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**POLISH MEDIA COVERAGE
DURING THE FIRST STAGE
OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

**A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS
OF SELECTED ONLINE NEWS OUTLETS
AND TV CHANNELS**



**Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań
Faculty of Political Science and Journalism
Poznań 2021**

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The research was financed by the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań as a part of the project “Research on COVID-19”.

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Scientific Publisher of the Faculty of Political Science and Journalism
5. Uniwersytetu Poznańskiego Street, 61-614 Poznań, tel. 61 829 65 17

Publisher: Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań
Scientific Publisher of the Faculty of Political Science and Journalism
ul. Uniwersytetu Poznańskiego 5, 61-614 Poznań, tel. 61 829 65 17

ISBN 978-83-66740-20-4

Computer composition – „MRS”, 60-408 Poznań, ul. P. Złotowa 23, tel. kom. 605087690
Printing and binding – PERFEKT – Gaul i wspólnicy sp.j., ul. Skórzewska 63, 60-185 Skórzewo

“Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world, yet somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our heads from a blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars in history, yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise...”

Albert Camus

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Acknowledgments

The publication presented below is the result of the first stage of the project “Media messages during COVID-19 pandemic”, conducted at the Faculty of Political Science and Journalism at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. Apart from the authors, the research team included the Chair of Social Communication Department, professor Dorota Piontek, and Monika Jabłońska, a member of the Social Communications Department. Also, we would like to thank Piotr Jabłoński for his tremendous support in technical matters.

The results presented in the following publications will serve, in the authors’ view, as an important basis for subsequent discussion on the narratives used to report on the pandemic in Poland and abroad. They also provide a starting point for the study of their influence on the audience. Undoubtedly, the results are just a fragment of the mass communication landscape, but significant enough as the research sample included Poland’s crucial news outlets. These outlets dictate the tone of public debate in the face of such a serious threat. And even though the results obtained offer much more content for debate on the state of the contemporary national mass media that could be captured within the constraints of these publications, we leave it up to you, the audience, to interpret and ponder upon.

The Authors.

Introduction

The Covid-19 global pandemic is an event that has dramatically reshaped the contemporary world. With the beginning of 2020 came far-reaching changes in the way states, governments, societies, and even individuals, function. All of these entities had to face a situation that threatens their health and lives, limits their civic freedoms in order to defend them against this threat, and warrants the protection of sensitive aspects of the social system, such as the economy, education, or employment. It is worth noting that the pandemic presents a challenge in adapting to new conditions, both in terms of protecting public health, the economy and communications, but also in terms of new laws and regulations that reflect states' policies regarding the ever present and constant threat. The issue came about in nonlinear fashion, starting in China and other Asian countries (in December 2019), and soon after reaching Europe and the United States. The prominence of the pandemic and the period of increased interest in the topic was directly correlated with, naturally, the number of Covid-19 cases in a given country or region. The issue of Covid-19 came to Poland relatively late, as the first SARS-COVid-2 infection was reported here on 4 March, 2020. Mass media played a particularly important role in maintaining public safety, the organisation of anticrisis activities, and arriving at a popular consensus on the scale of the threat and the legitimization of government-led actions in this extraordinary period. Undoubtedly, the state of jeopardy to public health and safety provides critical context for the government's decisions and actions, but also generates huge interest from the public, who yearn for reliable and verified information on the topic. Any pandemic creates anxiety and fear of the unknown threat. Mass media hold unmatched power to reduce this anxiety, through performing their systemic functions as they relate to their audience. Reporting on the aetiology of the virus, course of the pandemic, and actions taken by the government in a clear way significantly influences the social mood, can lead to increase in conciliation and legitimization (in relation to e.g. restrictions introduced), and impacts the level of knowledge and awareness amongst citizens. Apart from informing on the pandemic and educating their audiences, mass media perform other social functions of importance, such as mobilising their audience against a common enemy, or controlling and verifying actions as taken by the decision-makers. All of these aspects of media institutions and their functions take a particular meaning in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The reliability of reported information

becomes a *sine qua non* condition for maintaining social order, and the framing of media broadcasts determines social attitudes towards a global challenge.

Taking into consideration the aforementioned challenges facing the media, especially news broadcasters, a research team from Adam Mickiewicz University's Faculty of Political Science and Journalism in Poznan designed a two-stage research project, aiming to: (1) determine the nature (character) of the media broadcasts and publications relating to the Covid-19 pandemic, as produced by Polish media institutions, and (2) study their influence on the awareness and attitudes presented by the audience.

The following publication is the result of the first stage of this planned research. Content analysis results will be presented, based on content of the leading Polish news sources: the two largest online news portals, and three national TV stations. The study was conducted during the so-called "first wave" of the Coronavirus, where the need for informational, educational and mobilisatory functions against the universal issue was particularly apparent. The analysis conducted by AMU's research team serves also as a starting point for extended research concerned with the recipients of these broadcasts, results of which will be presented in a separate publication. This work discusses and studies the content of news media broadcasts – its character, applied cognitive frameworks and framing, sources of reported information, actors presented, as well as the evaluation and interpretation of the events on which they report.

This publication contains four distinct chapters. The first one presets the assumptions and research aims adopted, as well as the methodology and the discussion of the research sample selection process. The second chapter presents the results of content analysis of online news outlets (onet.pl and wp.pl) studied. This is followed by a chapter presenting content analysis results of news items broadcasted on TVP1, TVN, and Polsat. In the fourth chapter, results presentation has been supplemented by particularly interesting insights from comparative analysis of the online media content vs. TV broadcasts. This comparative analysis serves to underline the observed similarities and differences in reporting across different types of media outlets. Moreover, this publication is to serve as a chronicle of Polish media institutions' response and the narrative on the first weeks of the Covid-19 pandemic in Poland. The authors are convinced that it will be a useful source of information and a starting point for discussion on media broadcast and messaging, and, in a wider context, for evaluating the state of Polish news journalism. The results can also serve other researchers to continue analysis based on media-produced content. This is even more important as all news media outlets devoted significant amounts of broadcast time to pandemic coverage, not only in strictly informational segments, but also in different types of programming (editorial, educational, event coverage, chronicles, etc.).

Chapter 1. Research aims, methodology, and sample selection

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the media have played a particular role in social communication, but their importance is even greater in times of social threat and anxiety. This is because they are not only the source of information about actual and potential threats, but also because they shape the “pseudo-environment”, the irrational, and often egoistic, social-mental image of the world, which influences individual behaviours and decisions (Lippmann, 1922). 2020 saw SARS-CoV-2 virus-induced pandemic as the main source of global threat, and thus reports on the new virus virant have dominated both mainstream and local media. Despite the establishment of the Polish government’s official informational policy,¹ it was the media who were the main (and often the only) source of information on the number of cases, deaths, and various safety procedures and regulations introduced across the nation at the height of the pandemic.

Research conducted by Publicon agency and Press-Service Media Monitoring found that between mid-January and mid-March 2020, traditional media broadcasted/published over 235,000 reports on SARS-CoV-2 and the consequences of it spreading, and social media saw over 1.1 million posts on the topic (Publicon, Press Service 2020: 5). The sheer volume of media communications in such a short period of time, in the midst of a situation deemed life-threatening, makes qualitative content analysis of the media broadcasts particularly prudent and interesting. These unprecedented conditions could have had a significant influence on both the quality and reliability of published content, as well as social moods and actions, as media audiences were faced with a huge volume of information, often conflicting or incomplete.

At the same time, these same audiences, who face a threat to their health and life, need to feel they are informed about this threat in a reliable way. This situation puts the spotlight on news media, which should act according to professional standards, as they are responsible for providing reliable information to the public. Media broadcasts and publications play a significant role in shaping public opinion (Czyżewski et al., 2010; Noelle-Neuman, 2004), and in the case of the Covid-19

¹ The government’s informational policy included creating subsections of government websites (such as: www.gov.pl/web/koronawirus), distribution of leaflets directly to citizens’ postboxes, distribution of posters in public spaces, and a direct campaign with participation from police officers and municipal police officers (from Straż Miejska, municipal police).

pandemic, in shaping attitudes towards restrictions, legitimization of government actions, and calming or inflaming the panic.

Project objectives

The main objective of this project is to analyse media communications in mainstream news media in times of Covid-19 pandemic and, at a later stage which will be finalised in a distinct publication, to verify the influence of the broadcasts on social moods and behaviours. The aim of this research is diagnostic in nature. The end result is the knowledge database on the character of media broadcasting during Poland's first wave of coronavirus infections. Materials collected were analysed, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in order to determine the manner in which Polish media reported on the pandemic over its course. The main objective can be further divided into specific objectives, relating to particular elements of research materials. The first specific objective was to determine the character of the news coverage – whether they were informative or persuasive, rational or emotional in nature. This is an important research question as it allows a determination of the general direction of pandemic converge, which could serve as the basis for conclusions relating to the “temperature” of public debate, not only with regards to the virus threat, but also more generally, with regards to restrictions, lockdowns, freezing of particular branches of the economy, or systemic support for entrepreneurs. The second specific objective focuses on determining who was given more attention in pandemic news coverage. The associated research question delves into which media actors were given the most exposure – was it politicians (with what affiliation?), or was it medical professionals, doctors, experts, and scientists? This exposure directly relates to what categories of public actors are deemed the most important in context of the global health crisis by these media institutions. The third specific objective was to determine the sources of information presented by the research media. Narratives built on unverified and uncertain sources can be a massive threat to the reliability of this information, and indicate a lack of journalistic professionalism; professionalism which has become a necessary condition for the accurate and reliable informing of society. Moreover, another specific research objective was to verify and determine the variability of information as presented in TV and online media. The associated research questions were as follows. Was the narrative across media sources cohesive, and if not – what were the biggest differences in TV coverage vs. online coverage? Could the observed differences influence the social reception of covered events and specific stages of the public health crisis? The research presented took into consideration cognitive frameworks employed by news media to build their messaging. The goal of this part of the categorisation key was to determine the context in which the pandemic coverage appeared. The research team adopted a preliminary hypothesis, based on initial

observation of the media, stating that media coverage on the Covid-19 pandemic featured significant differences in portrayal and evaluation of the course of the pandemic and government's response, and knowledge and social awareness generated by Poland's leading news broadcasters can significantly differ depending on the medium chosen by the recipient. These differences stem from the various status of the media, the current political situation in Poland, and political parallelism which has formed over recent years. This relates mostly to Poland's public broadcaster (TVP), which is closely aligned with the party in power. The idea of parallelism supports a supposition that private broadcasters will in turn tend to be more critical with regards to evaluating and interpreting crisis management during the pandemic. This approach, coupled with the diagnostic objective of this research, allowed for the design of the categorisation key and the use of other tools required for its implementation.

Research methodology

A hybrid approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research techniques for content analysis, was employed to conduct this research on mainstream Polish media, online and broadcasted on television. Research categories common to both types of media were adopted, and the categorisation key was designed to fit content analysis of the entirety of collected source material. Source material was analysed both quantitatively (number of broadcasts, territoriality, the character/manner of messaging, quoted (re)sources, actors featured), and qualitatively (narrative framing, language of messaging, the political agenda of the medium, the image/view of the world as presented in the coverage). Content analysis was performed on the main editions of nation-wide general news broadcasts, namely TVN's Fakty ("Facts"), Polsat's Wydarzenia ("Events"), and TVP1's Wiadomości ("News").² The sample excluded broadcasts from dedicated news stations that are aligned with the main networks, such as TVN24, Polsat News, TVP2 and TVP Info, because of their small market share in comparison. The TV stations in the sample were determined based on the National Broadcasting Council's³ report on

² TVN is a private television station launched in 1997. Originally founded by Polish entrepreneurs, it is now part of the Discovery group. The profile of the station may be described as liberal. News programs broadcasted by TVN are considered as critical of the current government.

Polsat is the first private broadcaster to obtain a license in Poland after the political transformation – it started broadcasting in 1992. The owner of the station is a Polish businessman, Zygmunt Solorz-Żak. The political profile of the station can be described as neutral – journalists rarely decide to openly criticize the authorities and the parliamentary opposition.

TVP is a public broadcaster with strong ties to the government. Current chairman of the station is a former member of the ruling party, Jacek Kurski.

³ National Broadcasting Council, Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji (KRRiT) – Polish media regulatory body.

changes in programming and media's adaptation activities relating to the COVID-19 pandemic (KRRiT, 2020). Content analysis of the online publications was conducted on a sample sourced from Poland's two biggest news portals, namely Onet.pl and Wp.pl. These portals' landing pages are the leaders in media reach, with average total readership between the two amounting to 21 million Poles (*Wp.pl with a smaller advantage over Onet ...*, 2019). Moreover, both sites often top rankings as Poland's most influential and opinion-forming online media (*Onet is the most opinion-forming medium...*, 2021). The audiovisual source material collection, creation of a complete database, and the consequent analysis were realised through AMU WNPiD's proprietary software, Content Analysis System for Television (CAST).⁴ CAST is a software allowing for the archiving and analysis of TV broadcasts, both satellite and terrestrial. Source materials were collected using the software, focusing on news containing the keywords: "covid", "pandemic", "coronavirus", "epidemic", and "SARS-Cov-2". Material collected was then analysed using the categorisation key.

Similar processes were involved with online publications, where materials from onet.pl and wp.pl landing pages were analysed. Here articles highlighted by publishers, featured in the main news sections, were taken into consideration when collecting the sample. Source material was analysed in the following categories: message character (persuasive, informative, rational, emotional⁵), general tone of coverage (as it relates to the situation in the country: positive, negative, ambivalent, neutral), proportion and relation of facts and opinions in a broadcast/publication, category of actors featured, and cognitive framing used by the broadcasters/publishers. Traditional media frames (Entman, 2004), constructed based on Entman's analysis of media political communication coverage, were used to interpret the messaging. Deduction was used to reconstruct the frames accordingly. Messages were analysed to determine the presence of the following frames: conflict, attribution of responsibility, consequence, morality, and human interest (ibid.). It is particularly prudent, in light of this research, to study and follow the specific stages of the development of the pandemic, especially in its early stages. Undoubtedly, an event this paramount, universal and affecting so many areas of the public and private lives of citizens has been a tremendous adaptive challenge for all. This sudden change in the situation and conditions people face in their daily lives made the communication strategy and transparency of government a key is-

⁴ More on CAST: <https://wnpid.amu.edu.pl/en/home/cast>.

⁵ In the coding process, each news item was marked on two axes with opposite values: rational – emotional, and informative – persuasive. Emotional category was coded for content dominated by language related to the expression of feelings (e.g. "we are all afraid of the virus," "we can't stand it anymore.").

In the rational category, content related to facts or devoid of expression was coded. In the second axis, news items focused on reporting events and their developments were coded as informational. Persuasive category was used for content in which statements aimed at viewers were included, calling for specific social behavior (e.g. "stay at home", "go vote in the elections").

sue, as it is the government's direct responsibility to act during the time of crisis for its citizens. These circumstances make the early stage of the pandemic, when crucial decisions about public life were made (closing down of schools and businesses, movement restrictions and lockdown, social distancing and face coverings being required) a turning point for the entire society. On the one hand, Poles were facing a new and uncomfortable threat, and on the other, restrictions limiting their civic freedoms. Social reception of these events was majorly determined by the communication processes between the government and its people, where mass media play a key role.

Media content analysis included content analysis of specific segments of main news broadcasts from Poland's leading broadcasters (TVP, Polsat, TVN), and of Poland's two most-read online publications (Onet.pl and Wp.pl). Because sample selection was of particular importance, the research team decided to reconstruct the timeline of the first few months of the pandemic in Poland, and based on the timeline created, indicated key events which determined media narrative in a significant way, and as such played a big role in social mood and attitudes.

Sample selection timeline – early 2020

The first reports on a new type of contagious virus causing pneumonia are currently dated at mid-December 2019 and concerned employees from the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan (Parry, 2020). It is worth noting that experts monitoring the situation have already raised concerns about the unusual course of the disease, its contagiousness, and difficulty in acquiring reliable information on the topic back when the reports started (ibid.). The Chinese government informed the global public about a new type of virus by the end of 2019, and 8 January saw Chinese scientists proclaiming a hitherto unknown strain of coronavirus (named SARS-CoV-2 thanks to its similarity to the known SARS virus) is responsible for the new disease. The following day, 9 January 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) confirmed the information about a new coronavirus. By the end of January the new virus had already spread outside of China, reaching over a dozen Asian countries (incl. Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Malaysia and Singapore), as well as Europe (France, Finland, the UK, Spain, Germany, Sweden). The virus had also reached the US, Canada and Australia (*Coronavirus. Day by day...*, 2021). January saw almost 10,000 cases in total, with 213 deaths recorded (ibid.). February 2020 featured reports on coronavirus mainly in the context of China and its fight against the virus spreading in Hubei Province and Wuhan city. It was not until mid-February when the topic of actual threat from the new disease started to regularly appear in Polish media, prompted by reports from Italy. The sudden increase in infections in Lombardy, where 59 new cases were reported on February 22, made Italy the headline as the country most troubled by the epidemic. The total numbers

for Covid-19 infections in February 2020 were 87,000 cases and 3,000 deaths (ibid.). February was a particularly confusing time for those trying to make sense of the world. On the one hand, there were mounting reports of this “new threat from China”; on the other, Poland continued to be outside of this threat’s reach. This meant that, to Poles, coronavirus seemed to be a distant and unreal threat in the first two months of 2020. However, the situation changed drastically (and dynamically) as soon as March, when SARS-CoV-2 reached Poland.

In line with research objectives, the research team decided not to include any broadcasts/publications prior to Covid-19’s arrival in Poland in the research sample. The first two months of 2020 were not dominated by pandemic-related coverage, and as such analysing media content from that time is not particularly prudent to the research objective.⁶ This conclusion is also supported by public opinion surveys, published monthly by Kantar, relating to social mood in Poland. Data from the 1st quarter of 2020 (2020Q1) do not indicate any significant changes, and the general reception of “state of the union”/“current affairs” did not change: 40% of respondents viewed the current situation as positive, with a similar percentage viewing it negatively (Kantar, 2020a: 3; 2020b: 3; 2020c: 3). A significant change came in the April survey, when 53% of respondents judged the situation in Poland negatively (Kantar, 2020d: 3). Public opinion surveys confirm that the intensification of pandemic coverage began in the first weeks of March, when the virus reached Poland.

Timeline – March 2020

The unfolding events of March 2020 kick-started the aforementioned process of citizens adapting to the new health threat. Poland reported its first infection case on March 4, when a 66 year old patient from Lubusz Voivodeship was diagnosed (*First case of the coronavirus in Poland...*, 2020). This was announced by then-Minister of Health, Łukasz Szumowski, at a press conference. March 4 is the key date for the research perspective adopted, as it is a direct starting point for the epidemic in Poland. March 10 saw the government introducing the first restrictions in public spaces, cancelling all mass events across the country (*The Government Crisis Management Team Made decided...*, 2020). The following day, March 11, featured two significant events. Firstly, WHO announced a state of SARS-COV-2 global pandemic (*WHO chief: coronavirus is a pandemic*, 2020). Secondly, the government decided to issue a regulation suspending the functioning of educational facilities (schools and higher education) (Regulation of the Ministry of National Education from 11 March 2020). This regulation in particular changed

⁶ However, it needs to be noted that media content analysis relating to coverage before the pandemic erupted in Europe and Poland can yield some very interesting results in a different research perspective, distinct to the one adopted in this work.

the daily lives of Poles, as they were faced with providing educational support to their children. Simultaneously, educational facilities faced the challenge to reorganise work and adapt to new conditions. This was widely commented upon in public discourse, and as it later turned out, was just the beginning, with much more severe restrictions and regulations to come. On March 13, the Ministry of Health issued a regulation declaring the state of epidemiological threat in the country (Regulation of the Minister of Health from 13 March 2020). The act introduced, amongst others, obligatory quarantine for people coming from abroad, suspension of international rail connections, and banned all gatherings of over 50 people. The regulation was introduced on the basis of the Act on preventing and combating infection and infectious diseases from 5 December 2008 (Act from 5 December 2008). The regulation issued on March 13, with multiple consequent changes and harmonisation, has served as the main legal basis for restrictions until today. The situation evolved with growing numbers of reported cases across the country. By March 17, the virus reached all Polish voivodeships (first reported case in Podlaskie Voivodeship), and the Ministry of Health reported a total of 235 cases. At that point, 2 people in Poland had died as a result of Covid-19. On 20 March 2020, the Ministry of National Education issued another regulation, which provided a set of regulations concerning schools' duties related to organising education activity remotely (Regulation of the Ministry of National Education from 20 March 2020). The following day, the number of total cases in Poland surpassed 500. On March 24, a day after the number of daily new reported cases surpassed 100⁷, the government, based on the regulation on the state of epidemic emergency, introduced severe restrictions on movement. These meant that freedom of movement would be further restricted to only three instances (1) commuting to work, (2) commuting in relation to perform volunteer duties in order to prevent COVID-19, and (3) leaving home only to run the most necessary daily life errands (Regulation of the Minister of Health from 20 March 2020). It needs to be highlighted that these regulations became the subject of national public debate, in part relating to their legality and legal basis (see: e.g. Turek, 2020; Parkitna, 2020; Kwaśniewski et al., 2020). The end of March 2020 was determined by the ever increasing number of new infections (257 on 31 March 2020), and the looming presidential elections, initially planned for May 10th. First mentions of a universal postal vote reached the public by onet.pl's reports (Jurasz, Gajcy, 2020). By the end of March, Poland had 2311 reported cases and 2 deaths linked to the coronavirus. This prompted the government to introduce further restrictions on March 31, including specific limits on persons in public spaces, such as the number of people in a grocery store, a ban on entering parks, or social distancing rules at work (Regulation of the Council of Ministers from 31 March 2020). In light of such far-reaching changes in daily life, it seems particularly prudent to study the framing of media coverage. This is why

⁷ All data on Covid-19 cases reported in Poland comes based on information published on the Ministry of Health's twitter account (twitter.com/MZ_GOV_PL).

this period of time was of particular interest to researchers and was selected as part of the research sample.

Timeline – April and May 2020

The beginning of April was marked by the upcoming Easter holidays, taking place on the 12th and 13th of the month. Potential postal voting in the upcoming presidential election was also extensively featured in public debate, with various interpretations and commentary from the experts, however the pandemic was still the dominant topic. The number of daily new reported cases kept rising, with April 5 marking a then-record of 475 new cases, and two days later the number fell to 435. As the pandemic situation evolved, the nation awaited further decisions from the government. Finally, on April 9, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki announced the prolonging of the restrictions currently in place until April 26 (*Prime Minister: we are extending the restrictions...*, 2020). The second half of April brought the announcement of extensive support for entrepreneurs (the anti-crisis shield), and the future loosening of restrictions, announced by the PM at the press conference on April 16. The government prepared a four-stage restriction lifting plan, with the first stage to start on April 20. The post-Easter period was special in the context of the debate and information surrounding the course of the pandemic in Poland. The government decided to ease present restrictions, and the media increasingly featured the topic of the upcoming presidential elections. Only a day after the announced changes in restrictions, on April 16, Minister Szumowski published his recommendations on the elections, claiming that in-person elections will be possible “in 2 years the earliest”, and thus advocated for conducting “safe” postal elections (Romanek, 2020). The first stage of restriction easing started on April 20, when people were permitted to leave their homes, e.g. for recreation. It needs to be noted that late April 2020 was when the number of new daily cases stabilised at around 300–350, marking this period as the first (since the pandemic began) when the number of new daily cases was not growing. The first days of May saw the number of daily new cases (as reported by the Ministry of Health) dropping below 300, and on May 4 the government introduced the 2nd stage of restriction easing, and hotels and malls were reopened. Public opinion was concerned with not only the pandemic situation (with Śląsk reporting record numbers of new cases), but also with the heated political debate surrounding the presidential elections. Ultimately, the presidential elections planned for May 10 did not take place, and the National Electoral Commission⁸ stated the impossibility of the elections taking place as there was “lack of possibility to vote for the candidates” (Resolution no. 129/2020 PKW from 10 May 2020).

⁸ National Electoral Commission, pl. Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (PKW).

Topics related to Easter and electoral debate seemed to tone down the social anxiety relating to the pandemic threat. These issues allowed Poles to take a different perspective on the pandemic, and its “novelty” and “unpredictability” wore off with time. This was further supported by the number of new daily cases remaining constant in Poland (around 300–400). Government actions also influenced this relaxation of attitudes towards the pandemic. The government announced the 3rd stage of restriction easing on May 13, with plans to reopen hair salons (from May 18), and for middle-school children (aged 6–10) to return to school from May 25. These announcements significantly influenced the perception of the pandemic, and mitigated social discomfort associated with the first dozens of weeks of its evolution. According to the authors of this research, the initial stages of restriction easing could serve as a final point of the process of informing citizens and their consequent adaptation to the new (pandemic) reality. The research objective of this project is to study whether the media coverage during the course of the pandemic evoked feelings of anxiety, fear, or disinformation amongst the audience. Supposing that the novelty effect and the dynamic development of the new threat in the first months of its existence is key to executing this research objective, the research team decided to include the aforementioned (crucial) period in the content analysis sample. Taking into consideration the above-mentioned and discussed events, and the associated dates, the following timeline was adopted, as presented in **Table 1**. Based on the volume of content generated following the events, it was decided that the research sample would cover coverage including aforementioned keywords from the day of the announcement and the two days following.

