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The Media Reception of the Refugee Wave in the European Countries outside the Schengen Area

Abstract:

The phenomenological research of the media reception of migrants is an interesting challenge in itself, especially when it is limited to the area that brings its own specificities. Relating to the not so distant experience of the war on its own territory with numbers of its own refugees and relatively short-term membership in the European Union (while still outside the Schengen borders), the media reception becomes a key to the creation of a media audiences' attitude. The Croatian survey results regarding the various reporting methods on refugee problem and their influence on diverse perception of refugees, can help to understand the polarization of attitudes about the perhaps most problematic issue of the European Union; a question of inclusion and exclusion of immigrants into European society. The research was conducted over the most visited Internet pages on the Croatian speaking area, which provided information on immigrant issues and report. Particular attention was pursued on readers' comments, but the essential goal was to examine various ways of media presentation on refugee issues. The research results indicate that objective, professional journalism can contribute to understanding the "refugee issue" in Europe, but unfortunately, it is a more common practice to target the media coverage polarization, which is then mapped to the attitudes of society as a whole.

Key words:

public attitudes, immigrants, media consumer, media presentation, media reception

1. Introduction: Media as guardians of democracy

Currently and globally, the world is facing a number of major challenges. The primary and existential challenge is the ecological one related to the need to preserve life on our planet. Along with this, the world is burdened with issues of political and social nature, the overall democratic balance finding itself increasingly more under the scrutiny of the media. It is often stressed that democracy is guarded by the media, and that the world's political and social order cannot but be affected by the transformative processes which go on within the field of the media itself, since this field is moving forward against and under the pressure of constant technological changes, resulting in increased dynamics of communication and information exchange in the present-day world, especially in technologically more developed countries. Among collateral effects of such processes are numerous new forms of obscuration of political influence and control, accompanied by a multiplication of sources of information as well as numerous other features (e.g. superficiality and sensationalism) which heavily weigh upon the notion of objective reporting. Such phenomena in themselves represent a challenge to democratic orders, since they give rise to a whole new set of ethical issues specific to modernity. At the same time new challenges of historical dimensions are also on the rise, many of them rooted in social changes, such as the ones going on in European countries which are seeking to arrive at a new level of political and economic, but also cultural and social unity. Furthermore, many challenges are related to external phenomena which produce consequences likely to leave deep traces on the future functioning of European countries. Among these are definitely the wars which are being waged outside Europe, but which are affecting European democracies in many indirect or even direct ways. Hence, in this article we will evaluate the role and the impact of the present-day media from the perspective of one of the presently most controversial media topics: the refugee waves in the European countries outside the Schengen Area, as well as the ability of the media to provide answers to this issue of highest transformative potential, while simultaneously undergoing a transformation, in form and in substance, of their own.

2. Focus and methodology

In this research we limited our topic to cover the Croatian media space for a number of reasons. Being a member country of Europe, yet still not under the Schengen regime, Croatia's reactions to migratory processes, specifically to the refugee phenomenon, can be said to be both typical and atypical, and in that sense this case provides challenging grounds for research. Croatia's own internal divisions between leftist and rightist politics, reflected in the 2015 elections which brought about a turn from liberal to conservative governing, can be followed across the media space in an amazing range of approaches traversing from empathy all the way to xenophobia, these contrasts – both in reporting and in the reception – being even more drastic than in the surrounding countries. Croatia's response to such processes can also be said to reflect the recent refugee experience of the country itself, due to the independence war waged between 1991 and 1995, though in a somewhat unexpected way, since the conservative sentiments seem to have prevailed over the initial empathy. There is some absurdity in the fact that this member country of EU, yet not a member of the Schengen zone, put Croatia in the position to guard the external borders of EU, and found itself divided by the razor wire fence from Slovenia and Hungary. Yet another reason for choosing Croatia is the fact that several migratory routes have been formed across the country, which cause this issue to reappear cyclically in the media.

Furthermore, in order to provide a fuller insight into the case, we included not only Croatian media responses to these phenomena, but also those from Serbia and Bosnia, which are also relevant because those very countries make part of the so-called “Balkan route”, or – in actuality – routes.

The main part of the data on the media reception of refugee issues has been gathered in course of the summer semester of the academic year 2017/2018 (March 1 – June 20, 2018), during the seminars in Media Reception. The obtained insights have been updated to include data all the way to the end of 2018, and all the items included in the analysis have been additionally verified of January 2, 2019.

