dealing with the psychological aspects of current events. Nikolina Mesić, a regular columnist on topics in the field of culture and education, published 11 texts in the period from June 2020 to October 2022.

It is, however, interesting to note that the visual presentation of the mentioned women experts was rare, except for cases when they were shown in photographs along with other actors involved (almost never alone), most commonly in panels or at other public gatherings, or in old archived photos.

In terms of the topic, media workers have approached the pandemic neutrally in a number of the articles published, by writing about the current numbers of infected persons and by addressing the issue of the vaccine in the context of the health system and society as a whole. It is, nevertheless, quite symptomatic that, in as much as a quarter of the total number of articles analysed (with the *Večernji list* portal at the forefront with as many as 89 press articles published, which is quite a leap compared to the 15 articles in the first part of 2020), the coronavirus is presented in a sensationalist³⁴ manner, by relying on media appeals, emotions and almost manipulative techniques with the aim of provoking an emotional reaction from the readership.

³⁰ Competition for the “Vicko Andrić Award” announced (IKA, 28 July 2020)

³¹ The Pope: The pandemic is an opportunity to grow together in solidarity (IKA, 29 January 2022)

³² Theological symposium held in Rijeka – along with the Head of Theology, Prof. Veronika Nela Gašpar, PhD, four other speakers participated (IKA, 13 March 2020)

³³ Lecture by Prof. Gordana Buljan Flander, PhD: Mental Health with a Special Reference to Youth in the Circumstances of the Coronavirus Pandemic (22 October 2020)

³⁴ As lethal and dangerous.

In as much as a fifth of the content from the *vecernji.hr* portal and in 19 articles from the *jutarnji.hr* portal, violations of human dignity were observed (through explicit or implicit revealing of the identity of persons), as well as discriminatory descriptions, belittling treatment, and the portrayal of the sick as “dangerous others”.

The first hypothesis is partly confirmed. ³⁵

Reporting on refugees in the context of the invasion of Ukraine

The overall results of the study show that in most of the articles published in online versions of the daily newspapers included in the sample, migrant women and women refugees are presented in two (completely) different ways. The text does not follow the visual presentation or, more specifically, the selected photographs are in contrast to the written text. Although the texts published on portals (*Jutarnji list* – 56.9%, *Večernji list* – 67.2%) mostly involved a neutral portrayal of refugee women, quantitative indicators show that in as many as a quarter of the articles (with *jutarnji.hr* in the lead with 17 articles), the refugees were portrayed stereotypically and, when the headlines are observed along with the texts, that they were clearly labelled as *victims*. The very way they were presented by the media points to a deviation from the professional standards of journalism, which, among other things, require verified information before passing any judgment. A belittling portrayal of refugees as inferior or less valuable³⁶ was recorded in as many as 22.7% of the headlines of the *jutarnji.hr* portal i.e. in one text published in the online version of *Večernji list*. Other (distorted) images, comparisons, assumptions, and references to refugees were not recognised in the media content included in the study.

Although 11 press articles represent quite a statistically low value, it must be noted that in their articles *večernji.hr*, either metaphorically or by association, evoked feelings of hate, fear or disgust towards refugees from the territory of Ukraine. Media workers of *Jutarnji list*, on the other hand, in two texts, either metaphorically or by association, call for condemnation of or distancing

³⁵ In many cases, the media coverage of women involves a sensationalist approach to the coronavirus topic.

³⁶ For illustration purposes, a text published under the headline “Why are Ukrainian refugees welcome and some others not? These are not the refugees we are used to” (28 July 2022) used the sensationalist headline to attract the attention of readers and possibly created negative connotations concerning refugees, although the text explicitly stated that refugees were welcome and that a humane approach should be demanded at all levels of the society.

from the domicile population that does not accept refugees, whereas most of the articles call upon readers to welcome those in need of help.

An article published in *Jutarnji list* on 29 September 2022 under the headline “Do you want to offer temporary accommodation to refugees from Ukraine? Here is a website where you can apply”³⁷ is just one of the numerous examples of articles in which Croatian daily newspapers appealed for helping the refugees. The presented data also indicates that, in the period covered by the study, the majority of press articles (62% of them) more or less openly appealed to the readers’ emotions.