Table 1. Media content analysis – sample selection timeline

Date	Event	Research sample
4 March	First reported case of Covid-19 infection	4–6 March
11 March	Decision to close schools and higher education institutions	11–13 March
14 March	Declaration of the state of epidemic emergency	14–16 March
24 March	Introduction of the first restrictions on free movement	24–26 March
31 March	More restrictions: closing parks, hotels, introducing quantitative limits on persons at premises, ordering 2-metre social distance	31 March – 2 April
9 April	Extension of the restrictions until 26 April	9–11 April
16 April	Obligation to cover mouth and nose introduced, announcing soon-to-come restriction easing	16–19 April
20 April	1st stage of restrictions easing, recreational outings permitted	20–22 April
4 April	2nd stage of restriction easing, hotels and malls permitted to open	4–6 May
10 May	National Electoral Commission’s resolution on impossibility to vote in presidential elections	10–12 May
13 May	3rd stage of restrictions easing, announcement to reopen hair and beauty salons, return of young middle schoolers (aged 6–10) to school	13–15 May

Source: Authors.

Media content analysis conducted includes coverage from 5 media publishers (3 TV broadcasters and 2 online news sites), published on a given date (see: **Table 1**) and the two following days. This stems from the necessity to capture the entirety of media discourse relating to a given event/date. The sample selection reflects media narratives on the course of the pandemic in Poland, and includes other important topics appearing in the public debate at that time. Thus, the authors believe that the research sample adopted is an effective representation of the media coverage in the given time period.

The following chapters of this publication present the results of content analysis performed on the source materials, with the discussion corresponding to categories as defined in the key used for media content analysis. All key categories have been supplemented by a graphical presentation of the results. The discussion follows the structure of three parts, corresponding to the study's three stages. The first part discusses content analysis results for online media, and the second – television. Both discussions come together in online vs. TV comparative analysis, as performed in part three of this work.

Chapter 2. Content analysis of online news outlets

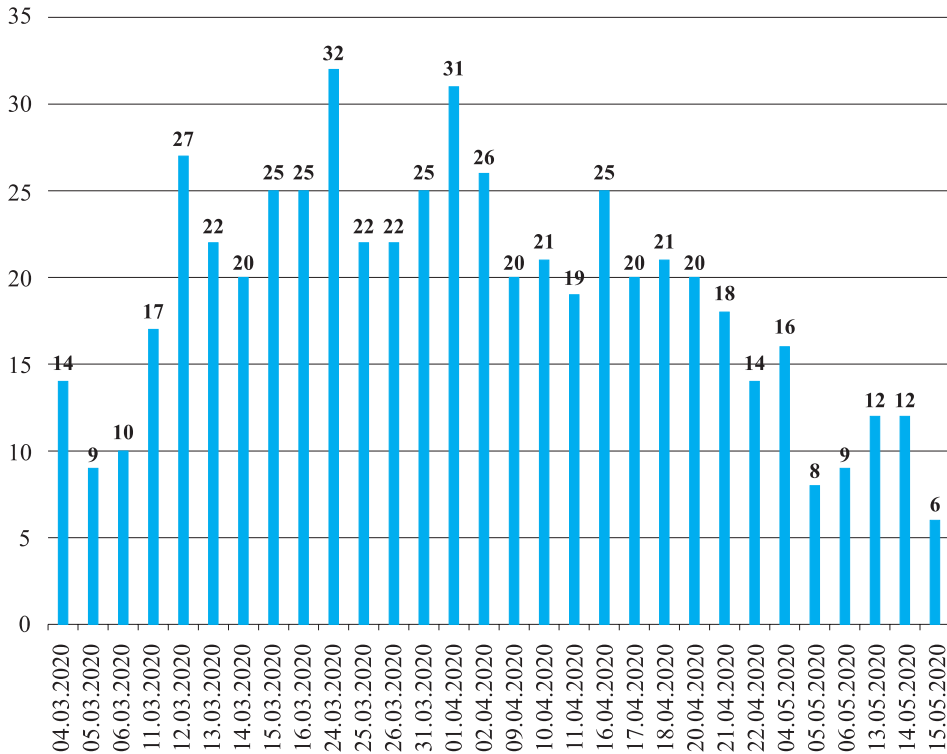
568 online news articles, published by onet.pl and wp.pl, were analysed in the course of this study on national news broadcasters. Because of the nature of online portals – high volume of published content, updating of already published content, and frequent changes in their agenda – purposive sampling was employed for sample selection. The following verification methods were used: only materials featured in the sidebar entitled “News” (or similarly) on the relevant (specified in the timeline table) days were selected.⁹

In order to maintain cohesion relative to the simultaneously analysed TV materials, only articles featured in the sidebar around 6 PM (afternoon time) were selected. The purposive sample included 342 news items from wp.pl and 226 news items from onet.pl. The notable difference in volume stems mainly from the capacity of sites’ sidebars – wp.pl displays 20 titles, and onet.pl, 16. The amount of published content relating to SARS-CoV-2 virus changed according to the changing situation within the country – as the number of active cases and deaths increased, so did the coverage. Moreover, it was additionally determined by the politically-charged events, such as the adaptation of Poland’s public life to the plans and preparations made for presidential elections.¹⁰ **Figure 1** features the coverage and timeline of the sample.

⁹ In Poland, mainstream TV stations broadcast main news editions at the following times: Polsat – “Wydarzenia” at 18:50, TVN – “Fakty” at 19:00, and TVP1 – “Wiadomości” at 19:30.

¹⁰ The Republic of Poland’s Presidential Elections were supposed to take place on May 10, 2020. As a result of appeals from scientific circles and then-Ombudsman Adam Bodnar to postpone the elections as they could not have been carried out without a threat to public health and lives, on April 6, 2020 the Polish Sejm saw an Act on postal elections submitted, and consequently passed in a vote on the same day (Dz. U. 2020, item 827), however rejected later on by the Senate. The National Electoral Committee passed a resolution on the impossibility to vote in presidential elections (Dz. U. 2020, item 967) on May 10, 2020. Ultimately, the President signed a new temporary law on 2 June on “Special regulations for general elections of the President of the Republic of Poland ordered in 2020 with the possibility of postal voting” governing the presidential election (Dz. U. 2020, item 979). The new election date was set by the Sejm Marshall to be June 28, 2020 (Dz. U. 2020, item 988). See more on 2020 Polish Presidential Elections in Piontek and Ossowski (2020). Note: Dz. U. 2020, item X – means an Act published in the Polish Journal of Laws (Dziennik Ustaw, Dz. U.) for 2020, with the item number specifying the location of the Act within the Journal of Laws.

Figure 1. Number of daily articles on COVID-19 (Wp.pl and Onet.pl total n=568)



Source: Authors.

The character and subject matter

The content analysis conducted verified the content of news items in terms of the character of coverage. Traditional division considering eight basic categories was used. These included the following types of messaging: emotional, rational, emotional-rational, rational-emotional, informative, persuasive, informative-persuasive and persuasive-informative (as described in the Introduction). The analysis entailed verifying source materials in two categories (on two axes) – emotional-rational and informative-persuasive.

When looking at all news items, most of the publications from onet.pl and wp.pl were rational-informative in nature. When judged against a scale that captures the two categories evenly (emotional-rational n=568, informative-persuasive n=568), there is a dominance of rational (55.11%) and rational-emotional (25%) communication in the first category, and a dominance of informative (61.44%) and informative-persuasive (26.94%) in the latter (see **Table 2**).

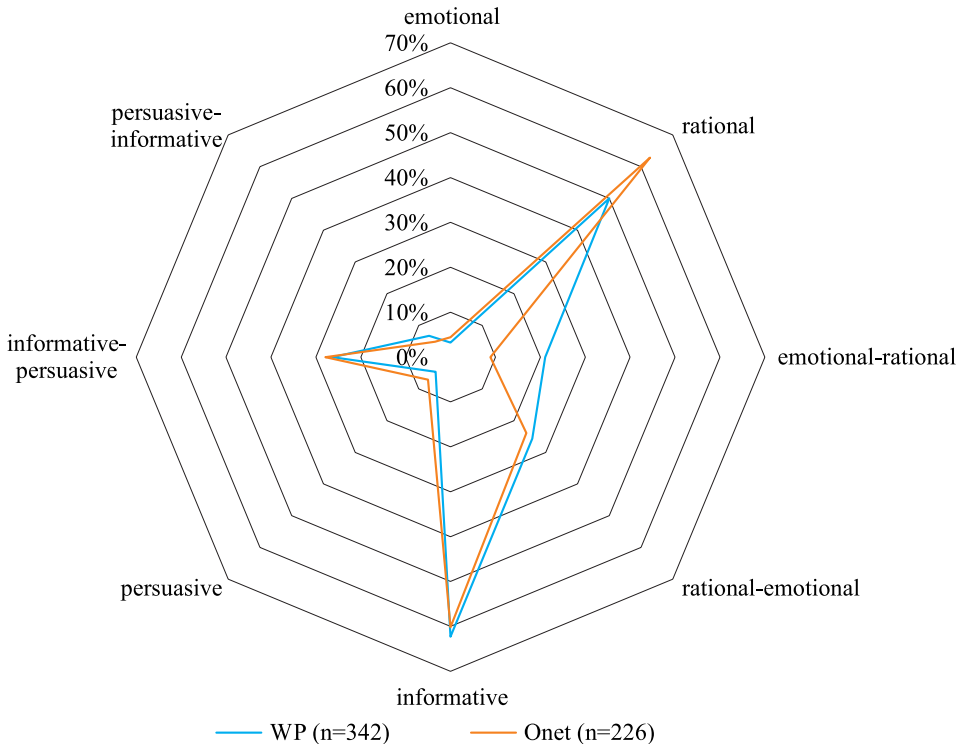
Table 2. The character of the COVID-19 pandemic coverage, total (Wp.pl and Onet.pl)

Emotional-rational axis		(n=568)
Emotional		3.70%
Rational		55.11%
Emotional-rational		16.20%
Rational-emotional		25.00%
Informative-persuasive axis		(n=568)
Informative		61.44%
Persuasive		5.63%
Informative-persuasive		26.94%
Persuasive-informative		5.99%

Source: Suthors.

Verification of each individual site’s (Wp and Onet) coverage showed similar results and a significant level of sentiment (character) alignment. The only significant differences were found in the rational dimension, which presented a difference of over 12 percentage points. Onet.pl’s coverage was 62.83% rational, and Wp.pl’s – only 50%. **Figure 2** presents the distribution of the character of coverage.

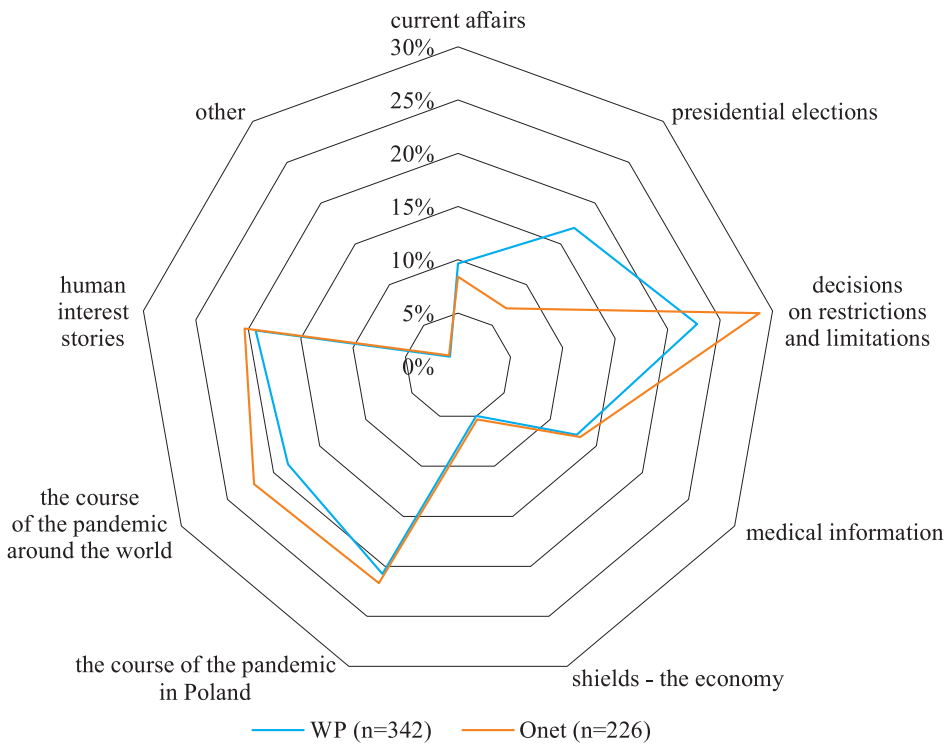
Figure 2. The character of the COVID-19 pandemic coverage, % (Wp.pl and Onet.pl)



Source: Authors.

Analysed materials dealt with the government’s decisions, including restrictions (25.18%), the course of the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland (21.13%), the course of the COVID-19 pandemic around the world (19.89%), and human interest stories (19.72%). Materials containing political context were also noticeable as it featured in over 27% of source materials, relating to: current affairs (9.15%), economic affairs and entrepreneur-dedicated financial support programmes (“shields”) (5.11%), and the then-upcoming presidential elections (13.03%). Information on SARS-CoV-2 etiology or the course of the disease constituted around a mere 13% of coverage.

Figure 3. Leading topics in COVID-19 coverage on Onet.pl and Wp.pl (in %)



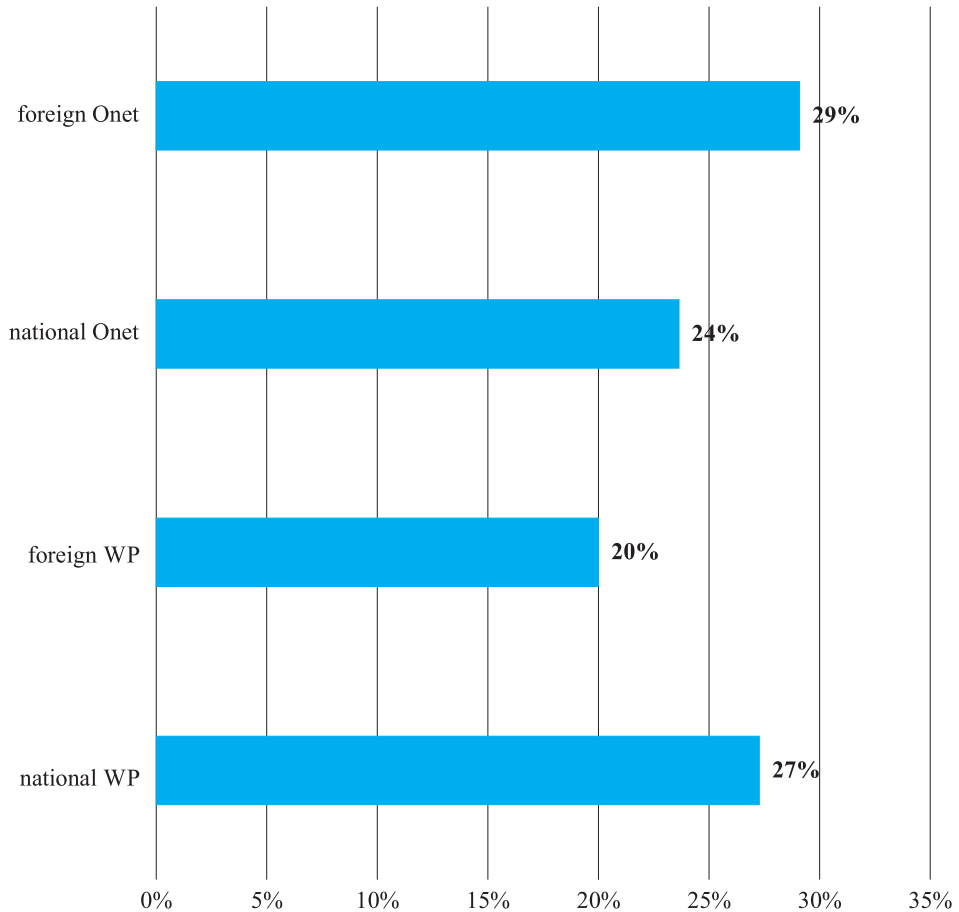
Source: Authors.

The online portals researched did not exhibit much significant differentiation in topic distribution in percentage terms. The only notable difference between them was in general political coverage (current affairs, government “shields” and presidential elections), which was much more common at wp.pl (31.58% of the research sample), than at onet.pl (20.8%).

The vast majority of news items reported on contemporaneous developments of the reported events (60.56%). Projections (forecasts) for the development of the

pandemic in Poland or abroad were part of just 9.68% of reports, with past events depicted in 29.75% of coverage. Data presented on **Figure 4** highlights that future-orientation (epidemic prognostics) were more common at onet.pl and dealt mostly with the pandemic development abroad.

Figure 4. Forecasts on the development of the epidemic in Poland and abroad, Onet.pl and Wp.pl (in %)

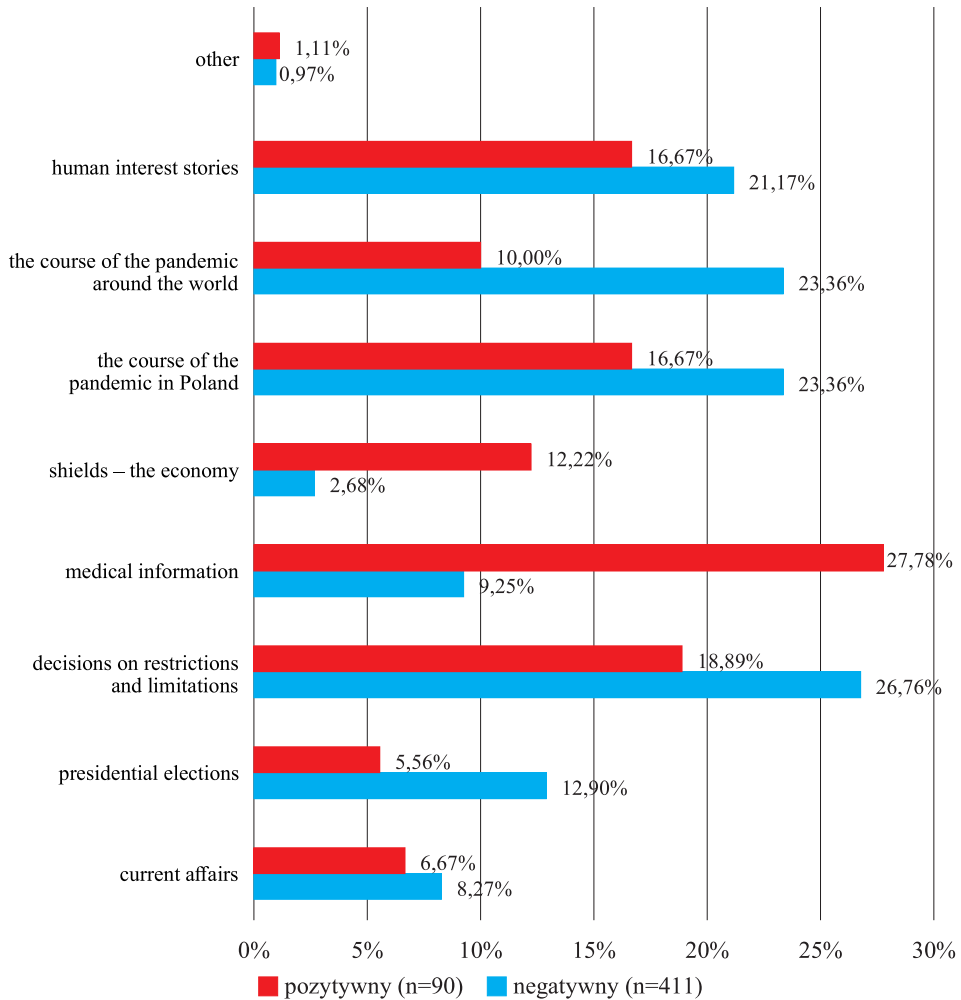


Source: Authors.

The vast majority of published news items (72.36%) were characterised by a negative sentiment towards the COVID-19 pandemic, with just 15.85% presenting as positive. The latter usually related to human interest stories (16.67%) of the so-called “convalescents” who managed to come back from COVID-19 induced illness, implementation of the government shields for entrepreneurs (12.22%), lockdown restriction easing (18.89%), or a variety of medical information on the

search for the cure or the vaccine for COVID-19 (27.78%), seemingly indicating the soon to come end of the epidemic and an improvement of the situation in the country.

Figure 5. Leading topics in news items published on onet.pl and wp.pl and their sentiment (in %)



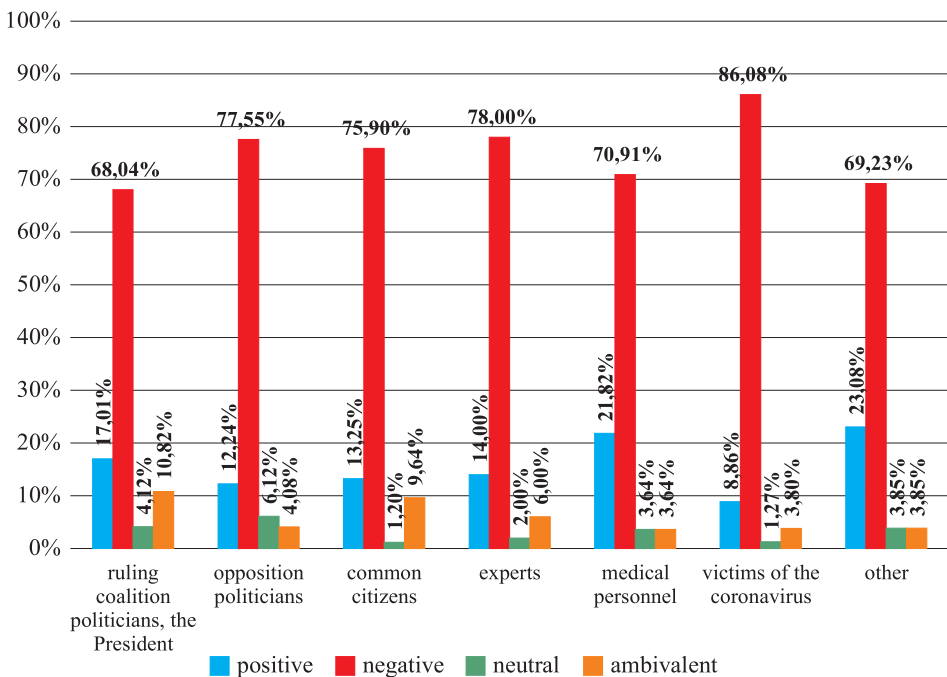
Source: Authors.

Content analysis regarding the construction of media messaging based on facts and opinions have not revealed any dominants. 38.20% were majorly fact-based, 26.94% – opinion-based, and 34.68% contained both. Distribution by source indicates that wp.pl news items were more fact-based (41.23%) than ones published on onet.pl (33.63%).

Actors, general sentiment, facts and opinions present in broadcasts

The vast majority of speakers providing information on SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus and the COVID-19 pandemic were the ruling coalition politicians and Poland’s President Andrzej Duda¹¹ (34.15%), and a variety of national and international organisations’ representatives (32.22%). Less than 10% (9.68%) of coverage featured medical professionals, and less than 9% (8.80%) featured experts, such as people representing the scientific method or epidemiologists. Even a common citizen was more frequently featured in coverage than medical personnel, with 14.61% of news items featuring “regular citizens” and 14.97% people infected with SARS-CoV-2.¹²

Figure 6. General sentiment expressed in the COVID-19 pandemic coverage and the featuring of particular actors (in %)



Source: Authors.

¹¹ The current President of the Republic of Poland, Andrzej Duda, should not, according to Poland’s Constitution (art. 132), hold any other public function or be part of any other (public) office. However, the way the President has chosen to perform his duties, in the authors’ opinion, leaves no doubt that it has become a political office. Mr Duda, before his presidential victory, was a well-known Law and Justice (the party currently in power) member, and during his 1st term (2015–2020) displayed his political sympathies on numerous occasions. This is why the research team has decided to assign a political inclination to the President’s public statements.

¹² “Regular citizens”, “coronavirus victims”, and “infected persons” were distinct sets of people, meaning they did not necessarily cross over.

Some interesting results were revealed when putting together the percentage distribution of the sentiments across the research sample and considering front stage actors featured in a given article (**Figure 6**). A significant negative skew was noted amongst all speakers speaking on the coronavirus and COVID-19 (74% average). Conversely, a positive sentiment was found in the same groups in 12–23% of news items. Ambivalent sentiment was found in between 3.8% and 12.8% of coverage. The rarest was neutrality, identified in between 1.2% and 6.12% of news items.

The highest degree of negativity was present in materials featuring coronavirus victims and statements from infected persons. This group was also characterised by the lowest percentage value of positive messaging (1.27%). The actors' statements usually included their experiences directly facing the disease and the accompanying emotions; their opinions on government restrictions and the resulting sanctions for disobeying them; as well as public appeals to the lawmakers for support and financial help to cover losses stemming from lockdown. The lowest degree of negativity was present in articles featuring statements from the governing party politicians and Poland's President (68%). Simultaneously, this group featured a higher degree of ambivalence (present in 10.8% of coverage) and a relatively high degree of positive sentiment (17%). This is a direct result of the governing coalitions's strategy of "rhetoric of success" in public discourse, evidenced by numerous instances of statements from government representatives depicting Poland as the "green island" of the pandemic – with the lowest number of infections, a fully prepared (staff and infrastructure wise) public health system, and the readiness to spend various amounts of money to fight the pandemic and its consequences. The attempts to maintain a positive outlook on the situation were meant to calm social moods, project a sense of control over the national situation and create a space to conduct the presidential elections. Naturally, some of the aspects commented on by the government officials referred to COVID-19 either directly or indirectly.

In terms of opposition politicians, the degree of negativity was relatively higher and present in 77.5% of news items, with positive sentiment expressed in 12.2%. The restraint in expressing positivity in terms of the situation in the country is expected from the opposition, as it is its natural political role. A high proportion of positive materials (21.8%) was noted in content featuring medical professionals (doctors and first responders). Positive messages related mostly to medical professionals talking about the number of convalescents, medication alleviating some of the COVID-19 symptoms, and expressing gratitude for citizens and entrepreneurs uniting in support for them, by delivering them food and small basic need items, such as personal protection equipment, or even oxygen tanks. The height of emotions and polarisation of the social mood led over 70% of negative messaging to lack cohesion and include some positive statements referring to other aspects of fighting against the pandemic. This can be exemplified by an article which featured medical professionals thanking the public for the help and support they received,

simultaneously appealing to the government to take note of the lack of equipment and staffing, and the conditions they are forced to work in.