2.1. Hypothesis

The main expectation of this research was that the concepts of the reception theory would also apply to the reporting on the refugee crises and that they would be subject to change in accordance with the reactions of the audience to this topic. Also, a correlation between the tone of reporting and public attitudes was anticipated, especially triggered by pseudo-interpretative rather than analytical and objective approaches to be found in the media space, and even more so in the profit-oriented media which tend to prefer infotainment over deep analysis, even when topics require the latter.

2.2. The corpus

This research is covering Croatian portals known for their highest readership, 24 sata being the most popular one according to Gemius, which is a Polish company specialized in market researchⁱ. However, this list does not cover digital editions owned by HANZA media, nor the Index.hr news website. Since the Reuters research indicates Index.hr as the best attended Croatian portalⁱⁱ, this portal was also included into the research.

In the Digital News Report for 2018, produced by the Reuters Institute and University of Oxford, in collaboration with the Centre for Media Research and Communications, it is confirmed that the online media are mostly used as source of news, which is why we chose to focus on them rather than on the printed versions. In the Digital News Report, Zrinjka Peruško from the Centre for Media and Communication Research, University of Zagreb stresses the following:

„...there is continued concern about the non-profit media — mainly online news portals and magazines, whose funding has been reduced by the government in the previous period. /.../ Digital-born Index.hr remains the leading news website followed by the website of the daily tabloid extension 24sata.hr“ (Peruško 2018).

In order to obtain the clearest possible view on the public attitudes, we included the forum.hr website as well, this site being the eight of the list of visitation published Gemius and specific in the sense that it does not publish journalistic texts but online discussions, which we also found relevant in the evaluation of public attitudes.

Hence, this research covers 3 news websites: 24sata, index.hr and forum.hr, the texts being organized in chronological order, from the time of their publication and inclusion into the archives until the present moment. Thus, both synchronic and diachronic levels are included, with emphasis on current texts.

2.3. Language and terminology

While still in the preliminary stage of this research, in course of classwork with the students at University North, a cyclic change in terminology – refugees, migrants, emigrants – was noted, with positive, negative or sometimes neutral connotations. The journalists themselves seem to be aware of this terminological inconsistency:

„The media in the region are still calculating whether the refugees from the Near East should be referred to as migrants, emigrants or in some other way. While the journalists are dwelling on this, the refugees keep on hitting the routes and aiming towards the faraway West which on certain days may seem as paradise to them, and on other days as hell /.../ The media were expected to take on a more active role on providing important information which ought to have been educationally and not just statistically relevant. The terrain was not well prepared. The media did not us inform that the refugees travelling across our lands in their attempt to reach Berlin, or Stockholm, were in arrival. We learned more of their supposed radical and islamist intentions, and nothing of the reasons why these people who lived happily until only recently, became overnight into the same phenomenon that transformed the people from Sarajevo in 1992. The term ‘migrants’ seems to be totally accept in the media, which also made this word to enter the public discourse” (Tanić 2015).

In order to avoid unplanned filtering of the results which could affect the objectivity of the overall picture, we chose to use both terms: migrants and refugees. Both keywords were applied in searches across the selected news websites and portals.

2.4. Presentation

The results, including the analytical aspects, will be presented for each individual site separately, in the order in which they are listed in the 2018 Digital News Report. After each individual presentation we will also provide an overall view on all the websites included in this research.

3. Analysis

3.1. Index.hr

On this website, the search resulted in as many as 708 findings. The most recent text is from December 2018, and discusses the arrival of 300 migrants to Spain, by ship. 28. The oldest text is from 2003 (which is a curious detail,