Furthermore, the textual content published was not equally accompanied by visual portrayals of refugees and/or (e)migrants. In the online version of *Jutarnji list*, accompanying photos were published in 37.5% of the articles, whereas in the online version of *Večernji list*, 19.6% of the press articles were not accompanied by photos of (e)migrants and refugees. In addition, the number of articles where migrants were shown crying, injured and/or in dangerous situations in the accompanying photos was approximately the same as the number of articles where they were not visually portrayed in such a way. In 12% of the cases recorded, photo portrayals published on the *jutarnji.hr* portal associated migrants and refugees with violent behaviour, particularly along with references to “dangerous people”, while in three times as many articles on the *vecernji.hr* portal they were portrayed crying, injured or as participants in the expulsion from homes, cities, and their country. In such articles, the protection of the victims’ identities should have certainly been a professional, but also a human imperative, as “the right to the protection of privacy guarantees citizens that their private lives³⁸ shall not be published in the media without their consent, except in cases where this is justified by broader public interests” (Zgrabljic Rotar, 2009: 38). Media portrayals of children (both in photographs and textually) were used for the purposes of sensationalism, to attract attention in the manner previously mentioned. Children were mainly shown together with elders, but often also alone and crying or pensive. Boys were portrayed alone in 32 photographs, whereas 18 photographs showed girls alone.

³⁷ The purpose of the article was to inform citizens about the functioning of the application.

³⁸ Pursuant to Article 2 of the Media Act (Croatian Public Gazette, 2013), private life denotes the “personal and family life, and primarily a life in accordance with one’s own choices and decisions.”

The analysis has shown that in more than 75% of the cases, children appeared as the main actors in the media coverage of the war on the territory of Ukraine and of its casualties. As a result, in 37% of cases, the text or the accompanying photograph revealed the identity of the child (directly or indirectly), in only 6.8% of articles the children's identity was protected, while 63.7% of the articles included photographs showing children. Based on this, it is safe to conclude that children were used to evoke sympathy and to portray the persons concerned as victims. However, the identity of children should by all means be protected when reporting on children or their family members as victims (The Ombudsperson for Children, 2007: 135).

The results of the conducted content analysis show that, in the press articles analysed, children were portrayed as passive actors and victims of adverse (war) conditions and that they served to evoke emotions in readers and to promote the labelling of victims as different others, as dependent and wounded members of society on a global level.

*Both hypotheses have been confirmed.*³⁹

Discussion

The analysis of the study results showed two general tendencies: women are not equally represented as men in press articles in Croatia that deal with the coronavirus pandemic, nor are they equal in the media dialogue when reporting on the war in Ukraine.

Modern media are responsible for the embodiment and transmission of *cultural identities*, including the understanding of gender, through which the traditional distinction between the social roles of women and men is reflected from the real culture into the media (Kosanović, 2008). As a result of a pre-defined paradigm of hegemony, the media, therefore, construct a certain new reality that is based on the symbolic languages which were discussed in more detail in the introduction. *Media attempts and successes* of representing women in relation to men point to an evident differentiation between them, such that women become (and remain) the “invisibility that survives” (Petričušić, 2013).

³⁹ In many cases, refugees are portrayed as victims in daily newspapers, and news articles about refugees appeal to readers' emotions.

Based on the results⁴⁰, it is clear that the percentage of 37% of articles about women compared to 63% of media content portraying men in the same period is dubious in terms of professional standards, which also introduces doubt regarding the transparency of the media, social, and gender dialogue in media discourse.

The content analysis also shows that women were most represented in topics and issues associated with adapting to life with the virus (75% of cases), i.e. press articles (83.6%) where they were presented as refugees, fighting for their own, but also for the lives of their children (families) and, again, in the context of adapting to the forced but accepted life in the *new normalcy*, outside the borders of war-torn Ukraine (77%).

The results show that women were included in media dialogue only from the perspective of the so-called “women’s spheres”, in their professional roles in largely feminised professions and (lower paid) sectors where no political decisions are made – psychology (as those who comfort and console), childcare, forgiveness (*turning the other cheek*), family meetings, children and domestic violence, culture, religion (in times of crisis, when the religions’ roles of support, compassion, and pacification are highlighted), empathy and learning.

Labelling and stereotypical portrayal of women manifested itself in presenting *women as victims* through four of the categories observed. Headlines such as “Ukrainian forensic experts: ‘Women were raped and then killed, some of their faces were crushed to pieces’”⁴¹ or “Protest in front of the European Commission: ‘Women are being raped in occupied territories, and you’re just watching’”⁴² often sought to portray *women as victims* of violence, while other headlines portrayed them as follows: “How do women of men who fled mobilisation in Russia live and get by?”⁴³ – *women in the service of their husbands and/or superiors*; “APPEAL OF AN UKRAINIAN NUN: We are in dire need of the truth to be heard”⁴⁴ – *women sending messages of*

⁴⁰ 1125 press articles specifically addressing women in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic were published in the online versions of two Croatian daily newspapers. 488 texts from online platforms of religious media were analysed, in addition to 765 articles that addressed the war in Ukraine, including 155 posts from the website of the *Catholic Press Agency* and *Glas Koncila*.