Framing pandemic news, consequences of the pandemic in sampled broadcasts

In order to define the framing in which the development of a pandemic is set in the selected media, Entman's (2004) concept of cognitive framing was employed. The deductive method (Gamson et al., 2003) was used to reconstruct the frames. The general frames – conflict, attribution of responsibility, consequence, morality, and human interest – were used in analysis, which was presented in the introduction of this paper.

The consequence frame dominated (45.25%) the research sample. It included various consequences, divided into five categories (**Figure 7**). The sample most often featured social consequences (54.23%), relating to both individuals and large social groups. Medical consequences, relating usually to convalescents or (in)direct actions and behaviours stemming from the pandemic, were equally popular (51.23%). Political consequences ranked third (26.23%) and related to the government vs. the opposition debate on what decisions are being made in a crisis situation. The consequence frame was further evidenced by messaging relating to Poland's image and position in the world in relation to the pandemic-related decisions made. The third category, of similar popularity to the previous one (24.13%), were the economic consequences, stemming directly from lockdown restrictions and the resulting disobeying of the sanctions. The last category, by far the least relevant, was the cultural consequences (11.44%), which came from various lockdown-related measures, such as limited access to religious practice, cancellation of mass and cultural events, and shutting down of cinemas and theatres, amongst others.

Social consequences were the most prominent out of all consequence categories. Analysed articles featured this framing in relation to restricting civil liberties by mandating quarantine, temporary jail sentences for breaking quarantine, and limiting people's contact with their friends and relatives, but also in relation to increased racist behaviours aimed at particular social groups – doctors, medical personnel, or specific nationalities (of Asian origin). The second category covered such events as death from coronavirus, hospitalisation, mental health issues, racially motivated assaults,¹³ or even homicides resulting from self-isolation.

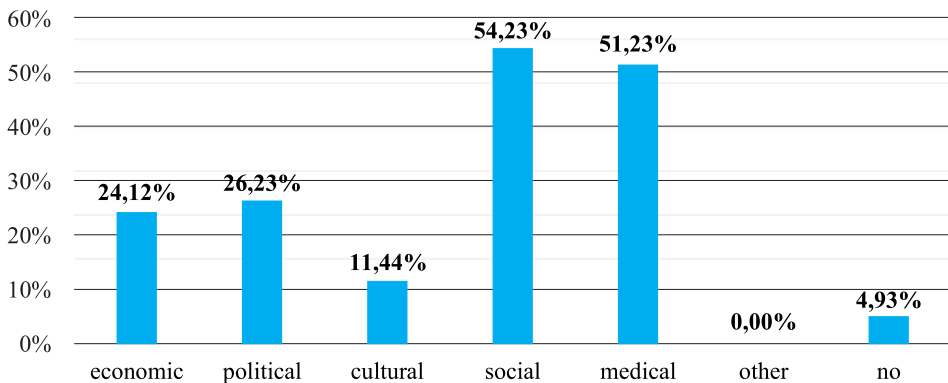
Political consequences were a category including, amongst others, government spending, such as irregularities relating to medical equipment purchases (respira-

¹³ Racially motivated assaults were an indirect effect of the pandemic and resulted from some citizens being convinced that people of Asian origin in Poland had an influence on the development of the pandemic in the country.

tors and PPE),¹⁴ which was an international scandal that has not been resolved until this very day. All political decisions were directly motivated by potential economic consequences. They dealt with, for instance, possible worsening of citizens' financial situation resulting from layoffs, restrictions on some industries, or additional costs incurred in order to facilitate remote work. Economic consequence framing appeared also in messaging portraying entrepreneurs facing lockdown or temporary restrictions as per government decisions as victims. Moreover, it appeared also in coverage relating to a variety of punishments and fines for disobeying the sanitary regime, from refusing to cover your mouth and nose, through different degrees of large gatherings against the law, to refusing to shut down a business in lockdown.

The cultural consequences of the pandemic related mostly to restrictions in access to places of religious observance, cancellation of cultural and sports events, and impossibility to consume food in restaurants, relax in hotels, and partake in a variety of leisure activities, including bans on outside playgrounds and gymnasiums.

Figure 7. Indications of pandemic's consequences in articles published on Onet.pl and Wp.pl (in %)

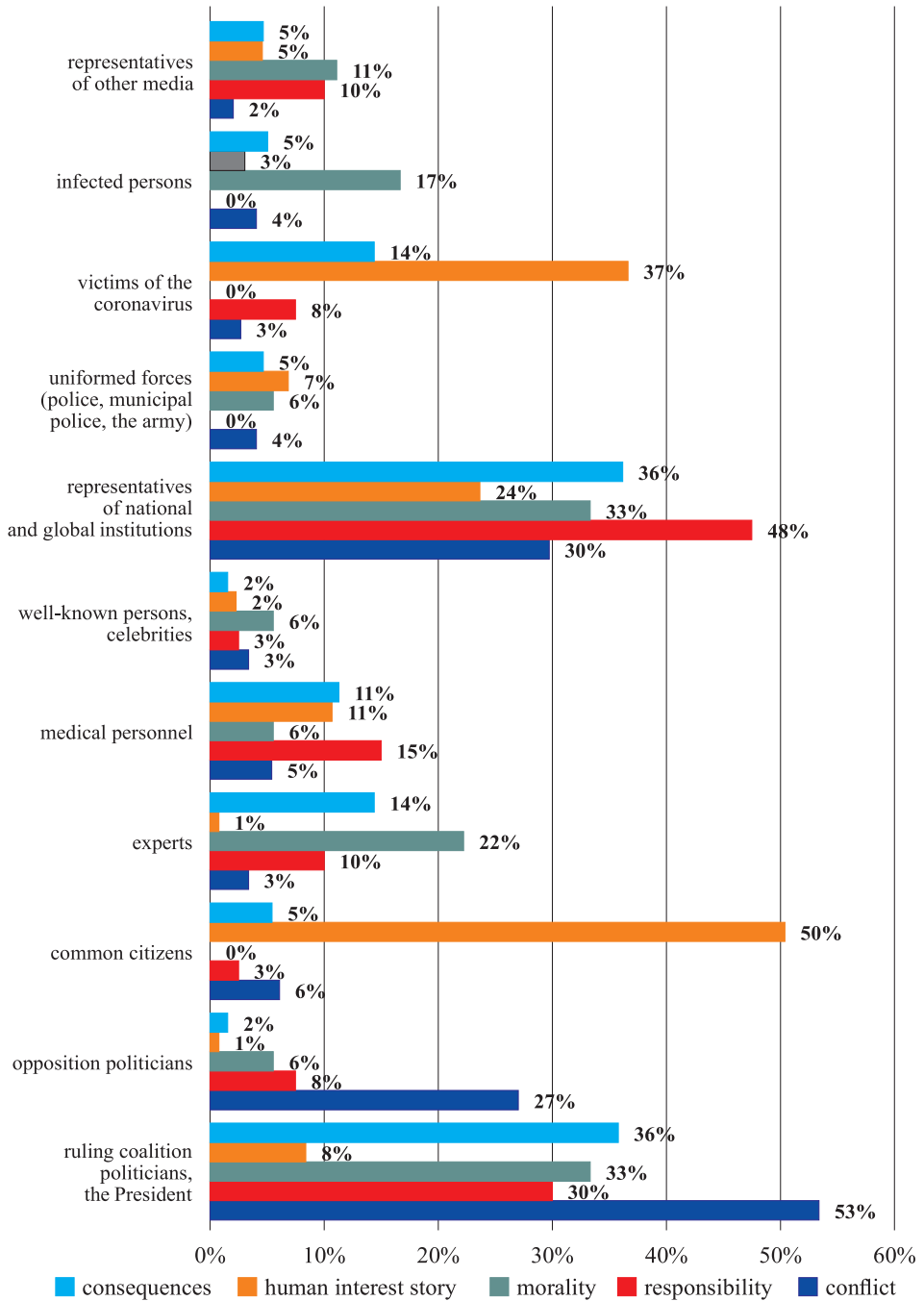


Source: authors.

Conflict frames (26.06%) and human stories (23.06%) had a similar frequency of occurrence in analysed articles. **Figure 8** presents particular cognitive frames in relation to the main featured actors in analysed samples. The aforementioned conflict frame most often featured messages with the governing party or opposition politicians and representatives of state or global organisations as main actors, often focused on shifting blame around for the current situation and decisions/

¹⁴ The Ministry of Health, then headed by the Minister of Health Łukasz Szumowski, ordered 1200 respirators from E&K, a company known for arms dealing. The public order cost the public PLN 130 million, and according to information from the Material Reserves Agency, only 50 respirators were actually delivered (Solska, 2020).

Figure 8. Cognitive frames occurring in articles on COVID-19 published on Onet.pl and Wp.pl and the main actors featured (in %)



Source: Authors.

actions taken. Opposition politicians in particular focused on public funds mismanagement (the aforementioned respirators scandal); introducing illegal legislative acts;¹⁵ restriction easing in order to facilitate presidential elections; delays in ordering medical equipment; decrying measures related to closing the borders; or decrying the Polish representatives' trip to commemorate the Smolensk crash on its anniversary.¹⁶ On the other hand, ruling coalition politicians blamed the opposition for lack of will to cooperate on dealing with the pandemic (or even aggravating the threat), seemingly exemplified by the actions of Warsaw's Mayor, Rafał Trzaskowski.¹⁷

Only 1.75% of all frames could be classified as moralising, most often in materials featuring government's and experts' appeals for respecting the restrictions and promoting safe behaviours, simultaneously condemning breaches. Some statements were also critical of the government, in relation to the planned political delegation to Smolensk; the will to organise presidential elections in the pandemic (and thus restriction easing), which led to people gathering in large crowds by queuing in front of stores; and the rash and ill-conceived restrictions without specifics, oftentimes illegal in the eyes of Polish law.

The human story frame was most often featured in materials focused on regular citizens. Those were portrayed as coronavirus victims or their families, or victims of the restrictions on the normal way of life (running a business included) introduced by the Polish government. It is worth noting that this frame was also part of articles featuring various national and world officials as main actors, where they were positioned as persons to explain the surrounding reality and in some way justify the actions taken by decision makers. Such cases offered a juxtaposition

¹⁵ The highest source of law in Poland is the Constitution. Freedoms that come exclusively from its text are the basic freedoms (including the freedom of movement) and cannot be limited by Acts or Laws which are lower in the Polish legal hierarchy. The situation could be changed by the introduction of one of the states of emergency which legally mandate some restrictions of civic freedoms in order to manage the situation within the country. However, such a decision was not made, and the restrictions were introduced as Acts and then a Law. This led to many conflicts relating to the legality of such decisions in light of lack of a state of emergency declaration.

¹⁶ April 10, 2010 saw the crash of TU-154M, an official government plane, in the proximity of Smolensk North Airport near Smolensk, Russia. On board were the representatives of Poland on route to commemorate the anniversary of Katyn Massacre, including Poland's President Lech Kaczyński and his wife Maria, Ryszard Kaczorowski, a former President-in-exile, chief commanders of the Polish army, members of the parliament, senators, Church dignitaries, and officials, 96 persons in total (Rogoż, 2011, pp. 11–25). The ruling party planned a commemorative trip for the tenth anniversary (like every year), although ultimately decided not to go through with it.

¹⁷ Rafał Trzaskowski (Mayor of Warsaw since 2018) was one of the candidates for the office of the President of the Republic of Poland in the 2020 presidential elections (official results available at: <https://prezydent20200628.pkw.gov.pl/prezydent20200628/>). Trzaskowski, as a result of his decision to change public transport timetables during COVID-19 pandemic, was accused by the ruling party politicians that he “is looking to save money on the coronavirus and is risking Varsovians getting infected by introducing weekend timetable during the week” (*Crowded communication in Warsaw...*, 2020).

of regular citizens' perspective and the government's actions and expert advice, which related to a much greater scale.

Responsibility frames were most often found in articles quoting national and global officials and representatives of world organisations. Their statements referred to blame attribution for the pandemic outbreak (most often blaming China and the city of Wuhan); pandemic spread (blaming world leaders who decided against a complete lockdown); tardiness in introducing restrictions, or conversely, overeagerness to close the national borders; and the inefficiency of the entire health system, amongst others. Content analysis focused on the responsibility frame allowed for research of such articles where main actors (in this case, Roman Catholic priests) blamed particular social groups and individuals for the situation, as evidenced by this statement: "The epidemic is God's punishment for living in Sin: for homosexuality, for unmarried couples living together, and for those who murder unborn children" (Pajęczek, 2020).

Geographical location and the sentiment of broadcasts

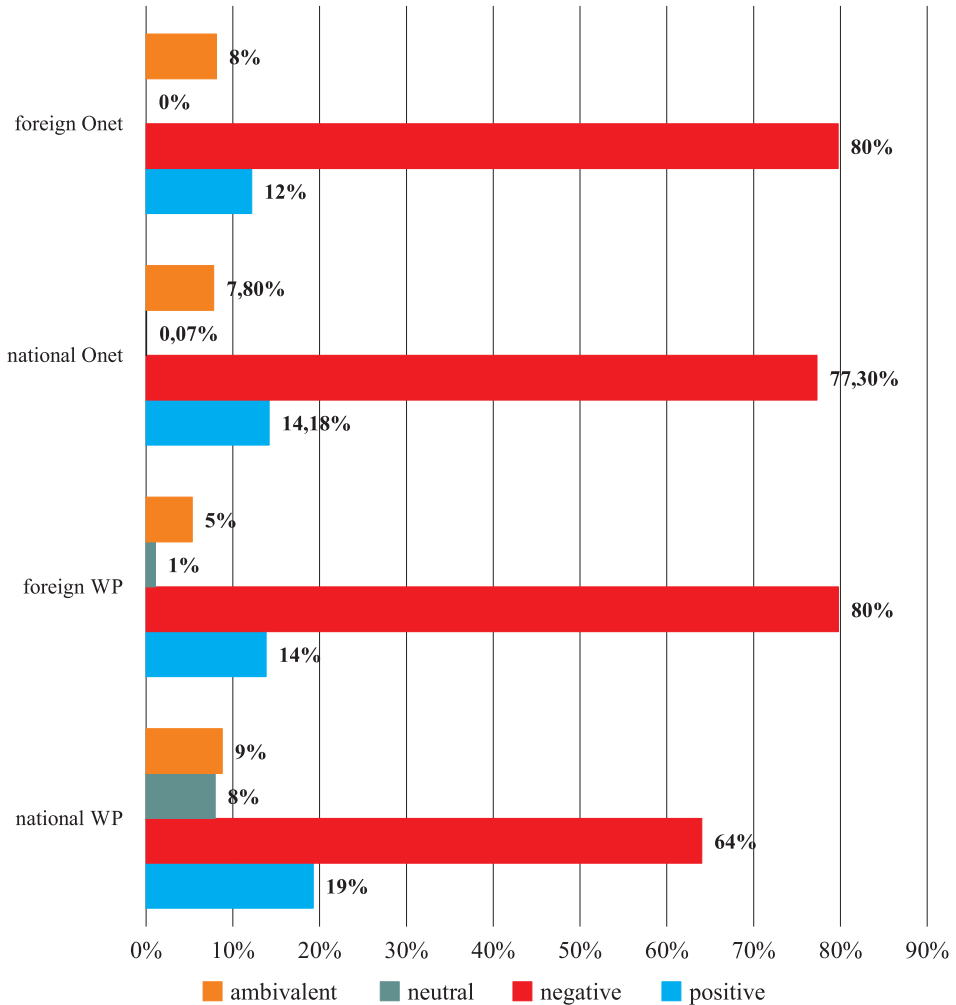
The research sample focused mostly on the situation in Poland (67.02% publications), with foreign reports accounting for 29.63%. When comparing geography and sentiment, there turned out to be a higher proportion of negative messaging when reporting on events from abroad (**Figure 9**). When considering the same variables, no significant differentiation across the portals was found. However, when it comes to coverage of Polish events, onet.pl featured more negative content. It is worth noting that the negative sentiments expressed in news on events abroad often stemmed from the depiction of particular territories as sources of pandemic outbreaks, and thus – a threat to Poles and Poland.

The analysis of the structural design of the articles revealed the majority of footage to be archival materials, press agency photos (most often from PAP, the Polish Press Agency) or commercial stock photos (93.84%). Dedicated photography was featured in mere 4.23% of materials. Because stock photography is commonly used by journalists, a vast majority of messaging (93.31%) correlated with the visuals. Such results can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, the use of stock photography is indicative of the changes in professional journalism, as noted in academic literature, as the pandemic forced changes in modes of work for reporters, reducing their mobility and hence increasing their reliance on stocks. Secondly, this is a phenomenon typical for online news journalism, which is more referential in nature and features less original content.

Moreover, it needs to be noted that the visual materials used were loosely connected to the subject matter – they related to the topic, but were more of a loose interpretation of the subject matter rather than a picture that could allow an audience to e.g. identify the place. This, however, is not the case for articles featur-

ing politicians (either ruling party or opposition), where an actual photograph of a given person was used, although often it was an archival portrait, not taken for the purpose of the article.

Figure 9. Sentiment of COVID-19 coverage published on Onet.pl and Wp.pl and geographical coverage (in %)



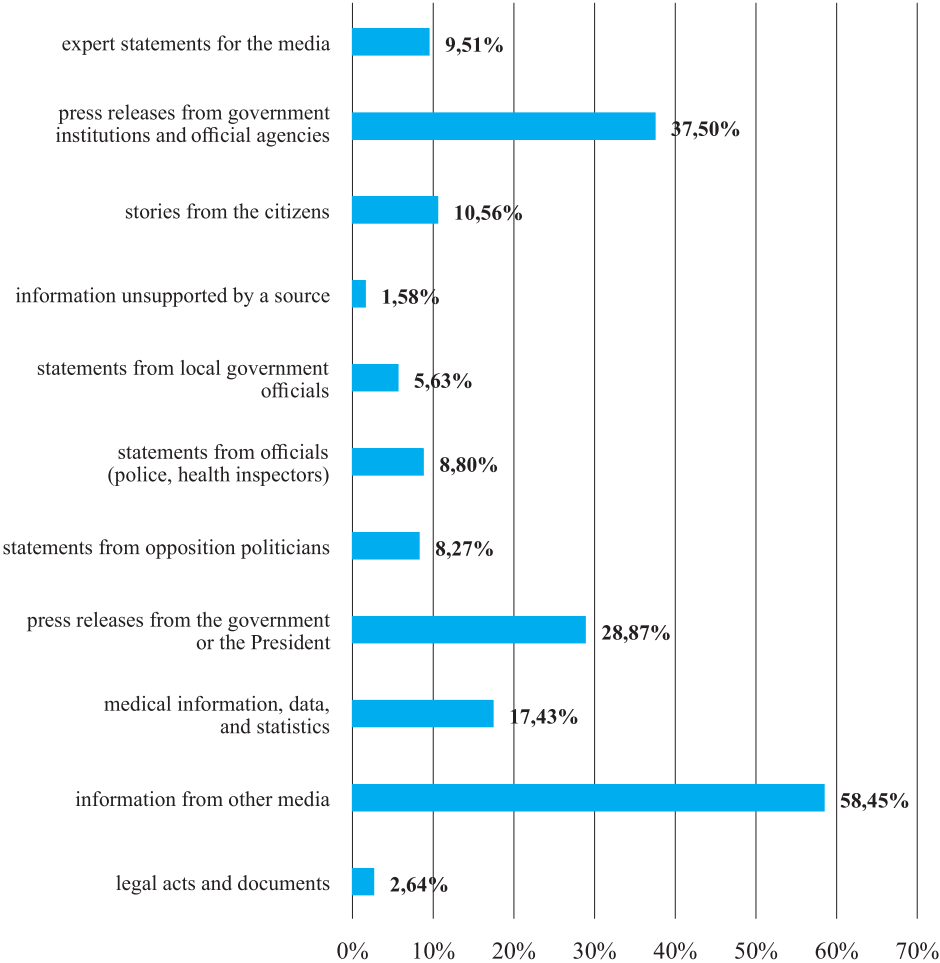
Source: Authors.

Footage and photography in the research sample

Content analysis conducted also included a classification of sources used as a basis for the reports, in order to verify the reliability and credibility of the studied

media. **Figure 10** presents the percentage distribution of sources used in content published on onet.pl and wp.pl. Over half (58.45%) of articles were written around content from another media source, both through direct citations and paraphrasing. Publishing screenshots of officials' statements from Facebook and Twitter (and other social media) has been noted as a repeated practice. Oftentimes, the articles were also based on official press releases from the government or the President of Poland (28.87%), or other public institutions (37.5%). Worrisome, especially in the context of the pandemic, is the fact that a mere 17.5% of articles contained medical-source-supported medical data and statistics, and statements from experts on coronavirus were featured almost as often (9.51%) as statements from common citizens (10.56%).

Figure 10. Sources used in articles published by Onet.pl and Wp.pl (in %)

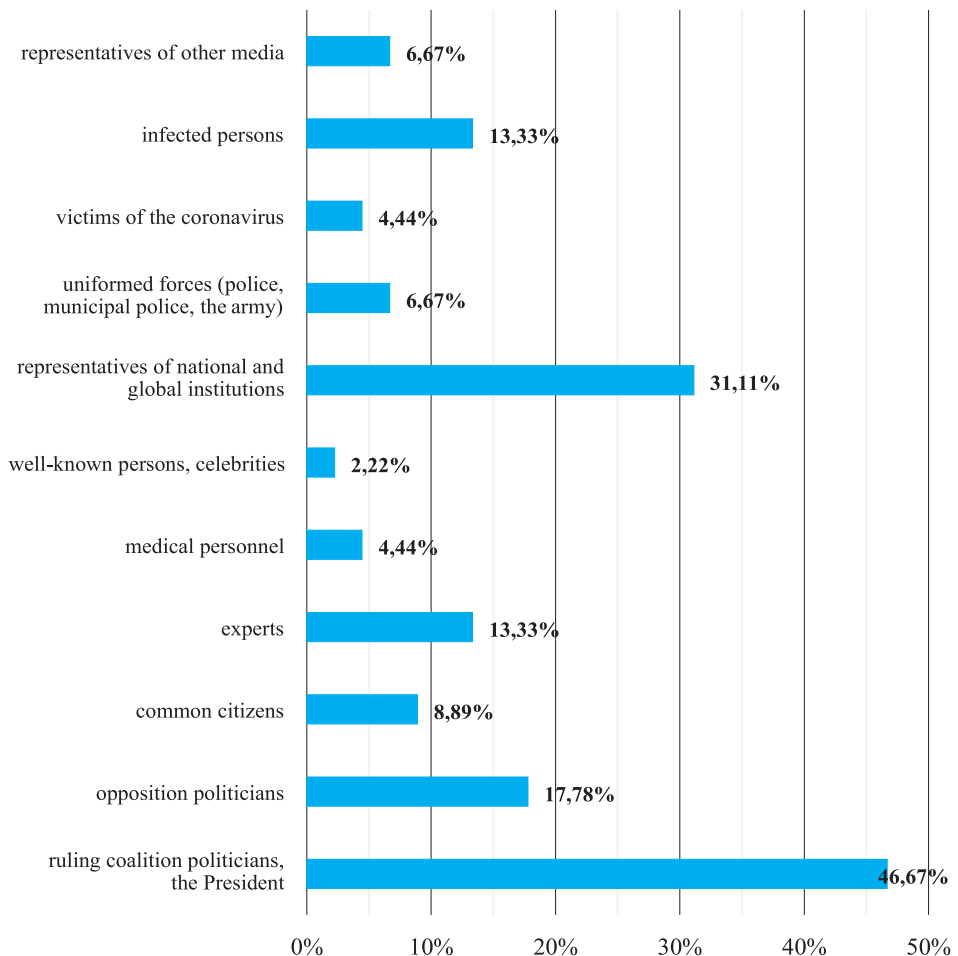


Source: Authors.

Assessment of the actions taken by the government in the research sample

Online media were mostly informational in nature, which led to most journalists abstaining from assessing the pandemic situation (90.85%). When they did share their opinion, it was negative. As the scale of neutrality of publishers is particularly large, it is worth analysing these negative articles in greater detail. The authors of this publication verified these messages in relation to the actors and subjects which were the main feature of these publications, allowing for determination of who was criticized in this negative content. **Figure 11** presents the percentage distribution of journalists' negative assessment of decisions made by the government

Figure 11. Journalists' negative assessment in relation to the actors featured in the articles (in %, n=45)



Source: Authors.

with main actors featured in these articles. The criticism was most often (46.67%) directed towards the governing coalition and the President. Representatives and officials from State and global organisations were the second most criticised group (31.11%). Interestingly, in 13.33% of the sample, the criticism was aimed at other media outlets, and thus debated other journalistic opinions. “Other” (6.67% of critical content main actors), were most often the clergy, where the negative assessment of government decisions was as common as among articles heavily featuring uniformed officers.