seeing that Index.hr was launched as a news website in November of 2002). This text treats the topic of construction of a shelter for asylum seekers. The next one appears some 5 years later and talks of refugees from Korea. After that a text on Libyan refugees appears, dated May 10, 2011. The topic begins to be discussed more intensely in April of 2015; between five and six discussing refugee-related issues started appearing monthly from then on. The term used was 'refugees', and the topic is discussed via testimonies of people who managed to survive peril, which is accompanied by statements given by international politicians regarding possible solutions to the problem. In June 2015 the focus switches onto the possibility of acceptance of such vast numbers of people, and these are mostly evaluated under the light of statements expressing fear from consequences. The topic was initially presented with empathy, which soon gives way to negative sentiments, which is also accompanied with a terminological switch, and the term 'migrants' starts to prevail. In early August of 2015, the focus was on the refugee situation in Macedonia and in Serbia, and the reports mainly quote testimonies from people who found themselves in refugee camps. Poor conditions of such shelters are reported on, and much attention is given to the moral value of volunteers working in those camps. The tension rises with the progression of August since there is an anticipation of a refugee penetrating into Croatia, and related political activities of European and Croatian leaders become a topic of great interest. Known as a news website prone to sensationalism, Index.hr remains true to such journalistic practices in this case as well, communicating worriedness and fear as main sentiments. Reports on injuries, hunger and thirst are given; disintegration of the Schengen is anticipated; numerical data not backed up by credible sources is provided. Several texts on the 'refugee threat' begin to appear daily on the site. Information on refugee situation in Croatia is next to none, but there is an abundance of scandalous reporting on brutalities in neighbouring countries, e. g. Macedonia. By the beginning of September 2015, there is an increase in news from Germany, Hungary and Denmark, mostly accompanied by statements given by populist politicians. The focus shifts from the descriptions of actual life conditions of the refugees to the topic of cost of the refugee crisis; economic migration is being discussed and terrorist threat highlighted. Statements of rightist politicians are often quoted, without comment. A sudden reappearance of empathy reoccurs with the actual arrival of refugees on the Croatian soil, along with dramatic reporting. A sudden surge of refugee-related texts can be noted at that point: for example, on Saturday, September 29, 2015, as many as eight texts were published on the topic, and the number remained as high throughout the following days. The focus was being put onto the field conditions, as well as on the discussions of political responsibility (it is also notable that the situation was politically used for self-promotion and political attacks on both sides of the political spectre). Situation at the borders between Croatia and Hungary as well as Slovenia were discussed, and the danger of a complete close-down of the borders and the return of migrants back to Croatia were often stressed. Another shift of interest took place in October, focusing mostly on conflicting political approaches, but also on the inhuman conditions in which the refugees try to survive. The number of published texts is still very high and the topic of numbers of people crossing over various regional borders is on the rise. Only occasionally a soothing text which promotes tolerance appears, usually through the words of a quoted religious leader, or covering real-life stories, such as the one on a newly-born Syrian in Slavonski Brod. By the end of 2015 there is an increase of more analytical texts, but largely preoccupied with the possibility of terrorists inserting themselves into the refugee groups, especially after the terrorist attack on Paris. At the beginning of 2016 scandalous texts on women who were brutalised in Germany around the New Year appear, and reports are published on rightist demonstrations against refugees, cultural incompatibility highlighted. Again, texts on events in other countries begin to prevail. Throughout 2016, news on situations at the borders (focus being on Germany and Turkey) dominate; these are also garnished by reports on political negotiations between countries as well as on news on victims of illegal crossings. Occasionally, the messages from the also Pope are published. Around the mid-year a new refugee crisis was announced and threats to Croatia discussed. The number of text is significantly lower by that point in time, as the audience seems to be losing interest for this topic. Sporadically, reports appear on refugees' life in Belgrade, or other shelters, and the brutality is criticized. An occasional story is picked up from Croatia demanding greater institutional responsibility, from Croatia and from Europe. In early 2018, the focus switches to the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and to the opening of a new route across which refugees attempt to cross the border between Croatia and Slovenia, at the narrowest geographical point. Little else is being written on what is actually going on in Croatia. By the mid-2018, critical texts appear on the EU inefficiency in treating the refugee problem. At the same time, it is possible to follow a gradual turn in dealing with the refugee issues on the part of this popular Croatian news web-site. Analytical and interpretative texts are being published more frequently, though often based on personal impressions rather than on facts. Also, these texts tend to be longer, more involved with the Croatian situation, while agency news are not as frequently published. However, the provided information seems to be lacking verification, numeric calculations are being expressed somewhat freely, and the basic journalistic rule "audiatur et altera pars" seems to be neglected too often.

3.1.1. Examples and reader comments

Exemplification of topics and approaches will be limited to the year 2018, for the following reasons:

- a) It was necessary to make a meaningful selection amongst numerous examples.
- b) The current state is of primary interest.
- c) The approach to writing has changed significantly in 2018 which calls for analysis

The same limitation will also be applied to the presentation of other news (and discussion) websites.