⁴¹ *jutarnji.hr* (25 April 2022)

⁴² *vecernji.hr* (16 May 2022)

⁴³ *vecernji.hr* (29 September 2022)

⁴⁴ *Glas Koncila* (15 June 2022)

reason, and “Didukh JRS Project to support refugees from Ukraine in Croatia”⁴⁵ – *women as mediators in humanitarian actions*.

In the study conducted in 2020, the secular media analysed attempted to meet the requirement for professional balance regarding the issues of gender and social dialogue by personally framing them through the *role of the “national heroine”*, doctor Alemka Markotić, while in the context of this study, they devoted a larger space to *women victims*. Both examples point to the imagery employed in the portrayal of *women and of the roles* imposed on them in media dialogue. The construct of unequal representation and portrayal of media subjects is thus proven as present, systematic, and constant. This, finally, confirms the last hypothesis of the paper – that women are not given equal media space nor are they positioned equally in media dialogue when reporting on the war in Ukraine.

Conclusion

As demonstrated by the generalised results of the empirical study, modern media participate in stereotyping the social role of women, using implicitly negatively toned texts to this end, as particularly evident in the context of reporting on the global coronavirus pandemic. The media are resorting to mimicry by giving a voice to women which is merely superficial, while in most cases not giving them equal media treatment and not including them in topics relevant to society, through which one directly departs from the social roles assigned to women by hegemonic patriarchy.

The media portrayal of women during the coverage of the coronavirus pandemic indicates that women are attractive stakeholders at a particular level of participation, involving primarily the roles imposed on them, which are then manifested in the media discourse, along with debates concerning (the balance of) their participation in promoting gender and social dialogue and in peace advocacy.

Furthermore, the media coverage of the war in Ukraine shows that women are equally attractive for the media when presented within the construct of victims: *women as victims of violence, women in the service of their husbands and/or superiors, women sending messages of*

⁴⁵ *Catholic Press Agency* (19 August 2022)

reason (through which messages of peace are transmitted) and women as mediators in humanitarian actions, but not in decision-making processes, nor in peacebuilding negotiations.

The media marginalisation of women and the reproduction of certain stereotypes in the secular media did not prove present in the content published by the Catholic weekly *Glas Koncila* and the *Catholic Press Agency*. Thus, it was also confirmed that women believers, experts in different fields of study, women scholars and theologians, as well as religiously educated women, were given media space and an opportunity to speak and participate in the creation of content.

Based on the results of the content analysis, we can conclude that the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have changed the position of women in media discourse as it has been partly confirmed that, in many cases, the media coverage of women involved a sensationalist approach to the topic. Quantitative indicators confirmed that in the online versions of Croatia's daily newspapers, women refugees from war-torn Ukraine were portrayed as victims, with their dignity compromised and the right to privacy explicitly violated when reporting on the topic. Equally, in their approach to other related topics, the media relied more heavily on the use of emotional appeal, which can be concluded to be synonymous with the modern media presentation of actors, events, and the position of women.

Finally, significant discrepancies have been observed between the reporting methods of secular media and of the media owned by the Catholic Church. The results show that women were not given equal media space nor were equal in public dialogue when reporting on the war in Ukraine and that they were not consulted as sources of information in the same way as men were.

The Code of Honour of the Croatian Journalists' Association lays down the obligation of media workers for impartial, balanced, objective, and accurate reporting, and the same elements are pointed out in the global guidelines of professional associations on reporting during a pandemic, war or in other circumstances that fall under situations of crises caused by a force majeure. The findings of the study showed that the media included in the sample were biased in their selection of content and at the same time unprofessional, both in devoting space to women and in the way women were portrayed within the limited space they were given. As their presentation of media content may have influenced public opinion, it is safe to conclude that this also confirms the specific hypothesis on the violation of fundamental principles of journalism in

reporting on both levels. Ethical controversies were present not only through the explicit lack of media space, but also through the reproduction and promotion of negative stereotypes based on hegemonic masculinity i.e. the patriarchal understanding of gender roles and the creation of a paradigm based on symbolic languages.

Media *attempts and successes* of representing women in relation to men point to an evident differentiation between them, with women thus becoming (and remaining) a platform of sorts, a medium *per se*, for the expression of emotions and the creation of more lightweight content, or actors strong enough to carry the roles of victims assigned to them.

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