The situation in Poland as presented in the research sample

The situation in the country was most often portrayed by the sampled online news outlets as “bad” (68.31%) or “very bad” (17.25%). When differentiating between the portals, wp.pl had a “very bad” outlook more often (18.59%) than onet.pl (13.72%). This was achieved by a variety of linguistic and stylistic devices, emotional setting, as well as directly, by featuring specific statements and people. It was up to the journalist to decide whether to expand or omit a given topic, whether to feature a given person’s statement or not. COVID-19 pandemic and SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus – specific phrases were extracted from the research sample and presented in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Phrases relating to SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus and the COVID-19 pandemic found in articles published on Onet.pl and Wp.pl

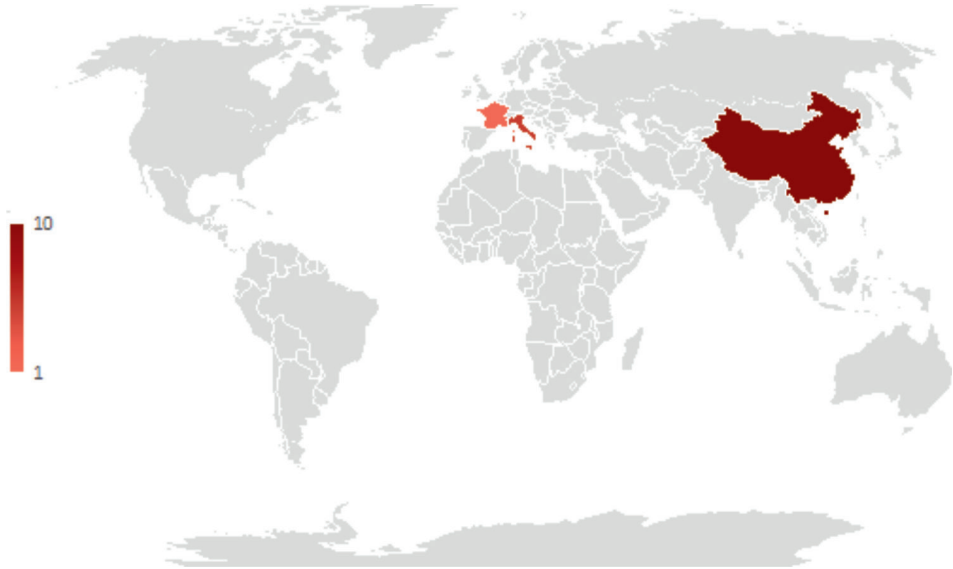
Medical	Emotionally charged	Indicative of virus’s causes and effects
1	2	3
Virus; Coronavirus; Contagious disease COVID-19; Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2; Disease/illness; New virus; Serious infection; Coronavirus pandemic; Coronavirus epidemic; Biological factor; Human mutation of the new coronavirus; Coronavirus spreads very rapidly;	Deadly virus; Fuc.... coronavirus, idiot virus; Threat; Unknown and dangerous virus; Aggressive virus; Crisis; Horrible pandemic devastating the world; Horrible virus; Plague; Dangerous, painful, and deadly rival; Coronavirus harvests the crop of death; Dramatic situation;	The pandemic has left a mark in our hearts; Time of God’s will, time of tears and darkness, a turning point, time to review one’s life; Invisible enemy, the existential threat of the coronavirus pandemic; Coronavirus kills; Coronavirus practically obliterated the airline business; The virus is the effect of “China’s direct action”; Coronavirus is a punishment for homosexuality, the epidemic is God’s punishment for living in sin: homosexuality, living together before getting married, murdering of unborn children;

1	2	3
<p>Epidemiological outbreak; Coronavirus infection;</p> <p>New COVID-19;</p> <p>Risk of coronavirus infection;</p> <p>Coronavirus leads to dangerous pneumonia;</p> <p>Coronavirus victims;</p> <p>Epidemic threat;</p> <p>Intelligent virus;</p> <p>Pathogen;</p> <p>Virus similar in nature to SARS virus;</p> <p>Global pandemic;</p> <p>SARS-CoV-2 virus leads to COVID-19 infection;</p> <p>Infection;</p> <p>Coronavirus wrecked (their) organism in a week and a half;</p> <p>Dangerous virus strain;</p> <p>Coronavirus is very contagious even before symptoms appear;</p> <p>RNA (Ribonucleic acid) strain in a glycoprotein shell.</p>	<p>Invisible enemy, the existential threat of the coronavirus pandemic;</p> <p>Coronacrisis;</p> <p>A serious situation;</p> <p>Dangerous disease;</p> <p>The virus is unpredictable, the virus is dangerous;</p> <p>Particular threat to the homeless (people in homelessness crisis?);</p> <p>A challenge we had never faced before, we need to fear coronavirus and be careful;</p> <p>Tragedy;</p> <p>State of emergency of public health;</p> <p>Coronavirus is the worst public health crisis in a generation;</p> <p>Coronavirus is going wild;</p> <p>The fight against coronavirus;</p> <p>We need to squash the virus;</p> <p>State of epidemic emergency;</p> <p>Health threat;</p> <p>Raging coronavirus epidemic;</p> <p>The biggest threat in decades;</p> <p>COVID-19 does not respect national borders;</p> <p>A massive breeding ground for coronavirus.</p>	<p>Coronavirus is an incredibly democratic disease: it hits equally, situation, which has globally influenced the way we live, coronavirus is a situation which has never happened before, coronavirus is going to change our lives;</p> <p>Virus from Asia/Asian virus;</p> <p>Coronavirus epidemic threatens with a labour market crash, the epidemic could ruin the Polish motor vehicle sector;</p> <p>Nothing is going to be the way it was before coronavirus; The consequences of the epidemic will be felt by everyone;</p> <p>Coronavirus forced national governments to fight for their citizens' survival;</p> <p>Coronavirus made social distancing truly important;</p> <p>The virus is a great threat for the surroundings; Elections in the pandemic are like dancing in a minefield;</p> <p>Coronavirus transformed the EU's renowned single market into a serious health threat;</p> <p>The coronavirus became a tragedy for almost 200 families; and it will probably become a tragedy for several hundreds;</p> <p>We are in chaos, caused by the coronavirus pandemic;</p> <p>We will have to live with the virus;</p> <p>The virus has been designed as a biological weapon.</p>

Source: Authors.

Map 1 presents the frequency of source attribution of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus and COVID-19. The darker the colour, the more often a given location was said to be the source. As visible, China was the most commonly attributed source. The content analysis found both wide and narrow geographical areas in the attribution analysis. More generally, Asia was mentioned as the source. When providing audiences with a more narrow source location, Wuhan, the Hubei Province in China, or Wuhan's wet market were named. Some conspiracy-laced phrases were also in use, assuming purposeful virus design and spread, such as a lab in Wuhan, China, or the Institute of Virology in Wuhan. In other cases, other places were also posited to be the source on occasion, amongst them Italy, Singapore, or Colmar, a commune in France. When not engaging with the actual source of origin, the

Map 1. Frequency with which a given place was indicated as a source of SARS-CoV-2 virus in news items published on Onet.pl and Wp.pl



Source: authors.

rhetoric of a virus coming from abroad, from outside of Poland, was employed. One article even claimed that the virus came from the microcosmos. In conclusion, onet.pl and wp.pl content analysis (March 2020–mid-May 2020) in relation to COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that out of 568 sample articles, the majority was rational-informative in nature. This does not mean that the researched materials were void of emotional messaging, as it was often present in the context of the virus and its characteristics or the pandemic situation within the country and abroad. Statements included in the coverage usually related to fear and a threat, indicating that this extraordinary situation will be difficult to handle both in Poland and around the world. This has also been noted when verifying the research sample in context of the portrayal of the situation in the country – the vast majority of messaging portrayed it as either very bad or bad.

A vast majority of researched articles was based on materials sourced from other media platforms. They resembled paraphrases of already published content rather than dedicated news reports, which stems directly from the nature of online journalism, as short content being published often is its business model. Thematic articles circled around the death toll, infection numbers, and people legally obliged to self-quarantine. Reports of disobeying the restrictions and sanctions that resulted were also often a point of focus. Online media were not only avoiding moralising (which was noted only in 3.17% of content), but also providing their own opinion, as the majority of content was just factual reporting on the events

(60.56%). Articles with a strong political context were also present in the sample, clearly utilising coronavirus and COVID-19 as an (in)conspicuous backdrop.

The analysed material unveiled a strong polarisation of attitudes of particular social groups. One article featured medical professionals thanking society for support and help received, and in another, decried social attitudes such as disobeying the health and safety rules and hostile behaviour towards medical personnel. Another notable example comes from the Catholic Church's representatives (the clerics) who on the one hand called for obeying the health and safety rules, and on the other, urged for more frequent visits to church. On the one hand, Church representatives equated COVID-19 with "divine grace, falling onto people" (Kołodziejczyk, 2020), on the other, they directly indicated that it is God's punishment for human sins. In this context, there was no one uniform voice of the Roman-catholic Church. This polarisation in perception of the pandemic and the virus and the variety of regulation set to control it was also present amongst decision-makers. Subsequent regulations introduced had no legal grounding. On one day, a regulation would be introduced, to concern all Poles; the next, it would be said that it is just the government's appeal, and the next, that it was just an ask on the part of the government. The ensuing legal chaos stemmed also from decision-makers' reluctance to employ one of the States of Emergency, as outlined in the Constitution,¹⁸ which would legitimise the decisions made. One of them was to introduce a variety of regulations, simultaneously wanting to calm social moods down and ensure full control over the crisis. The effects of these decisions were clearly evidenced by regular citizens' opinions, happily shared in the articles published by onet.pl and wp.pl.

Concluding content analysis performed on the sample materials, it can be stated that the sample collected allowed for fulfilling of the research aims, by providing knowledge on the characteristics of the pandemic narrative present in Polish news portals. However, the conclusions stemming from these observations need to be supplemented by the knowledge obtained from analysing TV media content, as presented in the following part of this publication.

¹⁸ Republic of Poland's Constitution (art. 228) foresees the ability to introduce one of the three States of Emergency: a state of emergency, a state of natural disaster, and martial law. During the research period (March–mid-May 2020) the introduction of a state of emergency was heavily debated in public, however the decision-makers chose not to introduce it (as of the date of the publication).

Chapter 3. TV content analysis

551 sample materials broadcasted in main news editions of the most viewed news broadcasts in Poland (TVP1’s “Wiadomości” [“News”], Polsat’s “Wydarzenia” [“Events”], TVN’s “Fakty” [“Facts”])¹⁹ were used in order to study national TV broadcasters.

Samples were collected according to the sampling timeline, and covered a total of 35 days of broadcasts between March and mid-May 2020. As aforementioned, these dates reflected the most important events of the pandemic’s first wave in Poland. Sample distribution in relation to TV broadcasters is presented in **Table 4**.

Table 4. Number of research materials sampled from specific broadcasters

TVN “Fakty” (Facts)	TVP1 “Wiadomości” (News)	POLSAT “Wydarzenia” (Events)
208	146	197

Source: Authors.

The research sample contained 208 items from TVN’s Fakty,²⁰ 146 items from TVP1’s Wiadomości,²¹ and 197 from POLSAT’s Wydarzenia.²² The clear disproportion of TVP1’s materials included in relation to other broadcasters stems from the average length of a news item. TVN’s and POLSAT’s news broadcasts had an average news item that lasted from 3 to maximum 4 minutes (**Figure 12**). In TVP’s case, the average length of a news item was over 4 minutes, with some of them lasting 10, or even 12, minutes, with subject-matter changing during its duration. This extended broadcast time was particularly prominent in the opening news items. It is also worth mentioning their bridging character, as one news item often featured more than one wide issue, with new ones introduced via journalist’s comments on-screen, or off-screen voiceovers. Topics directly connected to SARS-CoV-2 virus dominated the programming from the beginning of the research period. The first days of the pandemic in Poland additionally saw some current affairs coverage,

¹⁹ The selection of TV news stations was based on ratings (viewership numbers) which were used to determine the television market share. “Fakty” (TVN), “Wiadomości” (TVP1) and “Wydarzenia” (Polsat) had the highest ratings in 2020 (see: <https://www.wirtualnemedial.pl/artykul/ogladalnosc-programy-informacyjne-2020-rok-fakty-liderem-opinie>).

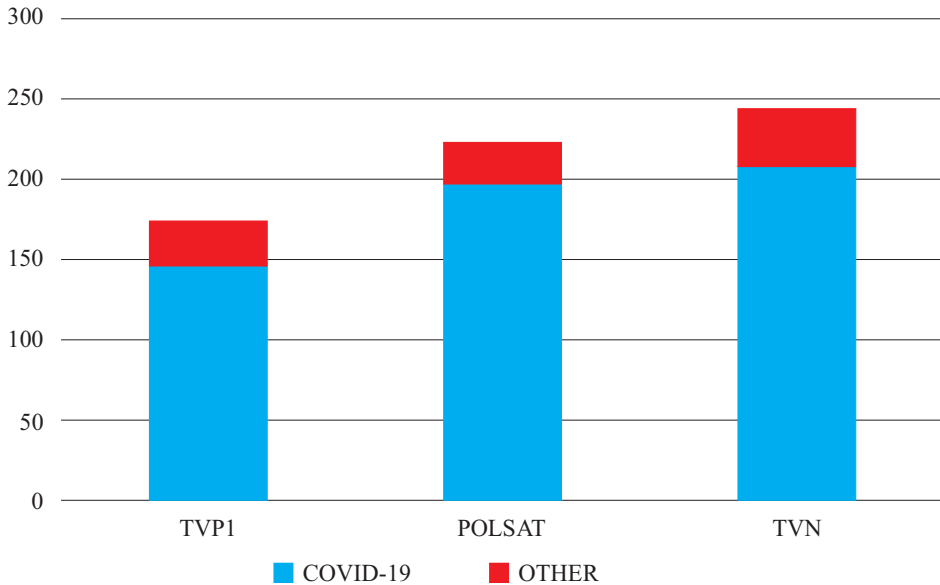
²⁰ TVN’s main news broadcast, broadcasted at 7 PM.

²¹ TVP1’s main news broadcast, broadcasted at 7:30 PM.

²² Polsat’s main news broadcast, broadcasted at 6:50 PM.

mostly on politics. However, with the growing numbers of infections, the coverage also increased. Significantly, every news broadcast studied prioritised pandemic-related coverage above all other topics. It was by far the most prominent topic, which on the one hand seems like a natural mechanism indicative of broadcasters' intentions, and on the other – indicates the correct and adequate purposive sample selection in the presented research.

Figure 12. Number of news items on COVID-19 in the main editions of news broadcasts presented by TVN, TVP1 and Polsat researched (n=613)



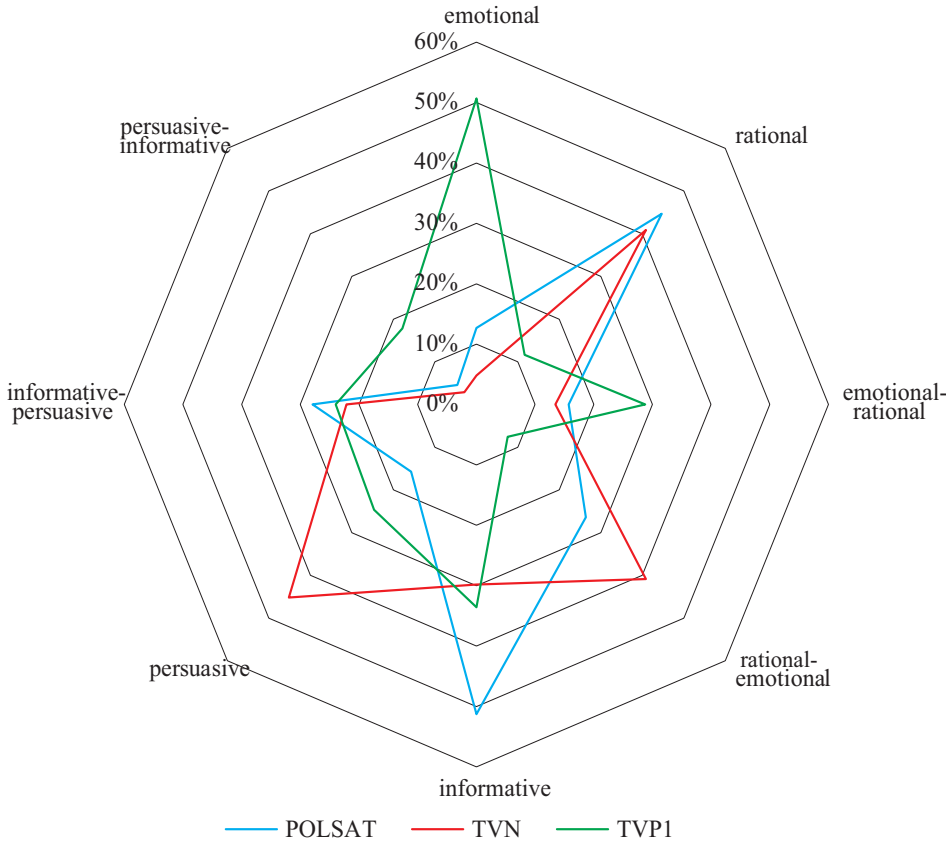
Source: Authors.

The character and subject matter

The content analysis entailed assigning source materials one of the two categories (on two axes). The axes referred to opposite values (persuasion – information and emotions – rationality) in such a way as to precisely reflect the character of broadcasted material, which would allow to answer the basic research questions assumed in this publication. The summary is presented on **Figure 13**.

The distribution of character of coverage across the news stations is particularly relevant here, as there exist significant differences. Especially visible is the contrast between TVN and TVP1, which were particularly emotion (TVP1 – 50%, TVN – 5%, POLSAT – 14%) and persuasion (TVP1 – 25%, TVN – 45%, POLSAT – 16%) – driven. The differences are hardly visible in other aspects of the coverage, and analogies and similarities are easily noted.

Figure 13. The character of the COVID-19 pandemic coverage from TVP1, TVN, POLSAT (% share, n= 1102)

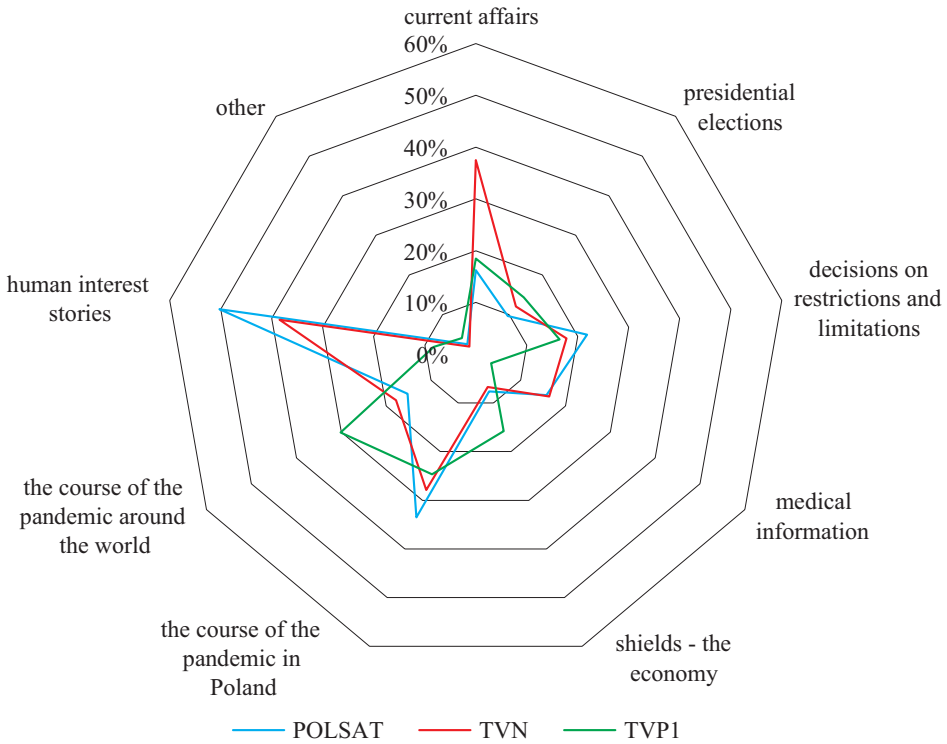


Source: Authors.

The aim of the content analysis was to classify the topics covered in researched stations' broadcasts and the categorisation key was based on the observation of current events and noted appearance of given topics in the news items. The topics were grouped into: current affairs, presidential elections, medical information, the course of the COVID-19 pandemic around the world, restrictions introduced by the government and the financial "shields", and human interest stories. The last category included broadcasts featuring common citizens as main actors, and related to experiences of COVID-19 health-wise, as well as its economic implications. People infected with the virus, entrepreneurs and employees were the most commonly featured actors.

Material collected was used to determine topic diversity across stations and to reflect engagement levels of particular broadcasters into particular aspects of public debate during the pandemic. Results are presented in **Figure 14**.

Figure 14. Leading topics in coverage broadcasted on TVN, TVP1, POLSAT (% share, n=551)



Source: Authors.

Subject matter in TV materials in the sample most often focused on human interest stories (34%), the course of the pandemic in Poland (29%), and current affairs (25%). Restrictions, “shields”, or the course of the pandemic around the world were featured less frequently, as presented on **Figure 15**. This is indicative of a high degree of “domestication” of TV coverage. Preliminary analysis indicated already that topics covered by TV stations converged to cover issues relatable to the widest possible groups. The research sample indicated that the studied broadcasts presented in majority the perspective of common citizens, their issues, and challenges they have to face during the pandemic. It is worth noting that in terms of etiology of the virus, the broadcasts also highlighted the visible effects on citizens and their lives. Information on the virus was put in context of actual cases and complications,²³ and medical information was presented in relation to the government’s policy or Polish business attempting

²³ This is exemplified by the first known infection case in Poland, when the “patient zero” became almost a celebrity and was even exclusively interviewed (See: <https://tvn24.pl/tvn24-news-in-english/coronavirus-patient-zero-in-poland-fully-recovers-as-infections-go-over-300-4367887>).

to create their own medications. Furthermore, economic consequences of the pandemic were discussed through the prism of inflation and price changes, and medical consequences through the prism of the number of cases and availability of hospital beds. When first reports on possible vaccines appeared in April and May, the related content was going far beyond medical terminology and medical aspects. The focus was more on the cost of production rather than on reliable discussion of possible ways of inoculation and how it could protect citizens from infection.

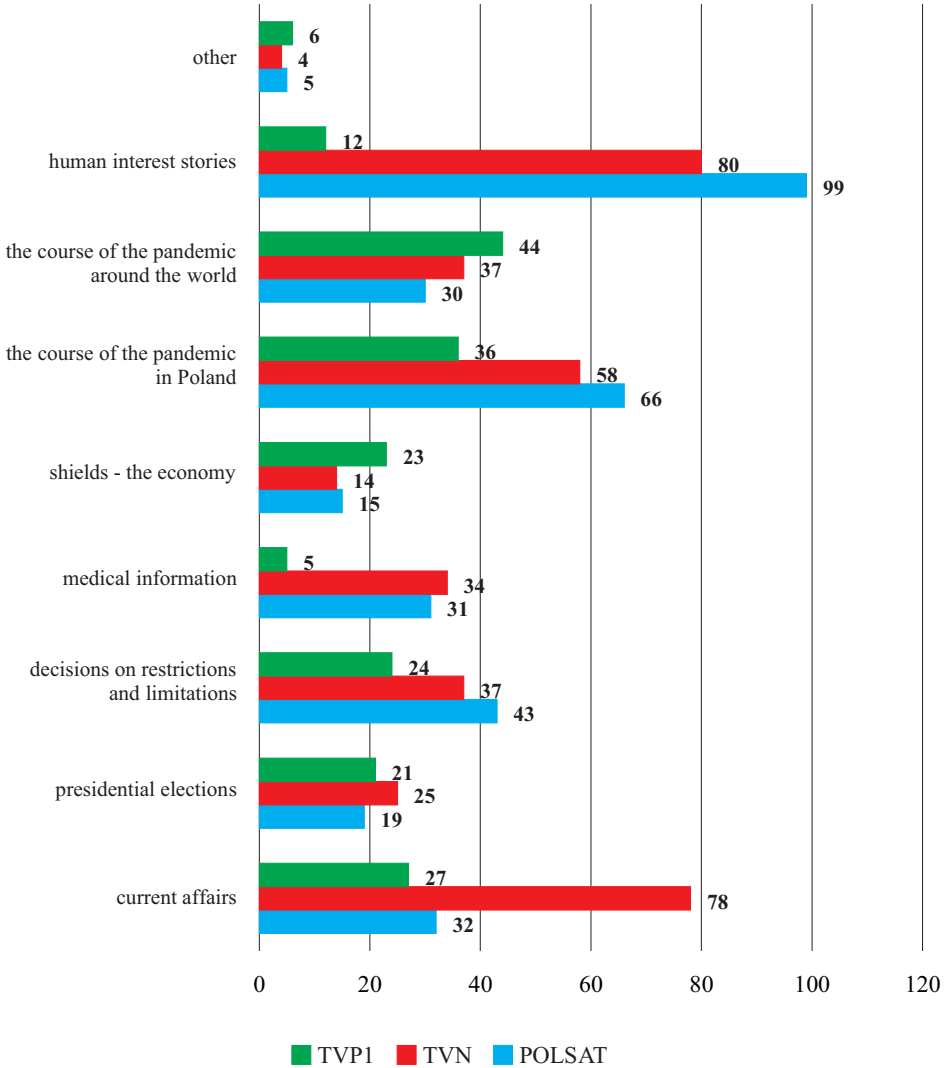
In terms of TV coverage, blame and credit attribution to particular institutions is particularly visible. For instance, if a given news item was dedicated to people stranded abroad with the flight ban in place, then the editorial staff (especially TVN) pointed towards this possibly being caused by the government's reckless and chaotic policies. In the research sample, a lot of the issues, topics, and consequences of any action were discussed in relation to actual visible phenomena. If the topic was, even potentially, complex and multi-layered, it was still brought to its most basic level that could actually influence real-life citizens. The complex issue of the effects of the pandemic on the national economy, and the need to save many enterprises, was brought down to the conclusion that "the shield is leaky, but better a leaky shield than none". The issue of remote Sejm sessions²⁴ was similarly, depending on the medium, brought down to either:

- One party's pursuit to destroy democracy through giving itself almost authoritarian powers, utilising the chaos stemming from the pandemic (TVN);
- Blaming the parties opposed to the change for "playing" with human life and exposing politicians to health consequences (TVP);
- Description of the potential change in the working method of Sejm as a natural result of the pandemic, almost equal to the wider change from office work to remote or hybrid working (TVP and Polsat).