It was also logical to display reader comments along with the selected examples, which enables a more plastic insight into the aspect of media reception.

We will therefore provide examples from 2018, varying in authorship, content and approach to writing.

We will start with addressing the issue of fake news. A text, signed with initials R. I. (Ivana Ramić), was published in November of 2018, under the title *How are fake images used to spread hatred towards migrants*. In the introductory part the author writes the following:

„The migration crisis, which exploded again thanks to a mass attempt to cross the border from Bosnia to Croatia and to penetrate police line has become the main topic in Croatia yet once more. Just as it happened in other countries which find themselves and the migrants' trail, and just as it happened at the peak of a much greater migrant wave in 2015, the concern of the public soon turned into panic and hysteria over this 'invasion', resulting once more in the spreading of fake news and conspiracy theories on migrants and their 'organizers' on social networks" (Ramić 2015).

The entire article aspires to a soothing tone and presents numerous examples of manipulation with photographic and video material as well as Facebook statuses. Comments on this article, totalling 85, are not however soothing at all. In most cases they are aggressive, ranging from: "Listen to this idiot from imbe.yu and his would-be writing. Bring an immigrant to your home to guard your wife and let us know how this went" to "The comment on "fake news used to attack fake news" has been erased twice. Soros mercenaries seem to be heavily engaged in the 'fake news' combat" and "What the fuck is wrong with you? Your crazy support of the migrants only gives rise to fascism. The fascists appear to be the only normal people around".

A week later, a HINA agency text was published, with the title "*The Ombudswoman requires punishment for the spreading of fake news on migrants*"ⁱⁱⁱ. The comments were aggressive again, though phrased in a somewhat milder manner. One of the comments, completely different than the rest, stands out „At the present-day level of communication, printed and electronic media, social networks and all the rest, such a medium which could manipulate with smart people does not exist. If they do succeed in manipulating, are the media or are the fools to blame?"

On September 30, 2018, a story on a saved Libyan family and their little dog was published, which rather shockingly provoked insults to journalists as a profession, to the point of being unquotable^{iv}. A similar response was also received by the article "*This terrible picture was drawn by an Iraqi migrant – the girl is 9 years old*"^v, published on November 22, 2018. Children's drawings from refugee camps were also published. The article did not inspire any empathy at all, judging by the responses .

Index also published an article from the German Die Welt, the title being "*Croatian police is merciless towards migrants*"^{vi} which also provoked aggressive commenting: "This German reporter and the entire Germany should be clearly told that they could easily solve the importation of cheap labour which they refer to as MIGRANT CRISIS. Let them cover the cost of their arrival and the entry into the state, i. e. they should pay for all the costs which come with the situation".

An article was published on a Facebook status published by Zoran Marinović, who is a prized Croatian documentary photographer and cameraman, with 15 years of international experience in journals such as National Geographic, New York Times and The Telegraph. The title was *A Croatian photographer took shots of hell. He has a message for all who hate migrants (Hrvatski fotograf snimio pakao života migranata. Ima poruku za one koji ih mrze* . The article was published on November 2, 2018, without any intervention into Marinović's original text. The copy/paste method was partly the reason why the message was met by quite the opposite response from what it aimed at, the comments being all but benevolent.

We are bringing this set of examples to closure with the comment written by Goran Vojković, the Index.hr's columnist. The text dates from June 2018:

„PANICKY meetings at the level of European Union clearly show that European politicians do not have the faintest idea on what to do with the immigrants. New vessels arrive to the Mediterranean daily, carrying miserable people who travel with one goal only – to somehow get themselves into some developed European country which is, for them, the synonym for abundance and safety. As someone once said: "You cannot have a social state and open borders at the same time!" (Vojković 2018)

Readers' comments were more civilized in this case, but again moved in the direction of "sending the migrants back to where they came from". "the army of deserters" and "American conspiracy against Europe".