Apart from human interest stories, being the main subject matter of both TVN and Polsat, the leading topics (as presented on **Figure 16**) reflect a high overrepresentation of political topics on TVN and a significant deficit, relative to the other two broadcasters, of medical information on TVP1. Other topics covered are evenly distributed and reflect, in line with the assumptions made by the researchers, the intensity and content of the political debate in the researched period.

²⁴ With the introduction of ever-newer restriction, a possibility of remote working of the Sejm has entered the public debate. Many industries moved towards remote working in order to protect public health, and this idea was transferred to politics as well. Unfortunately the incredibly quick change to the Regulations by the ruling party was faced with strong criticism across the entire opposition. The item allowing for the possibility of remote work even after the pandemic ends proved especially controversial. Opposition politicians formulated a series of accusations on the ad hoc scheduling of Sejm's sessions to suit the ruling party's agenda (See more: <https://notesfrompoland.com/2020/03/26/polish-parliament-approves-moving-its-work-online-during-coronavirus-crisis>).

Figure 15. Leading topics in main editions of news broadcasts on TVN, TVP1, POLSAT (total, n=905)

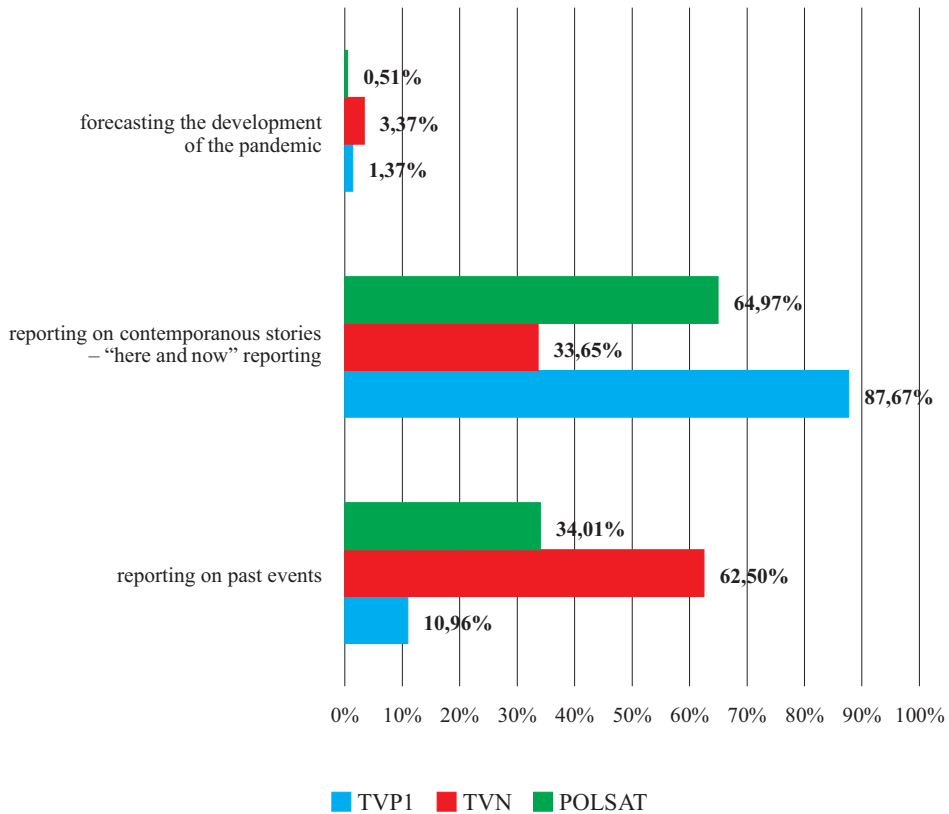


Source: Authors.

In majority, the researched media limited themselves to mere reporting on events (59%), as presented in **Figure 16**. There are no significant differences in corresponding results from online and TV media and the narratives are similar in nature. The broadcasts studied were geared towards informing and reporting on the course of the pandemic. This proportion clearly indicates which of the media functions were realised by the researched institutions. The research team believes that this is also indicative of a significant reluctance, aversion, or lack of capability

on part of the media institutions to fulfill their educational role, as during the researched period the etiology of the virus or fact-based, forward looking prognoses were scarcely broadcasted. In terms of the approach to reporting, TVN is worth mentioning here as the broadcaster most often reporting on past events, which could be a result of their preference to comment on already made decisions and their consequences. Moreover, TVN relatively rarely sent its reporters for live reports; and when it did, it mostly focused on Warsaw, the capital.²⁵

Figure 16. Forecasts of the development of the epidemic in Poland and abroad in main editions of news broadcasts on TVP1, TVN, POLSAT (% share, n=549)



Source: Authors.

Broadcasters’ focus on informing and reporting may also stem from the dynamics of the pandemic, during which the sheer volume and variety of information was so large, that there was no space left for prognoses and judgements. On the other hand, the relatively large length of TV materials needs to be noted. A vast proportion of materials coded had a bridging function, connecting journalists located

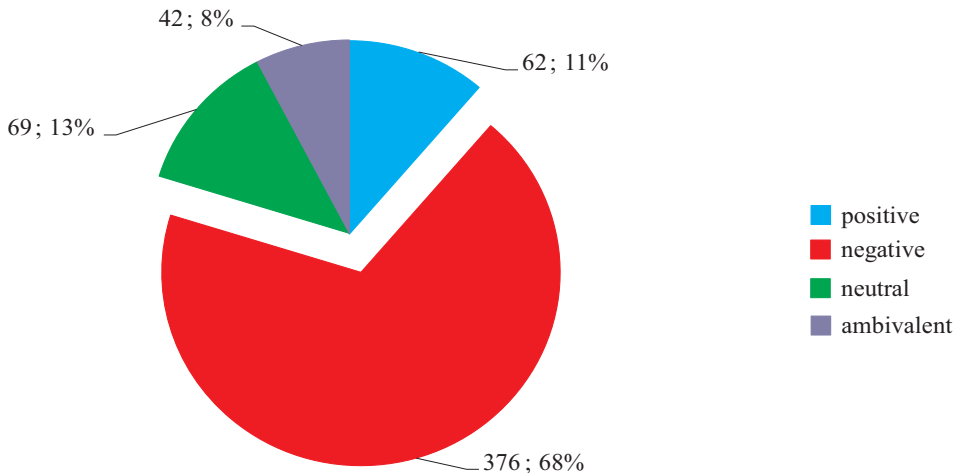
²⁵ Warsaw is the headquarters of TVN. The main HQ is located at 166 Wiertnicza Street.

in different cities or regions. This made the narrative more reporting in nature, a natural editorial trick, especially when the materials included journalists doing the characteristic standups. Moreover, a typical selection of phrases such as “we are in front of the Sejm building”, “we are just in Słubice, next to the border”, “we just arrived here, at this shutdown restaurant, whose owner decided to only do take away” was regularly noted.

Actors, general sentiment, facts and opinions present in broadcasts

Taking into consideration the subject matter featured in the news broadcasts, it brings no surprise that the research sample contained materials with majorly negative sentiment. The sample contained as much as 68% of news items coded as expressing negative sentiment, as presented in **Figure 17**. The materials univocally portrayed the situation as bad, and the pandemic as an unambiguously negative factor. There were no attempts to relate the pandemic to a positive feeling whatsoever, not even to portray it as something temporary, or a formal test of the readiness of the State and the society. The virus – as portrayed in the research sample – was attacking dynamically and unpredictably, and the full picture of its consequences was still not known.

Figure 17. General sentiment expressed in the COVID-19 pandemic coverage (n=549)

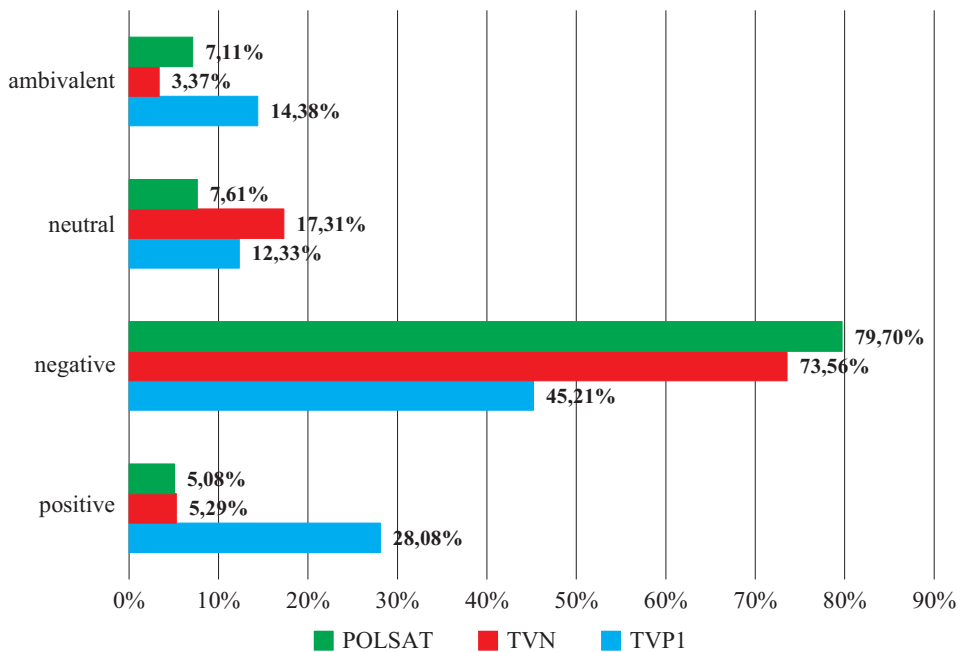


Source: Authors.

Positive news (11%) related mostly to human interest stories of convalescents, the progress made on vaccination development, or other medical successes achieved in this space. However, when analysing particular media institutions, some differentiating fluctuations can be noted. TVP1 is an outlier,

with 29% of its coverage positive, compared to TVN and Polsat, whose positive coverage did not surpass 10% (**Figure 18**). These positively-inclined materials broadcasted on TVP1 related to the government’s policies and success in fighting the pandemic (e.g. the “shields”,²⁶ restriction easing). The other stations usually featured positive news in the context of the policy of other countries (e.g. Germany and their social support policies, or the number of daily tests provided). This is even more interesting given the fact that individual items are studied, and TVP1, because of its lengthier pieces, had the least number of them analysed is taken into consideration. This indicates the tendency of this particular broadcaster to present things as relatively more positive; definitely in comparison to TVN (11 items, 6%).

Figure 18. General sentiment expressed in the COVID-19 pandemic coverage of main news broadcasts from TVP1, TVN, POLSAT (% share, n=549)



Source: Authors.

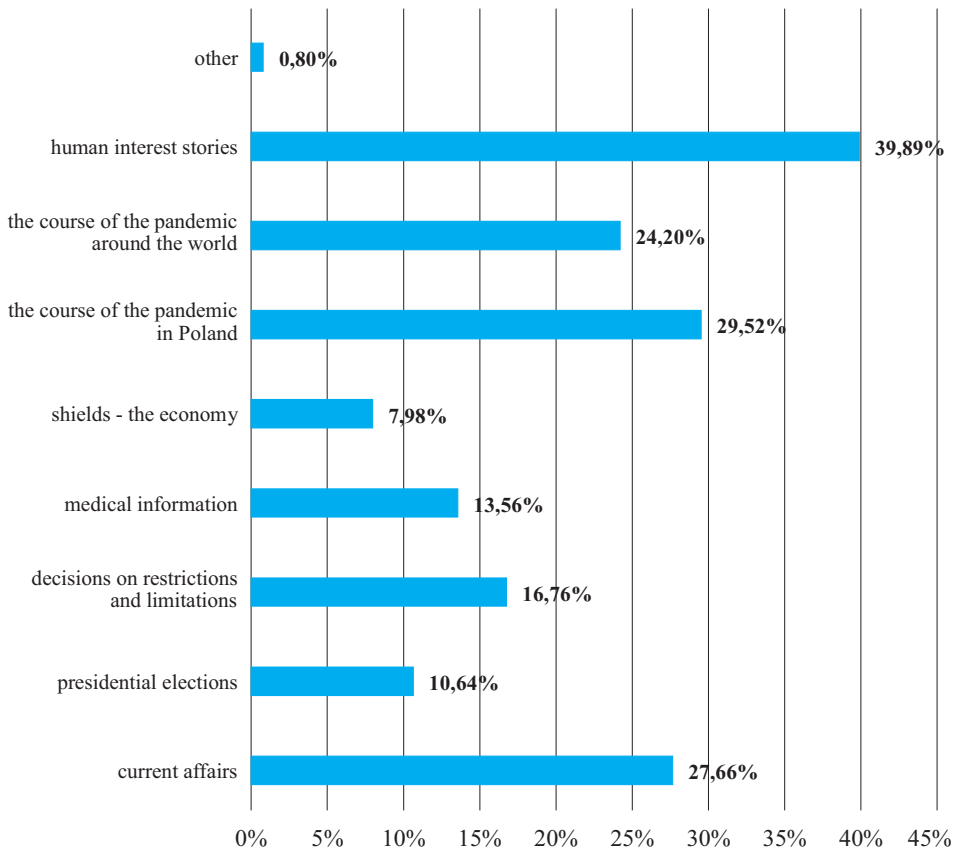
It is worth noting that even if relating this to the entirety of the research sample (online content included), the proportions hardly change. The differences in broadcasts become visible only when we cross reference the data. Thus, some correlations and relationships become visible when cross referencing the sentiment of

²⁶ “Anti-crisis shield” – the general propaganda name of the set of solutions and support mechanisms for entrepreneurs whose activity was severely limited or disabled because of the lockdown and pandemic restrictions.

coverage with the leading topics presented. Negative sentiments most often featured in materials on human interest stories (39.89%), the course of the pandemic in Poland (29.52%) and in the world (24.20%), and current affairs (27.66%). This is evidence of relating human stories and issues directly touching the people with negative sentiment towards COVID-19.

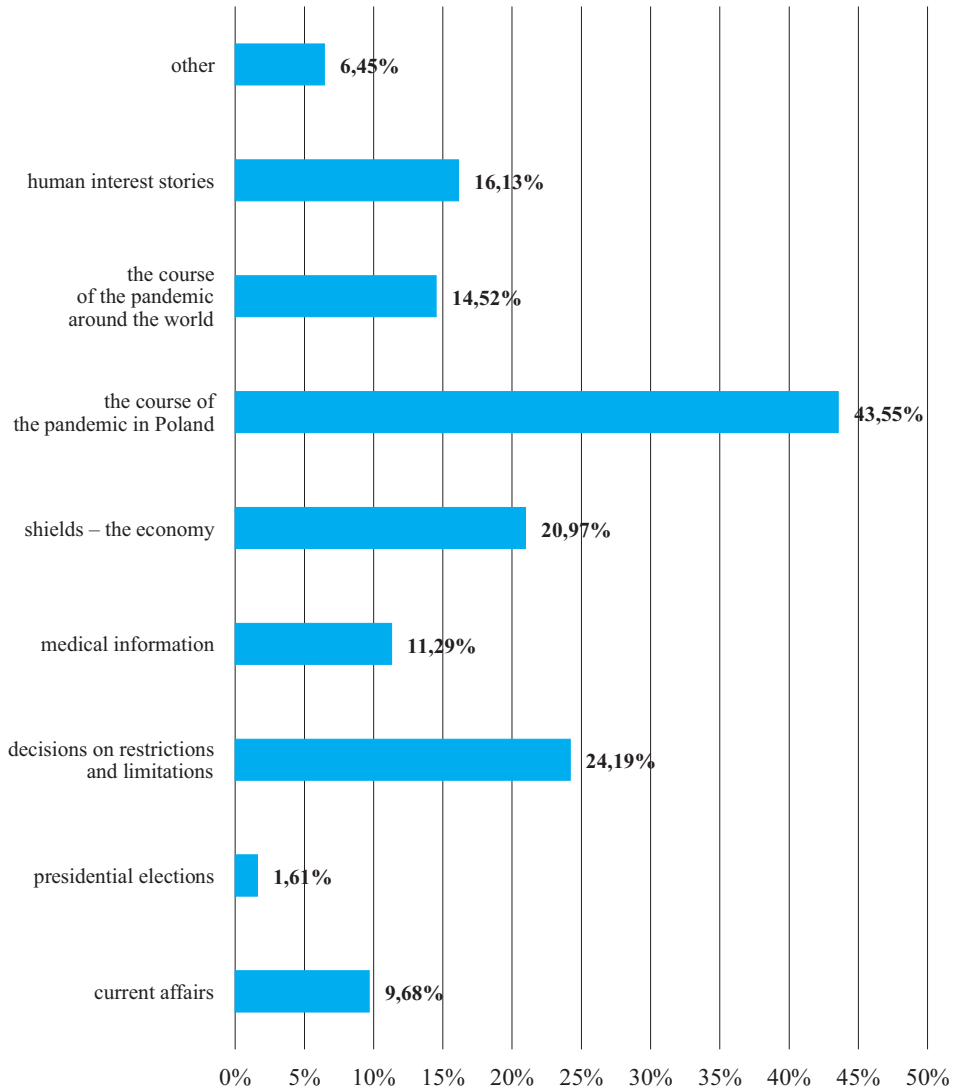
In terms of correlation of positive sentiment with specific leading topics, the results are as follows: the course of the pandemic in Poland (43.55%), information on virus etiology and other medical info (11.29%), decisions on restrictions and limitations (24.19%), human interest stories (16.13%), and shields and the economy (20.97%). This is a relatively clear indicator of the media connecting restrictions, shields, or medical info (including vaccines) with positive sentiment. This is particularly interesting, as several months later the decision to introduce restrictions are widely (and negatively!) commented on. The aforementioned correlations are presented on **Figures 19 and 20**.

Figure 19. Leading topics in news items with negative sentiment (% share, n=379)



Source: Authors.

Figure 20. Leading topics in news items with positive sentiment (% share, n=62)

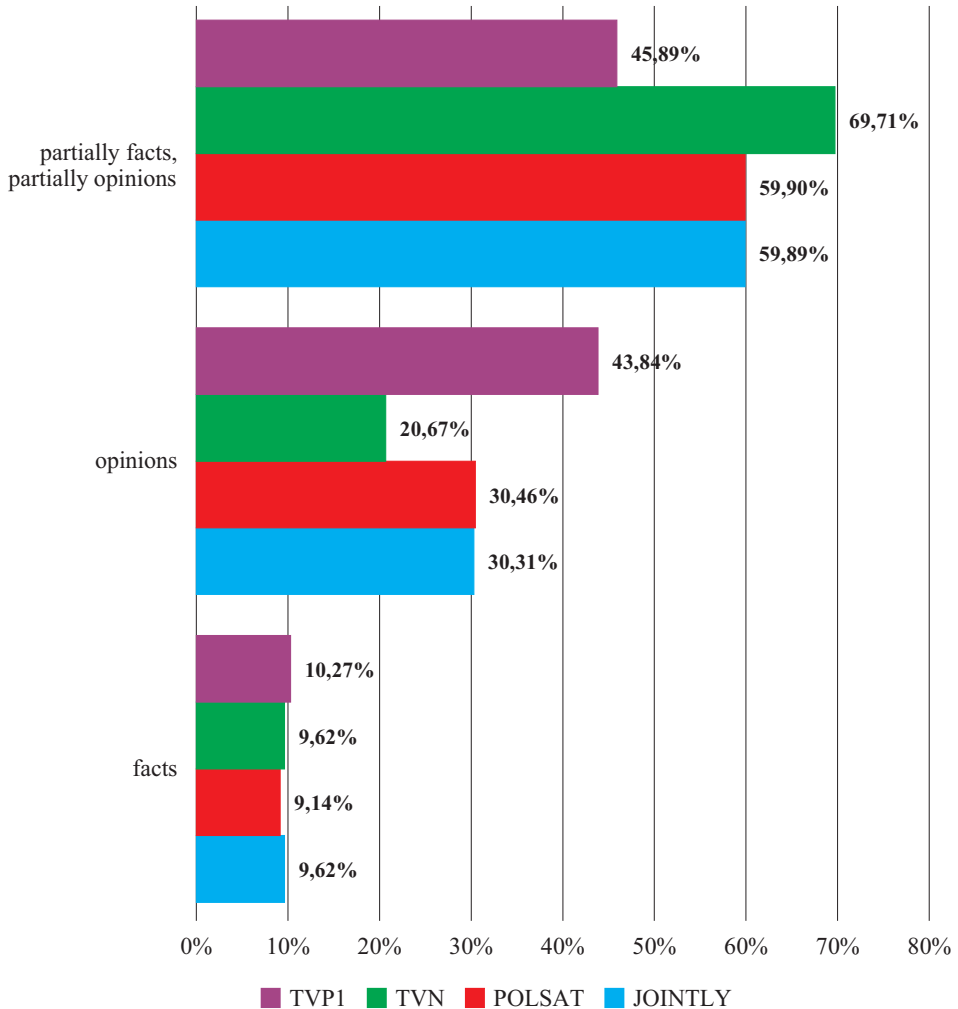


Source: Authors.

TV content analysis did not indicate any major differentiation in sources used to construct the messages. The mix of facts and opinions interpreting the reported events or information was most common (in around 60% of the sample), which can be explained by the complexity and subject matter of the content studied. Difference worth noting is the construction of messaging based on opinions, as is the case with TVP1. Around 44% of news items were not dominated by facts, or even partial facts supported by opinions, but were purely subjective statements

from politicians, experts, and the clergy (which will be further explained later in this publication). The other two broadcasters shared some similarities – they both had content dominated by hybrid forms (facts + opinions), and rarely entirely fact-based (10% for both). Polsat used opinion journalism more often (30%) than TVN (20%), as presented on **Figure 21**.

Figure 21. Facts and opinions in main news broadcasts from TVP1, TVN, POLSAT (% share, n=551)

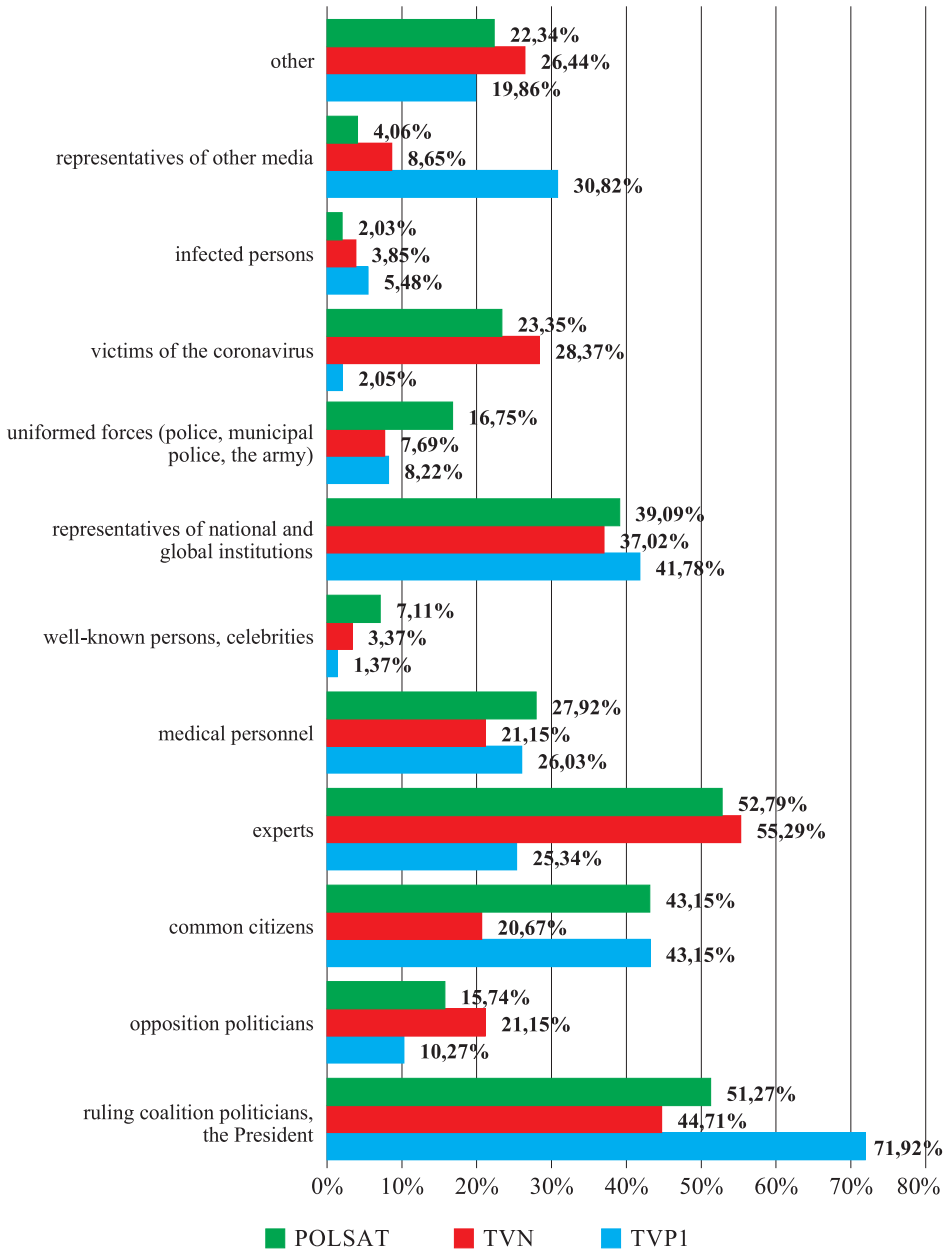


Source: Authors.

In order to reflect the diversity of speaking actors featured in the research sample, 12 distinct categories were created, taking into consideration statements from politicians, doctors, scientists, experts, and common citizens. **Figure 22** presents

a summary of actors whose statements served as a source of presented information or a commentary to events discussed.

Figure 22. Information actors in main news broadcasts from TVP1, TVN, POLSAT (% share, n=551)



Source: Authors.

Politicians, whether from the government, the opposition, or the President, were the most common type of actors, featured in over 70% of news items. The detailed division is as follows: 54% were the government politicians or the President, and 16.33% – opposition politicians. The biggest split is present in TVP1, where government politicians spoke in 71.92% of cases, and opposition – just 10.27%. The same category for TVN was 44.71% and 21.15%, respectively. Other categories do not present significant differences, except for media representatives, who were featured in TVP1 much more often (30.82% of coverage) than in other stations (4.06% on Polsat, and 8.56% in TVN). This was mostly a consequence of TVP1’s policy to invite media experts who largely supported the station’s agenda. Moreover, media experts hosted by TVP1 were a relatively constant group of people, connected mostly to right-wing opinion press.²⁷ The next most frequently featured group were experts (46.46%), common citizens (34.66%), representatives from international and state institutions (39.02%), and medical personnel (24.86%).

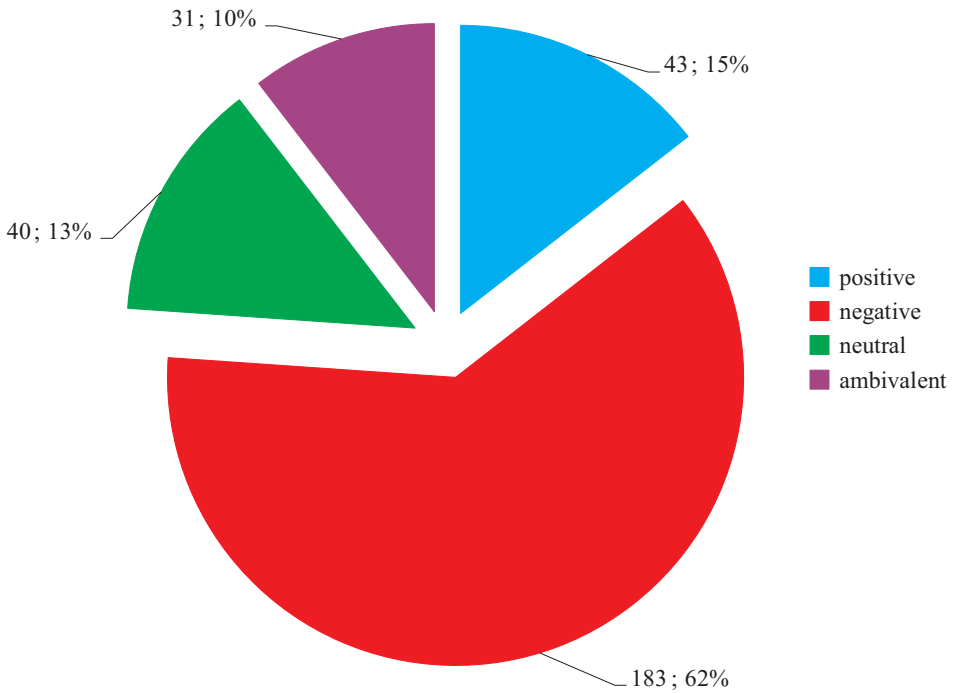
Other categories of actors do not present significant differences. All news stations researched utilised statements from similar actors, and notable is the relatively low rate of inclusion of experts and scientists. TV stations used experts to explain complex issues and difficult terminology related to consequences of the pandemic or disobeying the restrictions. Oftentimes, experts sympathetic to the narrative presented were included in order to legitimise it. TVP1 especially featured experts noting thoughtful, quick and positive actions of the government, while TVN experts noted the shortcomings, imperfections and the chaotic character of the decisions taken.

The issue of overrepresentation of political actors was particularly notable for the researchers. During medical crises it could be expected that crisis communication would be based on statements from experts. It needs to be noted that in Poland, in contrast to e.g. Belgium or Germany, the majority of narrative on the course of the pandemic and the ways to combat its spread was constructed based on statements from politicians. Adopting such a crisis communication strategy bears political risk, as social reception of the effectiveness of reported actions can influence the assessment of the government’s actions later on. This is a very interesting avenue of potential future research. In order to determine the character and role politicians played in researched broadcasts, it is worth to cross reference their presence with the general sentiment of the broadcast, and with the leading topics featured.

In the first case, when politicians were actors in a given news item, it was most often negative in sentiment. What is interesting is the fact that it seems that if the politicians featured were from the governing party, the sentiment was positive more often (15%), as presented on **Figure 23**. Ruling coalition politicians were also often featured across all topics.

²⁷ Examples include brothers Jacek and Michał Karnowski, journalists from the conservative weekly “Sieci” [“Networks”], where Jacek is currently the editor-in-chief.

Figure 23. General sentiment expressed in the COVID-19 pandemic coverage featuring ruling party politicians as actors in main news broadcasts from TVP1, TVN, POLSAT (total, n=299)

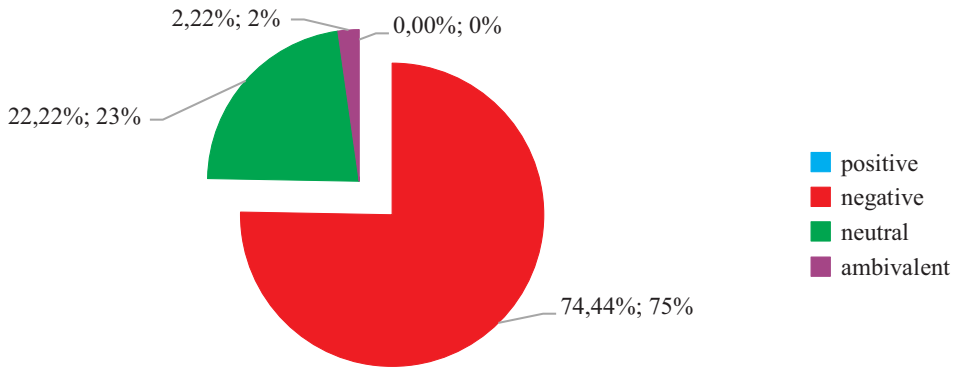


Source: Authors.

An analogous cross reference considering political actors from the widely defined opposition shows an interesting regularity. In the research sample, opposition statements are featured exclusively in content with negative sentiment present. This means that the entire TV research sample does not contain a single news item with positive sentiment featuring an opposition politician. This has been presented on **Figure 24**.

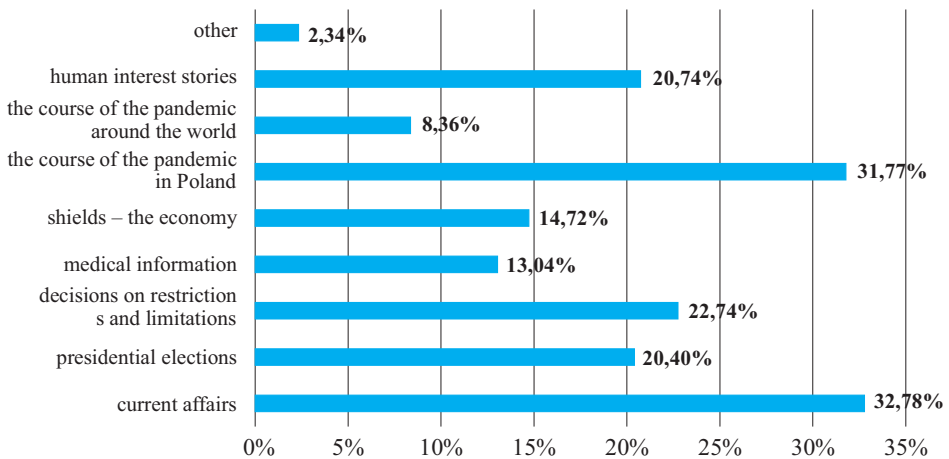
Furthermore, there were additional insights from detailed analysis of cross referencing the aforementioned categories. Ruling party politicians were most often featured in broadcasts on current affairs (33%), the course of the pandemic in Poland (32%), introduced restrictions and lockdowns (23%), as presented on **Figure 25**. This is indicative of a far reaching politicisation of the studied broadcasts in the research period. Politicians spoke on a variety of topics, differing in character and often very complex. It might be worth posing the question of why is this group so overrepresented, even though its competencies are not necessarily adequate to comment on certain issues, especially as these comments can be taken as advice, requests or suggestions by the audience.

Figure 24. General sentiment expressed in the COVID-19 pandemic coverage featuring opposition politicians as actors in main news broadcasts from TVP1, TVN, POLSAT (total, n=90)



Source: Authors.

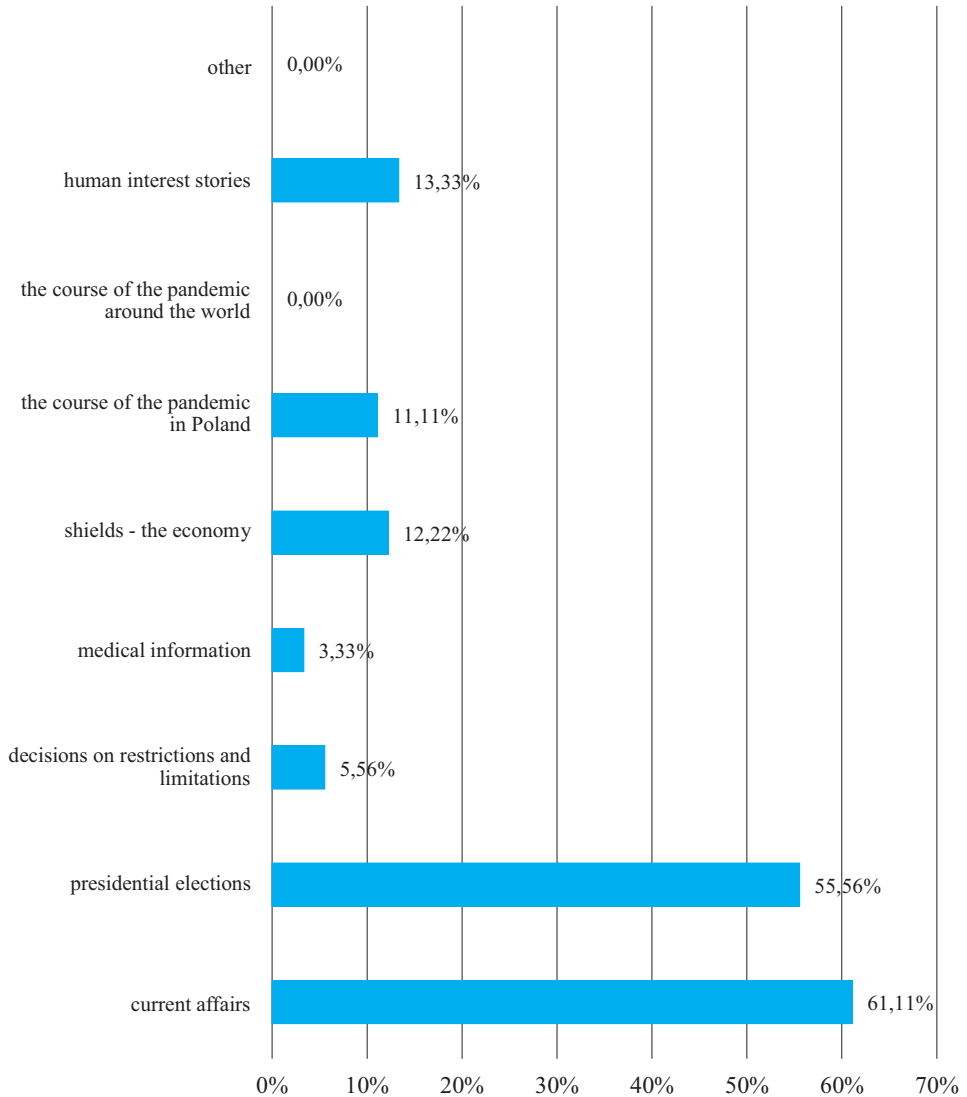
Figure 25. Topics covered in broadcasts featuring governing party politicians as actors (total, n=299)



Source: authors.

Opposition politicians spoke most often in materials relating to presidential elections (55.56% of statements) and current (political) affairs (61.11%). This means they spoke almost exclusively on strictly political topics, often related to the pandemic indirectly, such as postponement of the presidential elections, conducting of the electoral campaign, but also personnel changes in the government or international affairs. This is presented on **Figure 26**. Politics was present in about every topic, as either government or opposition politicians were featured.

Figure 26. Topics covered in broadcasts featuring opposition politicians as actors (total, n=90)



Source: Authors.

Every coded category and topic featured politicians, either from the government or the opposition. Repeated use of certain political actors could be indicative of the aforementioned view that Polish crisis communication in the pandemic has a “political face”. Opposition politicians featured most frequently in content related to presidential elections.²⁸

²⁸ For instance: Fakty, TVN, 25.03.2020; Fakty, TVN, 26.03.2020; Fakty, TVN, 01.04.2020.

Framing pandemic news, consequences of the pandemic in sampled broadcasts

The most common frame used in analysed TV materials was the consequence frame (47.01%), followed by human interest story (28.13%), conflict (16.33%), responsibility (9.98%), and morality (6.53%), as presented on **Figure 27**. TVP1 used the most distinct selection of frames, often using responsibility (23.29%) and morality (13.01%) frames. Their broadcasts referred both to the morality of citizens and the opposition, who, in TVP's view, was responsible for issues in combating the pandemic, such as obstructing parliamentary work, illogical critique or misleading the public by subjective reports and comments on government's policies.²⁹ The conflict frame was used relatively rarely, although most frequently by TVN, where its use was noted for 23.08% of broadcasts.

The research sample revealed that the majority of broadcasts related to conflicts, related to ones with political grounds. This stems from the timeline coinciding with presidential elections and the accompanying conflict related to running a campaign during COVID-19, mode of work of the Parliament, or allegations of mismanaged transactions during the crisis (e.g. buying face masks from China³⁰). The aforementioned differences in narratives are worth noting and expanding, as they oftentimes were conflicting each other.³¹ This will be further discussed in the following chapters, especially when describing the situation in the country and in the world, which has been portrayed very differently depending on the broadcaster.

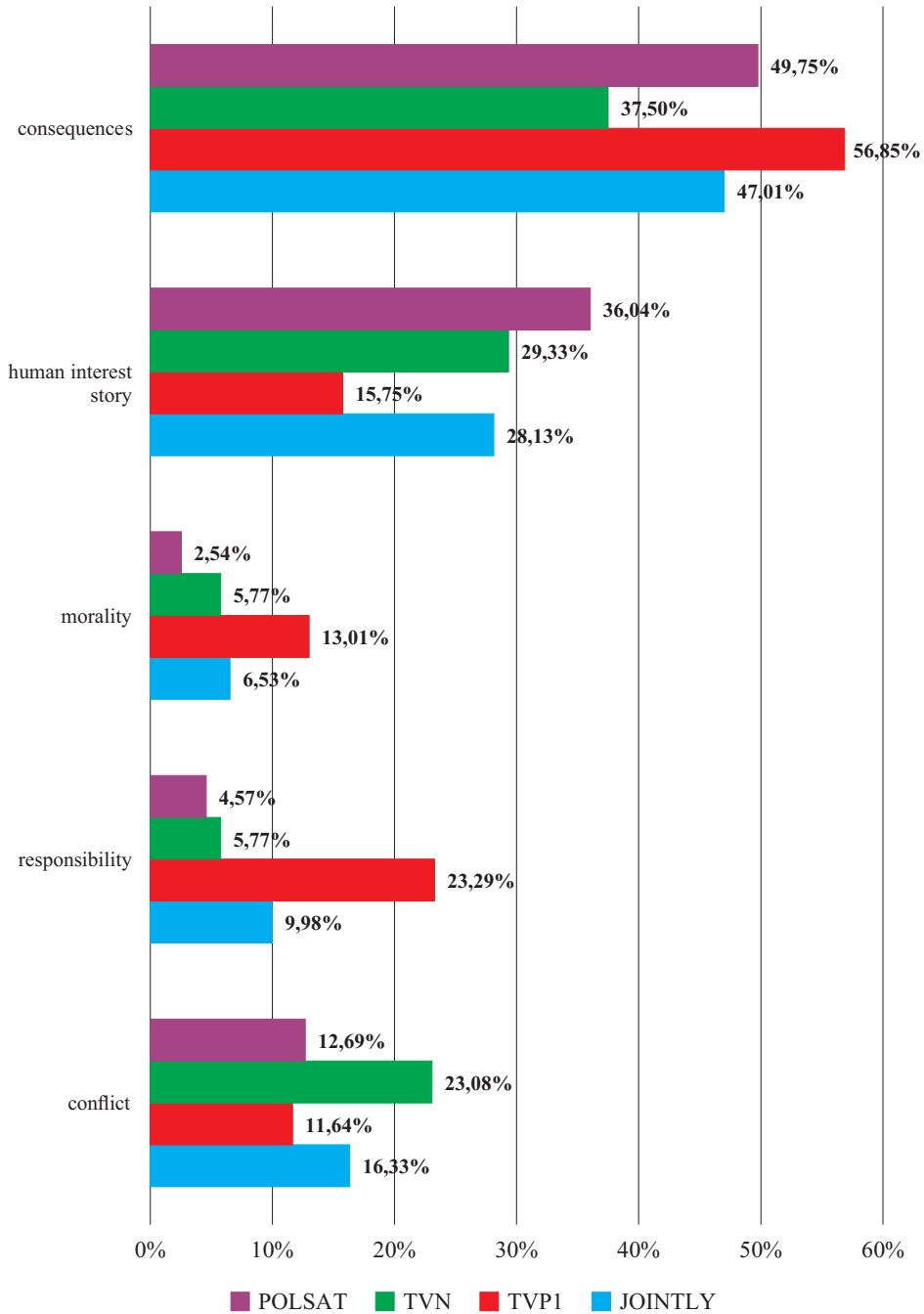
The consequence frame was the most dominant in all researched broadcasts, as it was noted in almost 50% of cases, while the human interest story frame was coded in just 28%. This is indicative of all news broadcasters focusing on commenting and reporting on the ways the pandemic is (re)shaping people's lives, governments' policies, the society, or the economy. Most broadcasts had journalists exhibit noticeable didactic tendencies, attempting to persuade the public that the pandemic is not a far away event in China, but is present in Poland, in specific places, touching specific people, either sick or affected by it otherwise. Thus, featuring convalescents and entrepreneurs whose economic activity was limited was not unpurposeful. Even though conflict frames were as common as the aforementioned frames (16.33% of the entire research sample), they mostly relate to political matters, most often the presidential elections. The electoral period generated a variety of conflicts on the government – opposition

²⁹ For instance: Wiadomości, TVP1, 25.03.2020; Wiadomości, TVP1, 26.03.2020.

³⁰ Fakty, TVN, 14.05.2020.

³¹ For instance news item (Fakty TVN, 02.04.2021) in which the ruling party politician's statement from TVP1 was used purely to highlight the inconsistencies and promise-breaking the statement included.

Figure 27. Cognitive frames occurring in main news broadcasts from TVP1, TVN, POL-SAT (% share, n=622)



Source: Authors.

line. Moreover, persons not directly related to Polish politics were also given voice on the elections relatively frequently, and their statements were widely commented. Donald Tusk, former President of the European Council, and the former Prime Minister of Poland (2007–2014) and one of the founders of Poland’s current biggest opposition party, Platforma Obywatelska³² could be one example. Controversial comments were made, such as equating conducting the elections to “pure madness” and suggesting that PiS wants to organise them no matter what, even at a human cost, as they realise that Andrzej Duda is losing support, and as the pandemic progresses, might lose it even further.³³ The other frames – of morality and responsibility – were regularly employed for emotional messaging. Human interest story framing was also used, often raising the issue of responsibility, including social responsibility, for the pandemic spread or retreat. Responsibility framing was also used in materials reporting on controversies relating to crisis management in Poland. When the government bought PPE without required certifications, journalists of all news channels quickly assumed positions and used the responsibility frame to indicate who, according to them, was to blame. There were even comments which clearly indicated that the Minister responsible for the purchase used his purely private connections, and the PPE purchased could have even been a “favour for a friend” which cost the State budget millions of zloty.³⁴ Worth noting also is the positive correlation between celebrity appearances and morality framing, as it was when the news items wished to appeal to citizens’ conscience, this is when they featured celebrities and actions they organised or endorsed.³⁵ As aforementioned, conflict framing was most often political in nature. The research sample included instances of political attacks relating to the presidential campaign, parliamentary remote work, organisation of the presidential elections, issues with number of available tests, policies on combating the virus, and the controversies related to government spending. Materials on social conflict were also featured, often relating to the way people in quarantine are treated, or treatment towards teachers, nurses, or doctors.

Consequence framing was noted in materials relating to economic and medical consequences of the pandemic spread. Auditions reporting on COVID-19 infection and death numbers were often coded as such. As **Figure 27** shows, the consequence frame was the most dominant of narratives in the research sample.

³² Platforma Obywatelska (eng. Civic Platform) has been rebranded to Koalicja Obywatelska (eng. Civic Coalition). PiS – Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (eng. Law and Justice), the main ruling coalition party.

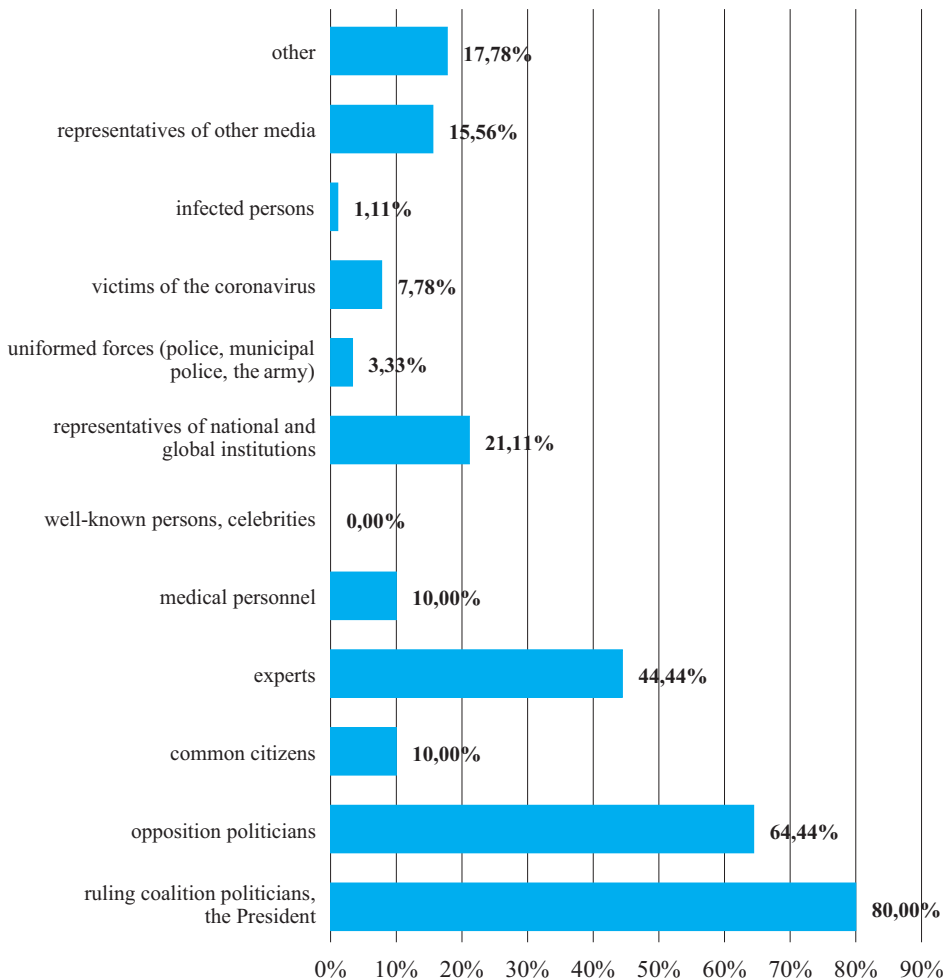
³³ Example from a news item from: Fakty, TVN, 31.03.2020.

³⁴ Fakty, TVN, 14.05.2020.

³⁵ These included signing with Polish singer Beata Kozidrak, who explained that one should wash their hands for a duration of her (very popular back in the day) song chorus. See more: www.facebook.com/watch/?v=485357702351745 (accessed: 20.02.2021).

Materials which used the human interest story frame featured stories of people who suffered because of the pandemic, both directly (because of the infection or quarantine) and indirectly, in economic or social sense, oftentimes showcasing particular persons. Materials coded in this group included people ill or quarantined, or convalescents who spoke on their experiences with the disease, including consequences. Moreover, they featured entrepreneurs and particular employees who complained about losing their life's work, or had no means to live. Employing the human interest story frame always involved a story of a particular individual, who was victimised by the pandemic, or the politics around, in one way or another.