3.1.2. Assessment of Index.hr in relation to the researched topic

Index.hr's approach to writing has changed greatly from the publishing of the earliest news on refugees to the present day. Earlier, the topic was treated with more empathy, but articles on the topic were rare. The peak in reporting on this topic took place in 2015 when several articles were produced and published daily. However, it is hard to avoid the impression that this newly found dedication to the topic had more to do with its "clickability" than with a more genuine journalistic motivation, just as the same goes for the largely negative attitude of the website. This approach, however, gave way to quite the opposite in due course, as the subsequently published articles became more analytical (though not always based on reliable data) and more empathetic towards the refugees. This new attitude, however, seems not to please a significant part of media consumers, as these articles tend to inspire negative commenting. The controversy in itself, however, generates more clicks, so one may be justified in wondering if the attitudes expressed in more recent articles are genuine, or might they be intended to provoke the audience, which was raised and groomed on the previously published negative sentiments? Where does, in such case, journalism as such, stand? The question is certainly a rhetorical one, and it just may be the case that it places Index.hr on the trail of distrust that the Croatian

public nurtures when it comes to trusting the media news. Issues of trustworthiness, authenticity and objectivity can certainly be raised when it comes to the best read Croatian news web-site, Index.hr.

3.2. 24sata

When searched for migrants and refugees, this news website came up with 408 results, which is exactly 300 less than in the case of Index.hr. The most recent article was dated on December 18, 2018, and the earliest on May 20, 2009. Prior to the year 2014, only two to three articles on refugees appeared annually, and the topic really came into focus in 2015. In articles prior to 2014 the term used was 'refugees', and after that the term 'emigrant' is also introduced. Around the same time the general tone of writing also changed. During the earlier period, the accent was on tragedy, while from the beginning of 2015 this accent was replaced by the highlighting of threat. There are even some texts which seem to seek panicky reactions quite knowingly, such as the text signed by Magdalena Rendulić, published on February 19, 2015.:

„The threat became serious after ISIL established jihadist positions in Libya. The Italians fear that they already collaborate with experienced human traffickers and that they are planning to enter Europe masked as African refugees, of whom 5000 have arrived since the beginning of the year. ISIL threatened Europe on Wednesday that it would flood it with half a million refugees from Libya. The vessels carrying immigrants could be used in suicidal missions. The Italian Ministry of Defence prepared a detailed analysis on how ISIL could take control over the Mediterranean.” (Rendulić 2015)

This text which might be called hysterical invited 9537 views and inspired 139 comments. It is of some interest to note that the comments on this web-site are phrased in a rather more civilized tone, that hate speech and vulgar words are used less frequently, and that sometimes even more constructive exchange among the commentators takes place, as opposed to a one-sided aggression practiced by the commentators on Index.hr.

In April, May and June 2015, the refugee topic became more intense, but less intense than in the case of Index.hr. The articles were, for the largest part, focused on the Mediterranean route. It was not until August that articles were published on refugees trying to cross over at Bajakovo and Tovarnik. The accent was on shorter articles, and the situation in Croatia but also Serbia and Germany was discussed.

It is also notable that more affirmative articles have fewer views and fewer comments, such as the article *“They help the refugees to socially integrate into the country”*^{vii} date on June 12, 2015. This article had only 136 and a single comment. This is in quite a contrast to an article with more distressing content, *“Dačić: Instead of Serbia, the refugee wave is heading to Croatia”*^{viii}, from August 19, 2015. The latter article had 7298 views and 308 comments. The comments vary in approach, but no hate speech stands out.

By the end of August, the refugee topic is reflected in many more articles. The news website 24sata brings insight into touching stories from Serbia, Macedonia and Greece, but the audience seem to left unmoved by the sentiments since the feeling of threat seems to dominate over them. IN September, as the refugee wave penetrated into Croatia, the main focus on the website is on politicians and their statements, as well as on the conditions that accompany the wave. Almost daily several articles on such topics appear, and police statements are commented on. Simultaneously, rightist politicians from Europe come into focus. Some trivial titles are also notable, such as *“Refugees are conquerors; they are here to fix their teeth free of charge...”*^{ix}. In October, the closing down of the Hungarian border and the situation on the border between Croatia and Slovenia are being followed on hourly basis. The articles are now longer and the number of views varies from 15 to 17 thousand, but are rarely commented on, and often not commented on at all! In November and in December 2015, much like in early 2016, the interest for the situation in other European countries is on the rise, and the number of articles on the refugee topic decreases. The journalists report on conflicts in refugee camps, but these articles do not get many views and even fewer comments. Cultural differences are being analysed, and doubt is expressed on the ability of refugees to be integrated into the European society. The articles are shorter once again. In March, the agreement with Turkey is being discussed, and in April, May and June optimism seems to be on the rise. In contrast to this, some articles appear which report on the cases of rape committed by migrants, and disturbing news appear on the conflicts at the borders. In the second half of 2016 there are more articles on the poor conditions in refugee camps, news on saved but also on killed immigrants in the Mediterranean, while also some sporadic articles appear on the arrests of illegal immigrants discovered by the Croatian police. Topic remain very much the same in 2017, but the number of articles decreases to two or three per month, and more calls to solidarity are expressed. The reason for this is the reactivation of the “Balkan Route” and numerous discoveries of illegal immigrants in Croatia. Interest for the situation in Bosnia is on the rise, while in the mid-year period there is a notable interest for the situation in Italy, France and Spain. By the end of the year, the focus returns to the illegal crossings of the Croatian border and on the actions of the Croatian police.

3.2.1. Examples and reader comments

The examples will again be limited to the year 2018, just as in case of Index.hr, for the previously mentioned reasons. At the end of 2018, actions of the Croatian police, at the border, came into focus. The article *“Secret recordings: Is the Croatian police illegally expelling the migrants?”*^x, unsigned and dated on December 16, 2018, received over 17 thousand views and even 356 comments. For the largest part, the commentators express support to the police, while criticizing the journalist for his statement on the illegal halting of the migrants, and doubt is expressed on the authenticity of the provided recordings. However, all comments are phrased in civilized forms, and hate speech cannot be detected.

This website does not fall short of the attempt to appeal at the audience by presenting them moving cases of individual destinies. For example, the article *"We are not talibans or ciminals, we only seek a better life..."*^{xi}, published on December 4, 2018 and unsigned, provides short testimonies of migrants. However, this article, much like similar ones on Index.hr, triggers quite the opposite effect. In the case of an even more moving story from Bosnia, published in a lengthier format under the title *"He hushed me down, pulled out his gun and aimed at my little girl"*^{xii}, signed by Helena Tkalčević and Bogdan Blotnej on July 20, 2018, triggers no empathy which might have been expected or aimed at. On the contrary, typical comments are much like the following one:

„You must be quite a bit retarded mentally to believe in this! Why don't you all just go home, what are you doing glued to the border and attempting to sneak into other people's land free of charge. You have your own country, there is no war there, so please pull up your sleeves and get to work, instead of sitting in your tents and waiting for food to be delivered to you!"^{xiii}

Facebook is a source of information and inspiration when it comes to 24sata as well. An article which proved to be of a great interest, sourced from Facebook, was published a month later, on November 4, 2018 under the following title *"Pernar; the migrants are cooking people; Nikola Grmoja calling in the army."*^{xiv} The text was extensively commented on in many different ways, ranging from confirmations, across criticism for the journalist, to the doubts on the article being written 'upon order'.

One might say that 24sata prefers the short format of news, such as in the case of the following article: *"They were looking for shelter from the rain: The migrants broke into five houses near Rijeka. Material damage is not great, for window glasses were broken to enable entrance, and the owners swiftly moved to repair the damage..."*^{xv} Such articles appear without any signature; they seem neutral or even siding with the refugees, which causes the commentators to take the opposite stand and suspect that there are many more of similar events which remain unreported. Examples of typical reactions can be found in the following comments „People are moving out of their own country because of them, they fear for their own... How much more before we are no lo longer able to walk our own streets at night for the fear of being ambushed by some migrant..."/.../ „Material damage aside, the larger damage is immaterial and invisible, the damage to the society and to the safety of Croatian citizens, the fact being that the Croatian citizens cannot feel safe in their own homes thank to the migrants. And the sate is either unable or it does not wish to ensure safety."^{xvi} Interest for such articles seems be significant.

3.2.2. Assessment of 24sata in relation to the researched topic

This news web-site, much like the previously analysed one, nurtures a tabloid approach to the topic of migrants and refugees. Texts with more in-depth aspirations are but a few; short forms prevail, authorship is reduced almost to irrelevance, and the topics are dictated by the tastes of the audience, with little or no attempt to shape that taste in a more meaningful direction. Texts are seldom critical, and if analytical at all, this only provokes more public criticism. Some examples of journalistic reporting of a better quality date from 2015, and these were accepted well by the audience. It can be detected that the commentators on this portal seem to be at a relatively higher level of literacy and are often inclined to provide criticism of their own. Sometimes 24sata publishes translations from international press, in its online and in its printed editions.