Figure 28. Actors featured in researched news broadcasts classified as conflict frames (% share, n=90)

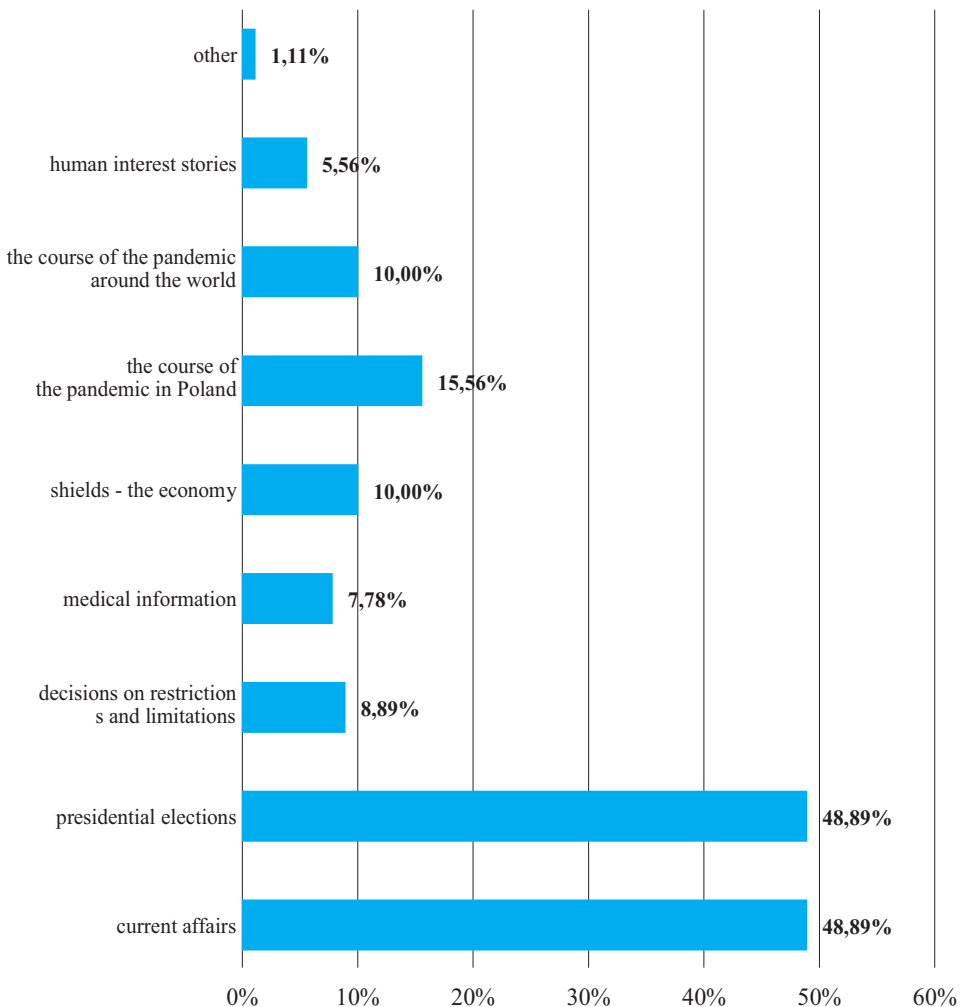


Source: Authors.

Owners of restaurants or hair salons were a popular feature in these materials, as their businesses were often their only source of income and influenced every aspect of their life – generated family feuds, forced one to take a bank loan, or to declare bankruptcy, etc.

The morality frame relates to materials covering social campaigns relating to restrictions. In this specific case, the media seemed unanimous, with all stations promoting “stay at home” or related campaigns. In-depth analysis on the conflict framing included cross-referencing this category with the main actors featured in the coded materials, as presented **Figures 28 and 29**.

Figure 29. Leading topics in researched news broadcasts classified as conflict frames (% share, n=90)



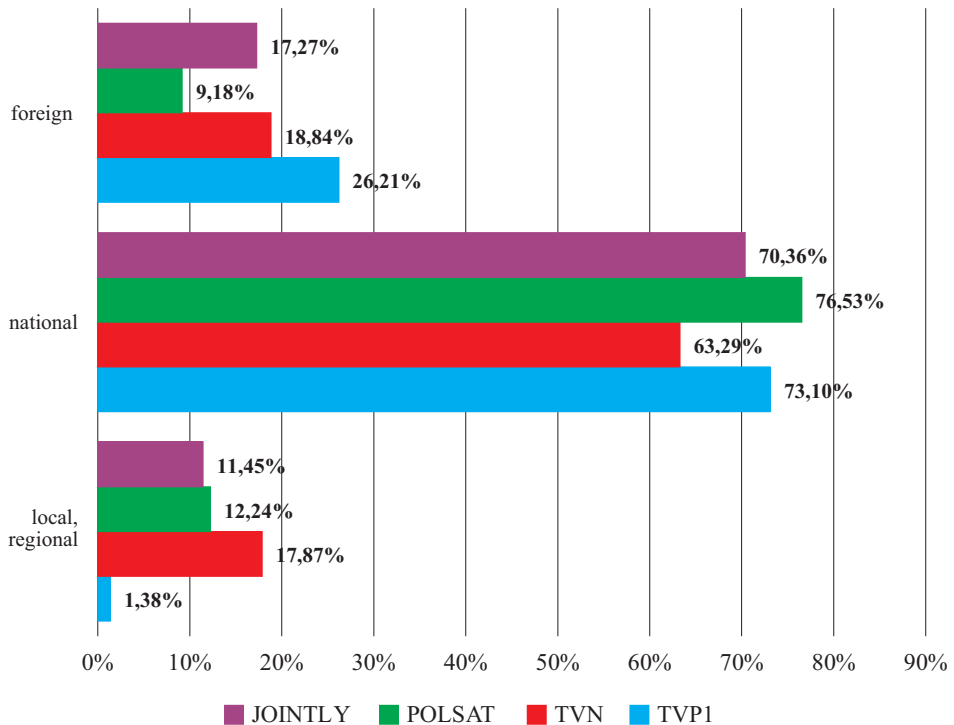
Source: Authors.

The results presented above clearly indicate a correlation between featuring political actors and using the conflict frame. They also confirm the observation that conflict framing featured almost exclusively in materials which were dominated by representatives of power, be it institutional, parliamentary, or governmental. The collected sample revealed that institutional actors, such as the government or international bodies' representatives were present in almost every case of the conflict frame being used. The framing itself was most often used when reporting on current affairs and presidential elections.

Geographical location and the sentiment of broadcasts

The vast majority (over 82%) of the TV research sample related to events within Poland's borders, and just 17% to events from abroad. The sample was also dominated by national (nation-wide) news, with the following percentage coverage: TVP1 – 73%, Polsat – 76%, and TVN notably less, with 63%, with detailed results presented on **Figure 30**.

Figure 30. Geographical coverage of main news broadcasts from TVP1, TVN, POLSAT (% share, n=595)

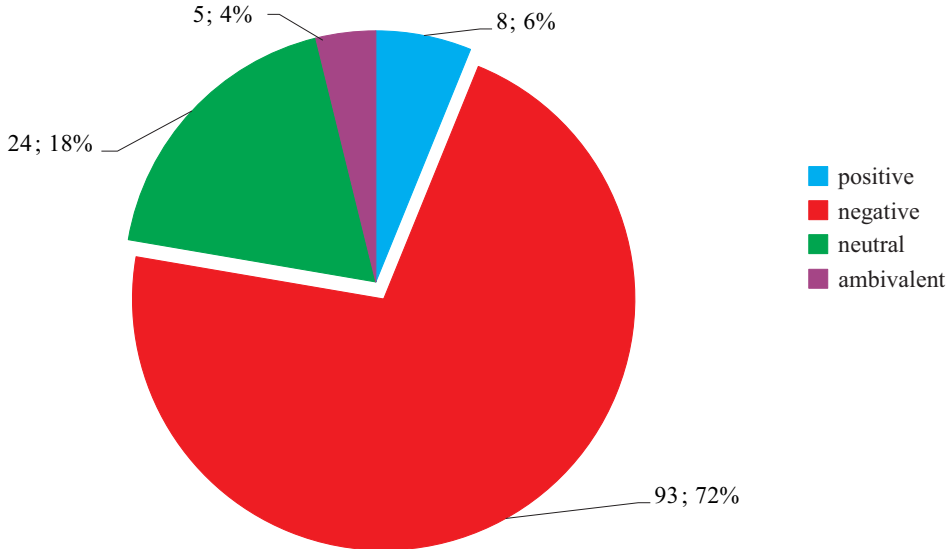


Source: Authors.

The geographical coverage across all news items analysed indicated a focus on national and local affairs, with TVP1 presenting significantly lower local focus, as a mere 1% of their sample materials broadcasted in “Wiadomości”’s main edition related to local issues. This can be explained by the fact that “Wiadomości” is a national broadcast, directed at a majority of viewers in Poland,³⁶ and Telewizja Polska (the owner) also owns a network of regional TV stations, with 16 local HQs located in voivodeship cities³⁷ with each editorial house preparing local broadcasts on local news, broadcasted on TVP3.

The following **Figures (from 31 to 34)** present the differences, as noted by the researchers, in portrayals presented by TVP1, and other stations, especially TVN. This is particularly prominent in coverage on the national situation. Although “Wiadomości” presented news from abroad in a negative light most of the time (84%), similarly to the other two stations, it painted the situation in the country as positive in 35% of the research sample. This is in stark contrast to TVN, which also had a negative skew in international news (73%) and presented the situation inside the country as positive in a mere 6% of cases, as presented before on **Figure 32**. In TVN’s case, the figures relating to geographical coverage and sentiments seem similar. As presented below, the majority of broadcasts studied was negative in its portrayal of the situation within the country (93%), and abroad (82%).

Figure 31. Sentiment of the broadcasts on Poland from TVN (% share, n=130)

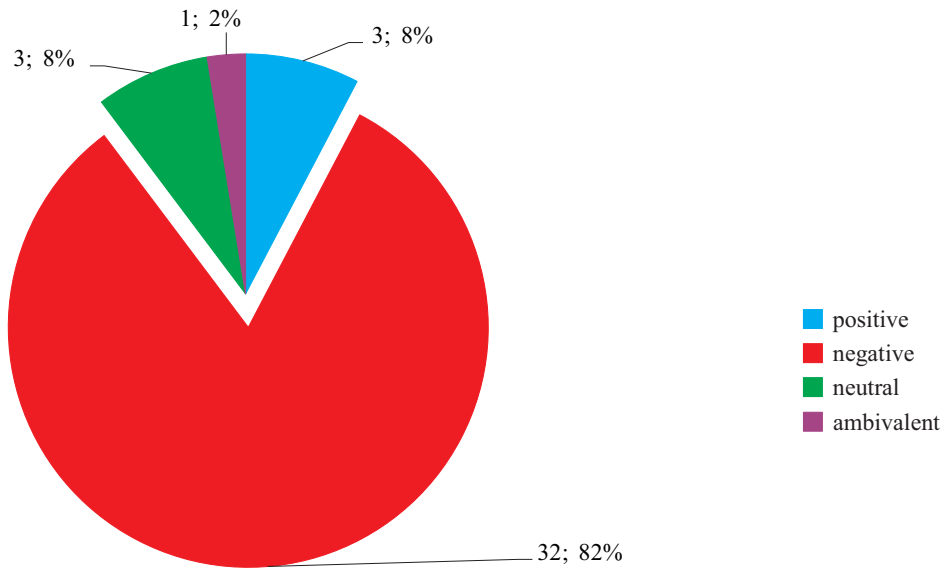


Source: Authors.

³⁶ “Wiadomości”’s viewership in April 2020 amounted to 3.3 million viewers, which was 23% of the market share (*Big increases in viewership...*, 2020).

³⁷ Voivodeship cities are usually capitals of voivodeships (Polish administrative regions) or their most important cities.

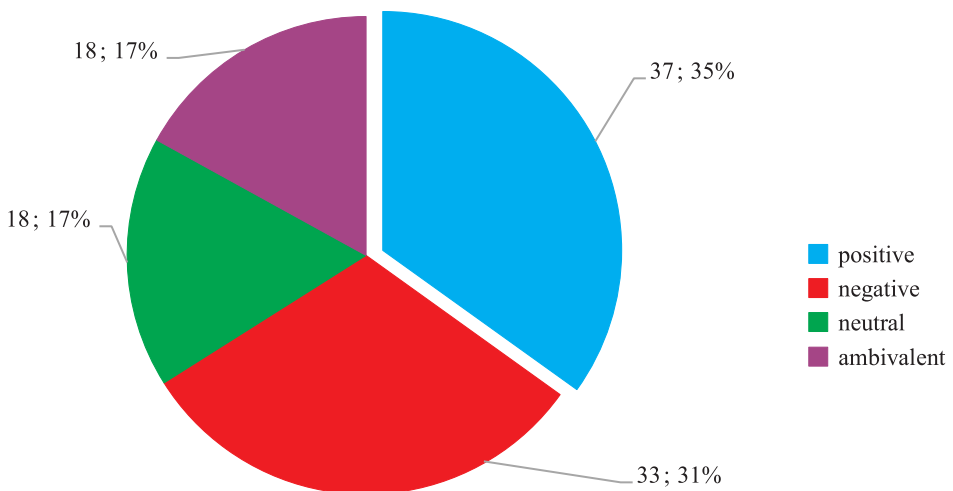
Figure 32. Sentiment of the broadcasts on abroad from TVN (% share, n=39)



Source: Authors.

Analogous comparison for TVP1 reveals distinct differences in covering events from Poland and from abroad. **Figure 33** presents that the main edition of “Wiadomości” contained only 31% of negative news. The rest of the coverage was either positive (35%), neutral (17%), or ambivalent (17%), combining the varied consequences of the events, both positive and negative.

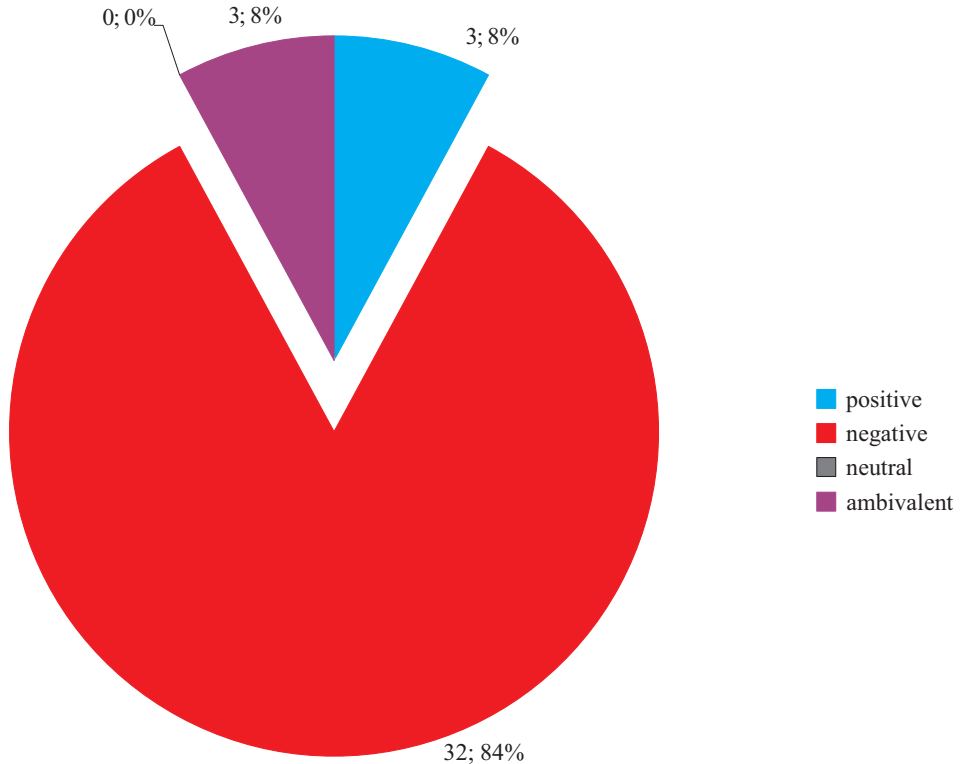
Figure 33. Sentiment of the broadcasts on Poland from TVP (% share, n=106)



Source: Authors.

On the other hand, news from abroad presented on TVP1 were majorly negative (84%), as presented on **Figure 34**. Such portrayal is not only significantly different from the narratives of the other stations, but in the authors' view, is also indicative of lack of clarity and consistency of the narrative designed by the editors.

Figure 34. Sentiment of the broadcasts on abroad from TVP1 (% share, n=38)



Source: Authors.

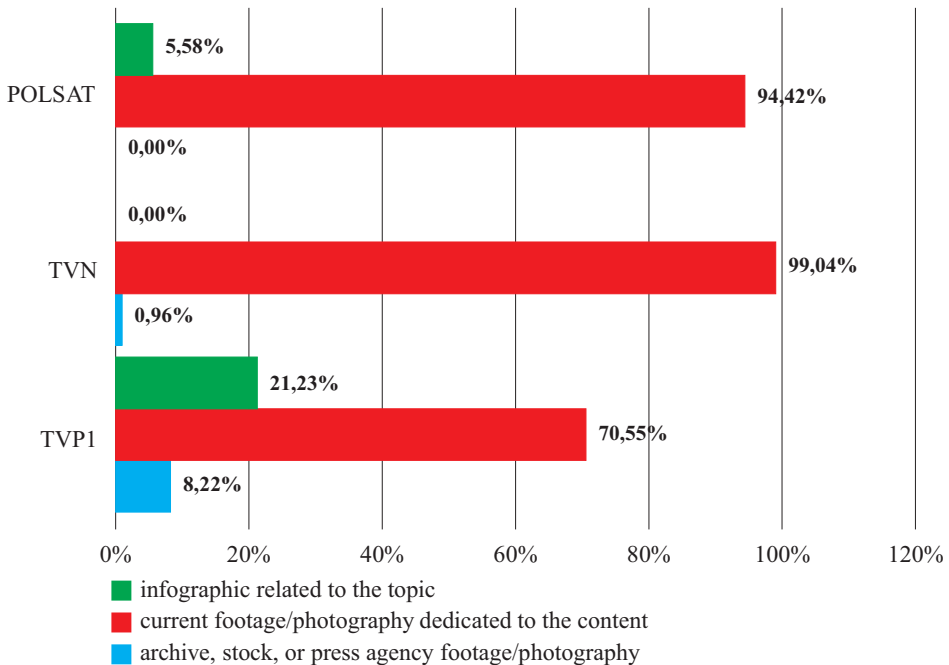
It must be remembered that the research sample includes materials initially broadcasted as parts of a cohesive main broadcast. All of the “Wiadomości” broadcasts analysed began with national news, where with varied frequency the positive news on the pandemic spread and the decisions and actions taken by the government on crisis management were featured. Simultaneously, the same edition would feature dramatic reports from correspondents in Italy or Germany, countries which were portrayed as significantly struggling with the pandemic. Such messaging can lead to cognitive dissonance, defined in the literature as a state in which a person’s consciousness receives contradictory cognitive input (Festinger, 2007: 43). Simultaneous reports of a decent situation within the country and an unequivocally negative situation abroad could have confused the viewers, especially if the negative experience related to the pandemic was reinforced by their own personal

experiences. Moreover, TVP1’s portrayal of the situation in Poland was not complementary to other reports from different broadcasters; at times it was just contradictory. This was particularly visible around election time, when “Wiadomości”, often using statements from government politicians as a source, clearly indicated that the “elections are safe”, and any attempt to postpone them is an attack on the foundations of democracy in Poland. At the same time, the station explained to its viewers the rationale and validity of introducing further restrictions, such as prolonged shopping centre shutdowns or the obligation to wear face coverings.

Footage and photography in the research sample

There were no significant differences across the research sample in terms of photography used. TV stations mostly used current footage that was actually connected to the material (recorded almost live), with such practice most popular at TVN (99%) and Polsat (94%), with TVP1 behind with 70% as they often used infographics explaining complex issues in a simple way and presenting the numbers associated (see **Figure 35**). The figure also presents instances of a coded lack

Figure 35. The relation of footage used to the topic of broadcasts in the research sample (total, n=551)

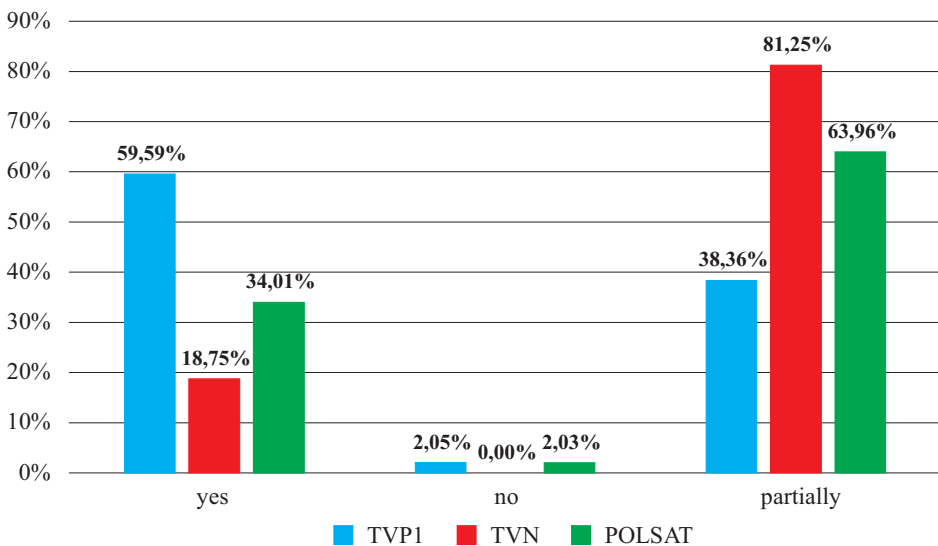


Source: Authors.

of infographics or unrelated footage. The matching of footage to the subject matter highlights its importance; topics related to Coronavirus were important enough for TV and online broadcasters to choose appropriate accompanying imagery and photography.

The footage generally corresponded to verbal content featured in all sampled broadcasts (Figure 36). Initial analysis did not indicate significant differences across broadcasters, with the percentage share of supplemental photography totaling 92%. Relatively high indicators of partially corresponding materials (around 82% on TVN, 38.36% on TVP1, and 63.96% on Polsat) are a direct consequence of the complexity of the medium. Technically speaking, video footage also consists of photography. Assuming that TV stations broadcast their material with 50 frames per second, this means there are 50 unique photographs displayed to the viewer every second. Although the researchers did not analyse the footage frame by frame, it seems impossible, or extremely difficult, to build entire (over 4 minutes long) footage using entirely corresponding photography. This is why the analysis also considered partially corresponding footage, coding as such materials that included e.g. crafted footage. For instance, if a given news item reported on a particular hospital, there would be footage that definitely presented a hospital building; however, it was impossible to say whether all of the footage was actually of that particular hospital. Similarly, when discussing the pandemic abroad, there would be footage of the particular country discussed, however, not from a particular, descriptive period. There was no evidence, during the course of in-depth

Figure 36. Footage corresponding to verbal content of broadcasts in the research sample (total, n=551)



Source: Authors.

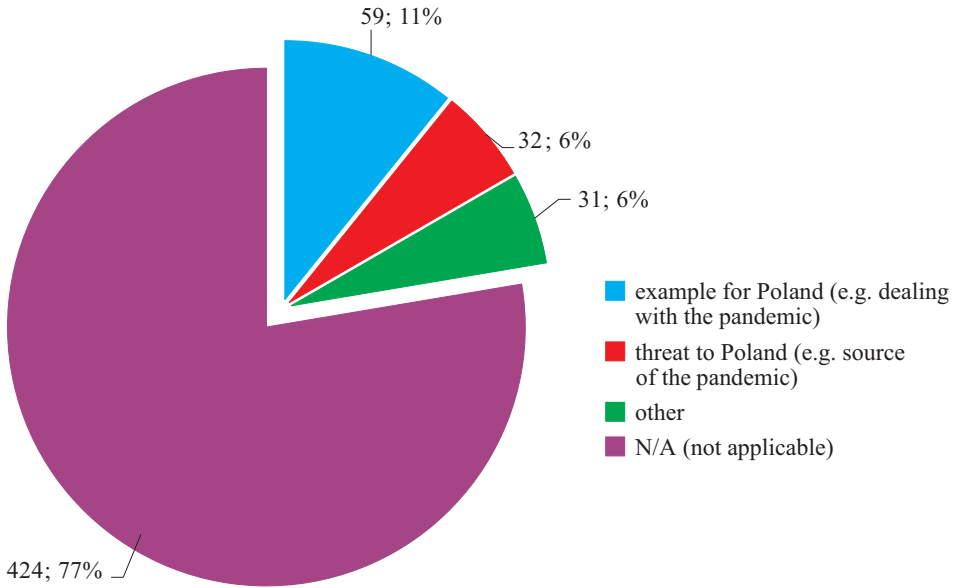
analysis, that would indicate that the stations used their own TV crews for footage from abroad. This could have been a result not only of the cost of such operation, but also because of health and safety.

The highest percentage of footage directly corresponding with the broadcast's content was found at TVP1 (almost 60%). This can be a result of multiple factors. Firstly, the already aforementioned robust network of TVP's regional HQs, although not necessarily localising the content, provided a basis for footage then extended to raise national topics. The length of news items, which as aforementioned, was relatively longer than in other TV stations (4 minutes for TVP1 vs 3 minutes for Polsat and TVN) was also conducive to this tendency.

The situation abroad was often – accounting for marginal differences – presented as a potential threat to Poland. 34% of news broadcasts across the stations were coded this way. Particular attention was paid to the origin source of the virus, not just its arrival. Moreover, many materials underlined that Poland's direct neighbours are not dealing with the situation well enough, and this can have negative consequences for Poland itself. "Wiadomości" were especially fond of such a narrative, and even though the "other" character was most popular, 13% of coverage on the situation abroad was coded as a portrayal of a threat: to the country's politics, to the citizens; being in competition for essential purchases (such as PPE), or a bad example to follow when dealing with the pandemic. A different view is painted by TVN, as "Fakty" presented other countries more like examples to follow (21%), especially when reporting on Western Europe, i.e. Germany or France. In-depth analysis revealed a lot of direct comparisons that put Poland in an unfavourable position. TVN's coverage revealed for example a much higher number of available tests and greater and easily obtained support for entrepreneurs in Germany. France, which conducted local elections which inadvertently led to a higher number of infections, could have been a negative example; but on the one hand it became a cautionary tale for the government planning for the presidential elections, and on the other – an example to follow in such cases. These relations are captured on **Figures 37, 38, 39**.