3.3. Forum.hr

It was interesting to check if Forum.hr would justify its inclusion in this research, seeing that it is not a news web-site. However, it provides a format which is highly relevant for the reception of news, both in the sense of providing insight into the extent in which the news is echoed in free discussions of Internet users, as well as in the sense of providing insight into public attitudes related to the topic.

3.3.1. Assessment of Forum.hr in relation to the researched topic

The discussions on Forum.hr are moderated, and if they take a direction which is not in accordance with the discussion rules, can be locked down. The refugee problem was extensively discussed on this forum, and in the individual sub-forums, which reveals a much greater interest of the Croatian public for this topic than one might deduct from the comment sections on news portals. It may seem surprising that the level of empathy expressed by participants is much above that which can be found in direct comments of the news. Also, certain topics and attitudes emerge which differ from the spectre on news portals. For example, the fact that Croatia is not the refugees' final destination and that the country is for a number of reasons less than attractive for becoming their home, proved to be an interesting frame for the discussion on life conditions in the country. A number of participants in these discussions chose this topic as a platform to discuss their own (lack of) quality of life, to target national issues such as the rule of law, corruption, nepotism, demographic issues, sustainability of retirement policies, employment issues etc.

3.4. Overall analysis

The three portals covered by this research differ in effects and in their foundations. Most attention was given to the most visited news web-sites, Index.hr and 24sata. Seeing that our main goal was to investigate the reception of the media, these two were judged as most likely to determine the scope of the reception and to provide feedback on the reception. The practical difference between the two lies in the fact that Index.hr is exclusively Internet-oriented, and relies on online audiences, while 24sata appears in a printed version as well.

Finally, Forum.hr is a portal which can provide an unbiased insight into public attitudes than the comment sections included in news portals, since news portals are, unavoidable, ideologically tinted and the commenting audiences are usually those who put themselves either in a 'pro' or in a 'contra' position towards the portal itself. Since we aimed at

a broader insight into the reception of the media, it was of interest to move also to evaluate the indirect effects of the media onto media audiences, more likely to be expressed outside the frame of a given news web-site or of a particular article.

4. Media vs. audience – reception theory translated into practice

When we talk of media reception, we are inevitably dealing with the phenomenon known as the ‘horizon of expectations’. Let’s remind ourselves:

“A German literary critic named Hans Robert Jauss provided a key for sociologicistic trying to understand cultural reception/.../ horizon of expectations (is) shaped by previous literary, cultural, and social experience. A reader interprets the text – finds meaning in it – on the basis of how it fits or challenges his expectations. In constructing the text’s meaning, he finds his horizon of expectations changing as well.” (Griswold 2008)

What is said above is probably best exemplified by the articles, as well as comments, which were encountered on Index.hr. Index.hr practices journalism based on controversies and does not sustain from publishing which challenges, or even trespasses over ethical standards. However, although – over time – Index.hr also developed a parallel line of publishing, which could be called more investigative and less provocative, the audience tends to treat any article found there as essentially provocative and possible untrue. Since this portal functions outside the framework of influential institutions, the public seems to treat it as informal and does not sustain from doubting or even insulting the published authors, often even suspecting some hidden agenda, which explains largely negative comments. This can be also explained, at least to a point, by the fact that online publications – if not accompanied by the existence of a printed counterpart, which adds to traditional notions of respectability – tend to be treated much more casually, almost as if they themselves were a part of some social network where colloquial language, vulgarisms and hate speech are not only permitted but openly if not dominantly practiced. This example provides insight into the cycle of reception based on expectations and failed expectations: the text provokes the public by hitting against their horizon of expectations; the audience reacts violently (the more violent the reaction, more views and clicks are obtained); the process is repeated, thus strengthening a publishing policy based on evaluation but also on constant undermining of the horizon of expectations. The refugee topic provides in-depth insight into this mechanism. For example, when the public is invited to empathise against panic, the panic, not only as a stronger sentiment, but also as a rejected one by the author, prevails. The ongoing interplay moves against the rationality of the audiences and is focuses on their sentiments, especially on the interplay between the positive and negative ones, and a given sentimental dictate of any article is likely to encounter resistance. The effect of more views and more clicks causes other portals to adopt similar policies. In the case of refugees this seemed to escalate to an unacceptable level, as the approach gave rise not only to feelings of fear, but also to the loss of quality in reporting, which seems to be the point in which the audience counter-reacted in a corrective manner, bringing the situation back to its default settings.

The horizon of expectations set by 24hours seems to be somewhat different, which can be explained, at least in part, by the respect for more traditional forms (printed media) nurtured by the public. Though this portal also exists in an online format, and does not refrain from tabloid formats either, it can be said to be somewhat less open to controversies than Index.hr has proven to be in the past. The relationship between the production and the reception, however, remains based on the same logic and on similar cycles as described above, yet the exchange takes place in a somewhat milder form.

We should also bear in mind that authors and readers make part of the same interpretative community (as defined by Stanley Fish), and that certain interpretative settings are shared by all. Any published piece is structured uniquely by the author, but within the interpretative limits which are opened up by the given structure, there is room for binary modes and differences, both of which fall within the horizon of expectations. It is the triggering of these differences that gives rise to controversy and secures interest of the public; the refugee topic, evolving between empathy and xenophobia, proved to be exemplary of the process.

The research we carried out also give reasons to tackle the notion of indeterminacy and uncertainty set forward by Wolfgang Iser:

“we must attempt to clarify the observable increase of indeterminacy in narrative literature /.../ The more texts lose their determinacy, the more the reader is shifted into the full operation of their possible intentions.” (Iser 1994)

Uncertainty may therefore be not just unconsciously but also intentionally inserted into a published article, which is likely to produce tension and urge for the text to be ‘finished’ by the reader. Seeing that different audiences are likely to aim at filling the gaps in different ways, this will give room for argumentative commentaries, which in turn adds to the ‘clickability’ of certain websites, and no less of certain topics, such as the topic of this research.

5. Conclusion

As we expected, the terms of the reception theory proved to be applicable also onto the ways in which the refugee crisis was reported on, and flexible enough to encompass the changes in reception which we followed through time and through different news portals. Public attitudes seem to follow the same logic, and there is a definite interconnectedness between the ways in which the news portals are conditioned by public attitudes and in which the public attitudes are, in turn, related to the production of news. The part that gives reason for concern is the tendency to

reject rationality for the sake of clickability, which could well lead to the popularization of journalistic forms lacking objectivity, and could well involve the very essence of the today's crisis of journalism.

However, we should bear in mind the fact that the reception theory which we have attempted to apply onto the topic of our research, primarily arises from the literary theory. Therefore, it might be necessary to investigate the notions we used against other phenomena to arrive at theoretical notions which might be best adapted to the analysis of media-related phenomena. Whether we discuss the refugees or some other topic, we must at all times bear in mind the specific relation between the public and the media which is in many ways dictated by pragmatic, or, so to say, non-literary elements. The aim of these tools should certainly be arriving at a more in-depth understanding of the process of media reception which could in turn be applied to publishing policies and to the increase in quality of the media production.

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A short bio-note on the authors

Gordana Tkalec was born in 1973. in Osijek. From 1994 to 1997 she was a reporter, editor and presenter of the news on Slavonia TV, and 1998. a journalist in Jutarnji list. Since 2012 she is working at the University North, Department of Journalism. Since 2015. she is at the position of Head of Department of Journalism, and since 2018. at the position of Head of Department of Communication, Media and Journalism.

She teaches in the undergraduate and graduate studies in Journalism and in Doctoral Studies in Media and Communication at the University North, Koprivnica.

She has published one book, many scientific and professional papers and participated in the work of many international scientific and professional conferences.

Research interests: Journalism, Cultural Studies, Media Studies, Literary Theory, etc.

Iva Rosanda Žigo was born in 1978 in Rijeka. From 2008/2009 she was employed as teaching/research assistant at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Croatian Studies (University of Rijeka). From 2012 till 2015 employed as teaching/research assistant (PhD) at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Croatian Studies (University of Rijeka). From 2015 employed as Assistant Professor and from 2018 as Associate Professor at the University North (Department of Communicology, Media and Journalism).

Till 2015 she was the head of the Centre for electronic publishing at the University of Rijeka and secretary of Doctoral Study Publishing and media at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (University of Rijeka).

From 2018 she is the head of the Doctoral program (PhD) in Media and Communication at the University North (Department of Media and Communication).

She has published three books, more than twenty scientific and professional papers and participated in the work of many international scientific and professional conferences.

Research interests: Cultural Studies, Media Studies, Theatre Studies, Literary Theory, etc.

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