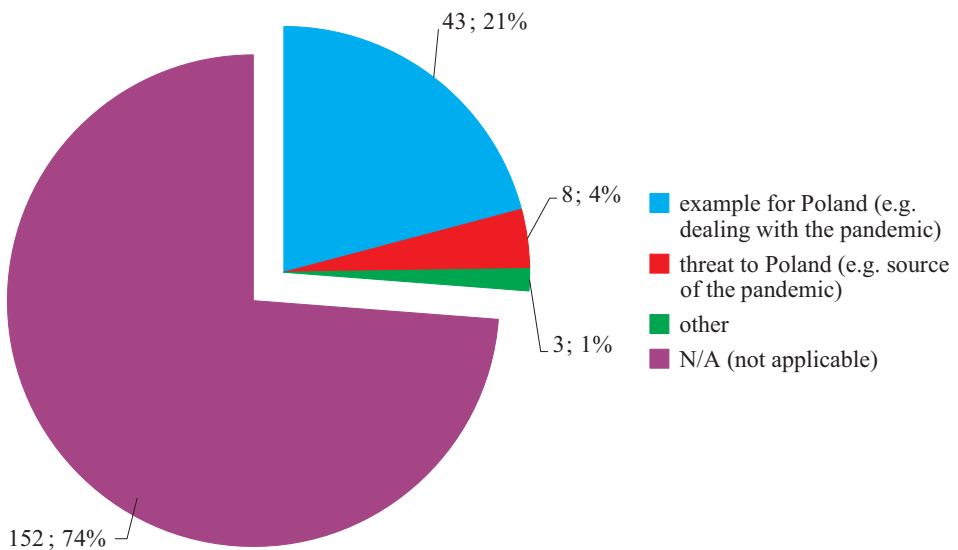
"Other" as a coded category in this case relates to broadcasts that presented neutral and detailed (e.g. using relevant numbers) information on the course of the pandemic abroad. Most often, Poland or the potential consequences for Poland, were not even considered in the coverage. When Poland was referenced in coverage on foreign countries, it was mostly to compare the efficiency of governments in dealing with the situation. For example, TVN coverage highlighted that Germany conducts far more tests and thus the issue of dynamic increase in infection numbers will be dealt with relatively quickly, while in Poland the number of daily tests remained relatively low. "Fakty"'s journalists mostly blamed the government being occupied with other things, such as battling the opposition or prepping for the presidential elections.

Figure 37. Context in which news from abroad were portrayed in broadcasts in the research sample (% share, n=551)



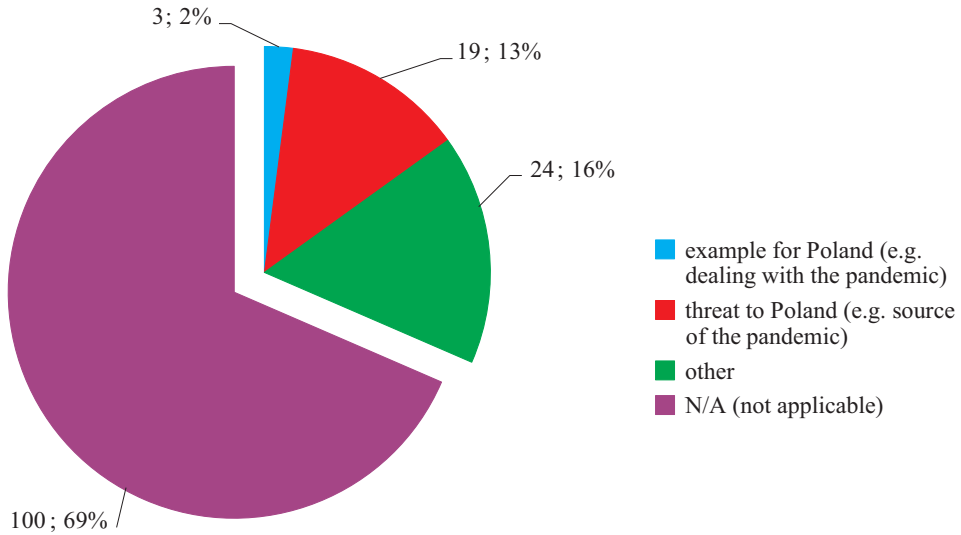
Source: authors.

Figure 38. Context in which news from abroad were portrayed in broadcasts sampled from TVN (% share, n=208)



Source: Authors.

Figure 39. Context in which news from abroad were portrayed in broadcasts sampled from TVP1 (% share, n=146)

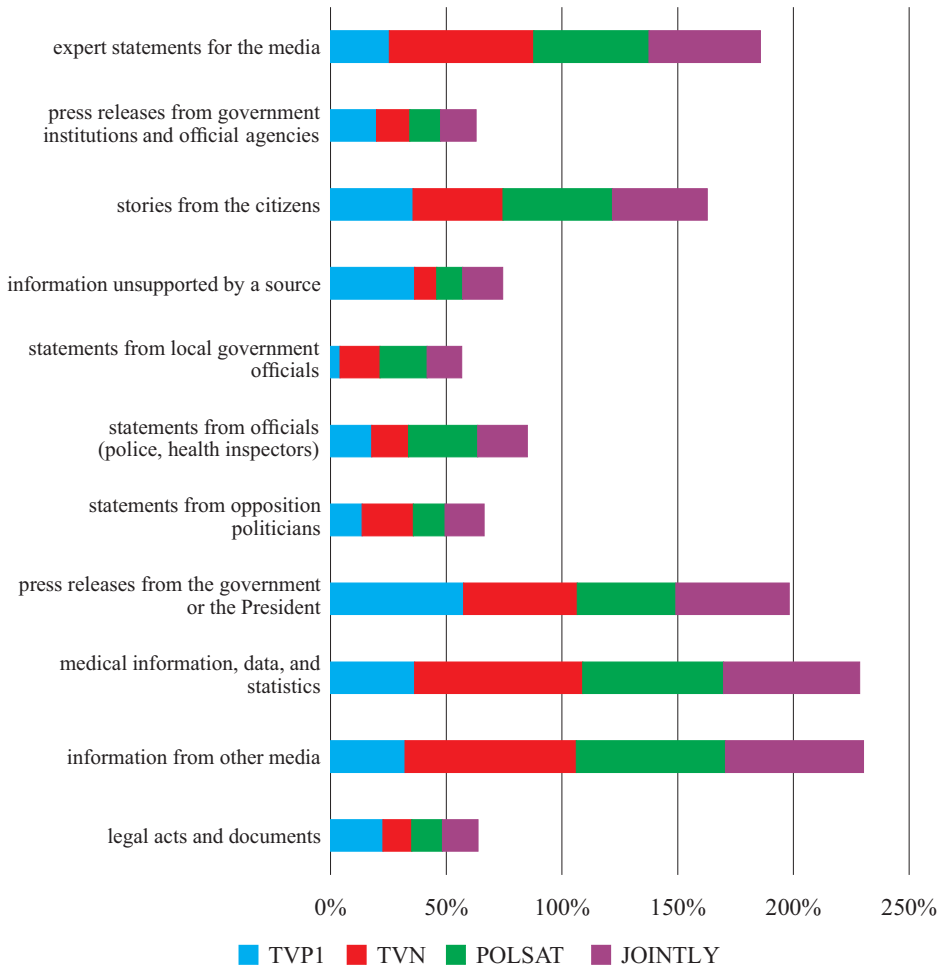


Source: Authors.

There was a significant variety in sources used for constructing sampled broadcasts across the news stations. Generally speaking, TV stations prepared their coverage mostly based on medical data and statistics (60%), and reports from other media (59.53%). Furthermore, they used statements from the government or the President (49%), expert statements (48%) and statements from the citizens themselves (41%). Because of the aforementioned adopted style of narrative, “here and now”, it needs to be noted that TV stations based their coverage on sources being on the one hand reactive (meaning that as the number of infections and thus the threat grew, so did the number of statements and statistics used), and on the other, dependant on the political decisions made by the government crisis management team.

This led to a situation in which the politicians had led the discourse, as it was their subsequent press conferences that brought the public further changes, restrictions, and decisions, undoubtedly making them a very (if not the most) significant source of information across the sampled broadcasts. In TVP1’s case, statements from the government or the President constituted over half of sources (57%). In Polsat’s “Wydarzenia”’s case, this was 42%, and TVN’s “Fakty”, almost 50%. When adding opposition politicians and their statements to these results, the following share of coverage was based on political sources: 70% for TVP, 55% for Polsat, and 71% for TVN. Detailed results, considering all of the types of information sources as captured in the categorisation key are presented on **Figure 40**.

Figure 40. Sources used to construct coverage in the main news broadcasts from TVP1, TVN, Polsat (total, n=551)



Source: Authors.

Analysing the presented results, it is difficult to overlook the fact that the researched media were significantly dependent in their coverage on political statements and decisions. The authors stipulate that this is yet another exemplification of the close relationship present between the political sphere and the news media in Poland. Referring to Hallin and Mancini, who in their classic publication on the contemporary media systems analysed the relationship between the political powers and mass media, this situation reflects the high degree of political parallelism (Hallin, Mancini, 2010: 47–51), a category that embodies tightening of the relationship between the political system and the media system. A high degree of parallelism can be found in a system in which

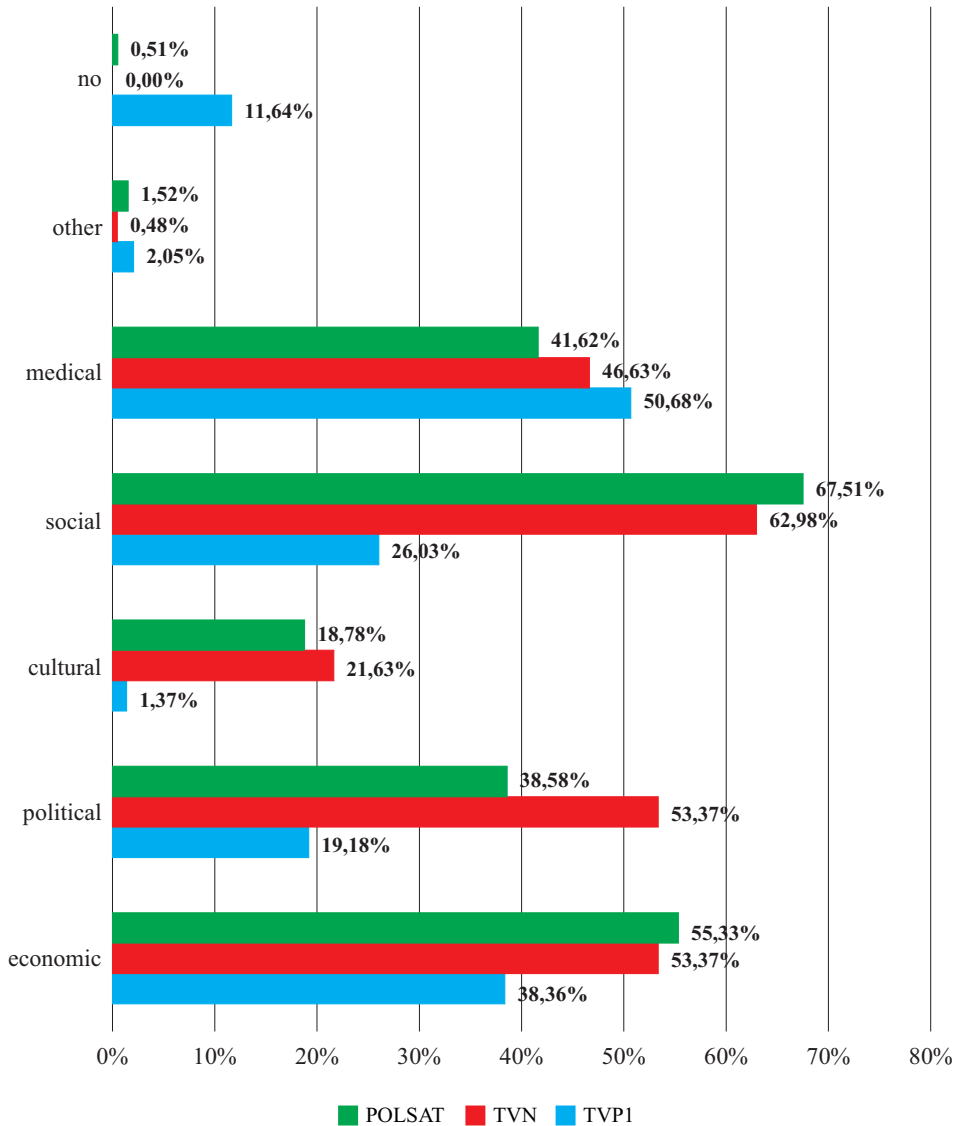
media content reflects (generally speaking) the political views and attitudes presented by the ruling class. Taking into consideration the results of the conducted analysis, it is visible that the degree of political parallelism in the Polish media system during the research period was very high. The sampled broadcasts often featured experts or people who were meant to explain often complex mechanisms of the pandemic spreading and the decisions taken by the government, such as the lockdown and introduced restrictions. When discussing a complex medical issue, such as the effect the virus has on one's body, or the mode of dispersion of the SARS-CoViD-19, editors were keen to invite scientists and doctors who then explained the complex issues. Expert statements were a regular feature across the research sample, with 61% in TVN's case and 50% in Polsat's case. TVP1 was a distinct outlier, with using expert statements as a source of information merely in 25% of sampled broadcasts. Furthermore, the presence of information without sources is worth noting.

The overall analysis of the research sample indicated that TVP1 exhibited a tendency to present unclear information or such unsupported by sources. 37% of news items from TVP1 were coded with unidentified sources used by the "Wiadomości" journalists. Such undefined sources were introduced using statements such as "it's being said", "as it's generally known", "it's no secret that...", or "people often say". TVP1 sourcing practice also includes relatively low use of experts (25%), and medical data (36%), which was much more present in the other two stations. The following **figure 41** presents the results of the analysis of the consequences of the pandemic as indicated in the research sample. Main news broadcast focused mostly on the following consequences of the spreading COVID-19 pandemic: economic (53%), social (63%), medical (45%), political (39%), and more rarely, cultural (15%), although the last category was featured on TVP1 in just 1% of broadcasted items. **Figure 41** also presents how TV media focused on topics close to the citizen. The virus itself, the course of the pandemic, number of infections, and economic, social and political consequences that affect all social groups dominated the research sample. The underrepresentation of cultural consequences can stem from the long-run perspective of such consequences and their delayed effect. It can also stem from the fact that cultural needs are not considered basic needs according to Maslow's pyramid, and as such the cultural/entertainment dimension occupied less public space in the face of the pandemic.

In coverage on national issues (**Figure 42**), social (55.33%), medical (40.44%), and economic (48.89%) consequences were the most prominent.

As aforementioned, national broadcasts were characterised by portraying these consequences which are have the most direct impact, most often employing consequence or human interest story frames. **Figure 43** presents the correlation between the consequences presented in sampled news items and the presence of the consequence frame.

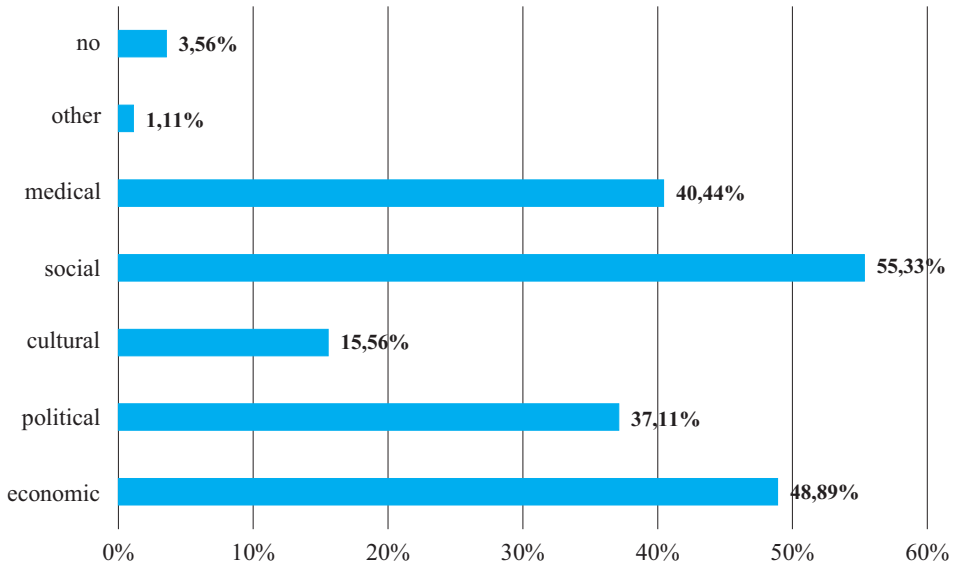
Figure 41. Indications of pandemic’s consequences in the main news broadcasts from TVP1, TVN, Polsat (total, n=551)



Source: Authors.

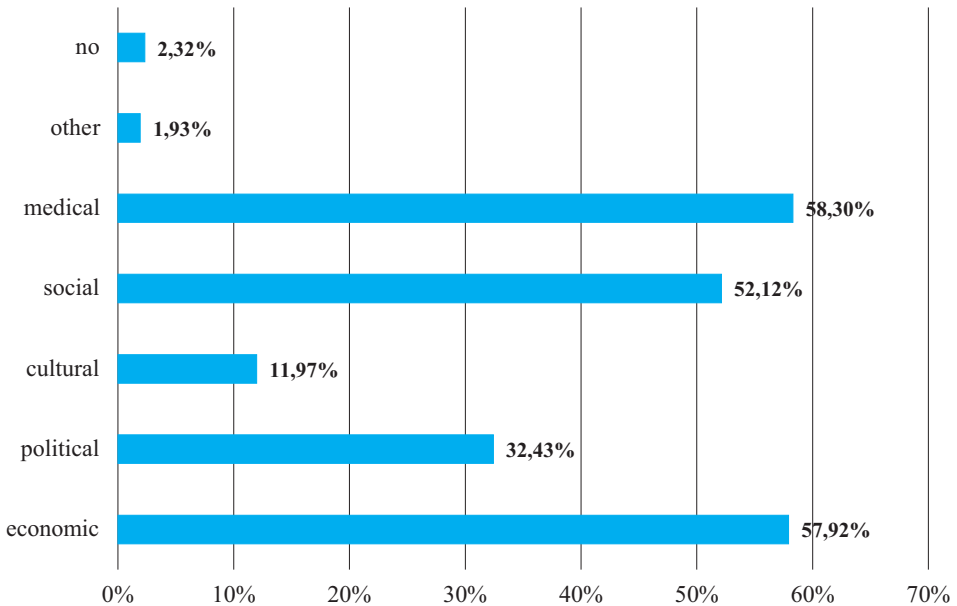
Consequence frame was present most often in materials highlighting the economic, social, and medical effects of the pandemic spread. Human interest story frame was most often present in materials dealing with social consequences, which is in line with the “common citizen” perspective often adopted by journalists when using this framing, as presented on **Figure 44**.

Figure 42. Consequences of the pandemic in national and local broadcasts (% share, n=450)



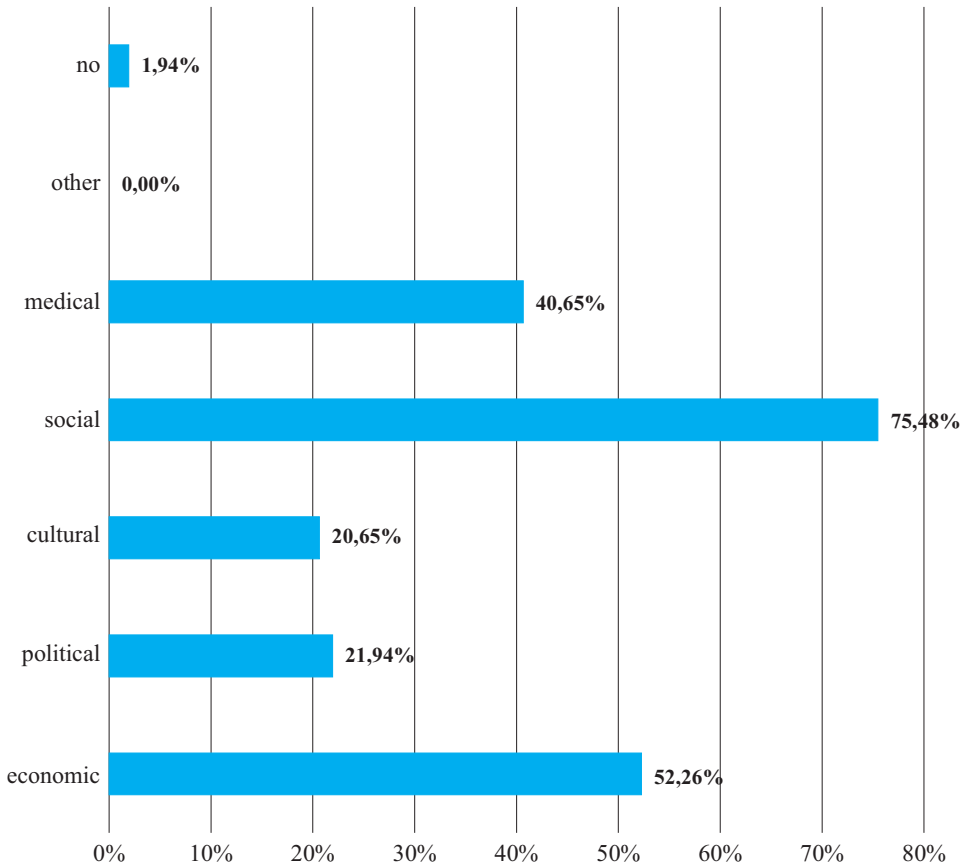
Source: Authors.

Figure 43. Consequences of the pandemic in coverage with consequence frame (% share, n=259)



Source: Authors.

Figure 44. Consequences of the pandemic in coverage with human interest story frame (% share, n=155)

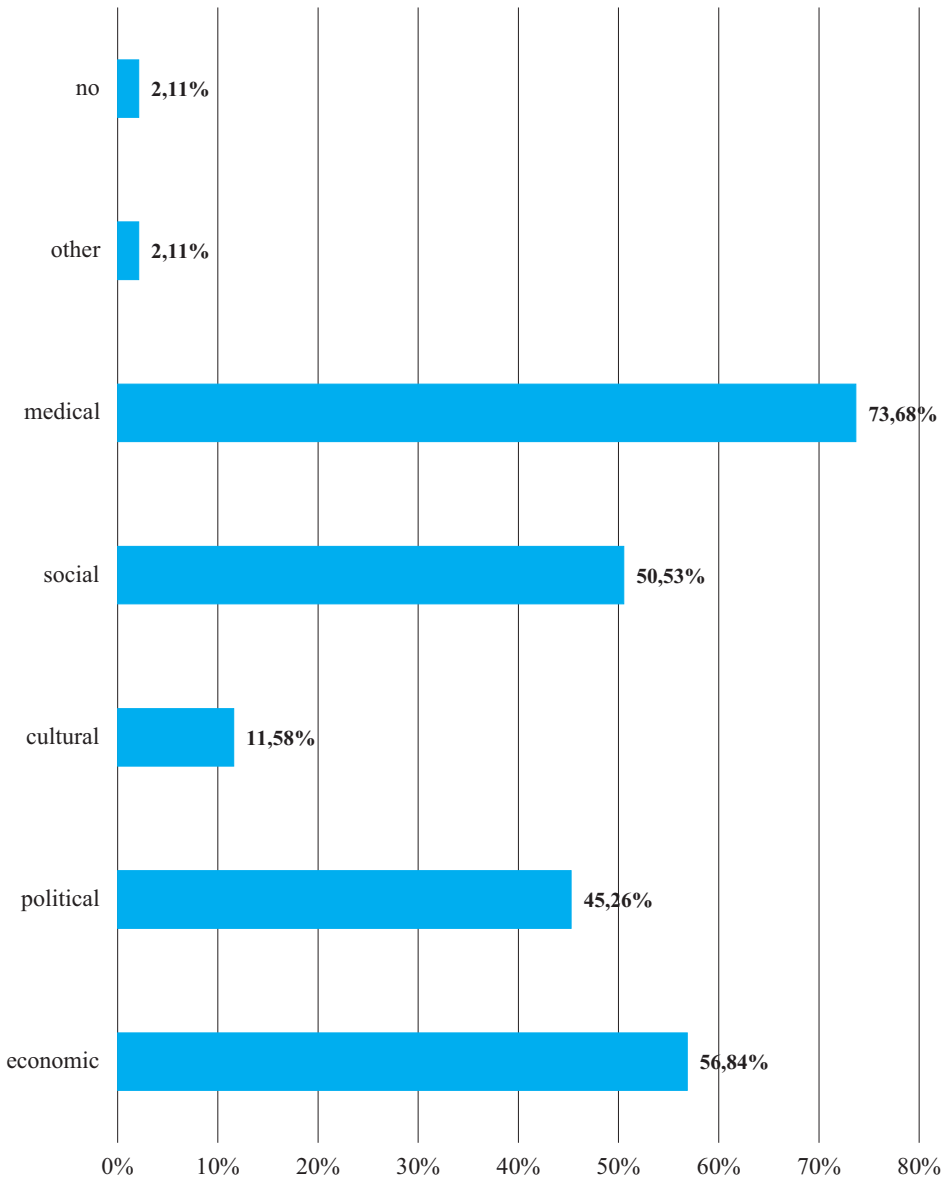


Source: Authors.

The portrayal of consequences differs when it comes to coverage on the abroad (Figure 45). In this instance, the effects of the pandemic were presented in the general view, how they impact wider social groups or even entire countries. Most commonly featured were reports on worsening economic (56.84%) and medical (73.68%) situation, with the latter, including number of infections and deaths, constituting the biggest part of the sample.

Messages were constructed based on the general social outlook, where a number of social issues stemming from the pandemic were featured (50.53%). Social consequences were portrayed differently in international coverage, as the broadcasts often featured the course of the pandemic across different countries. This meant that there was no particular attention paid to singular actors, social groups, or companies, and the social consequences touched exclusively the wider national group as a whole.

Figure 45. Consequences of the pandemic in coverage on abroad (% share, n=95)



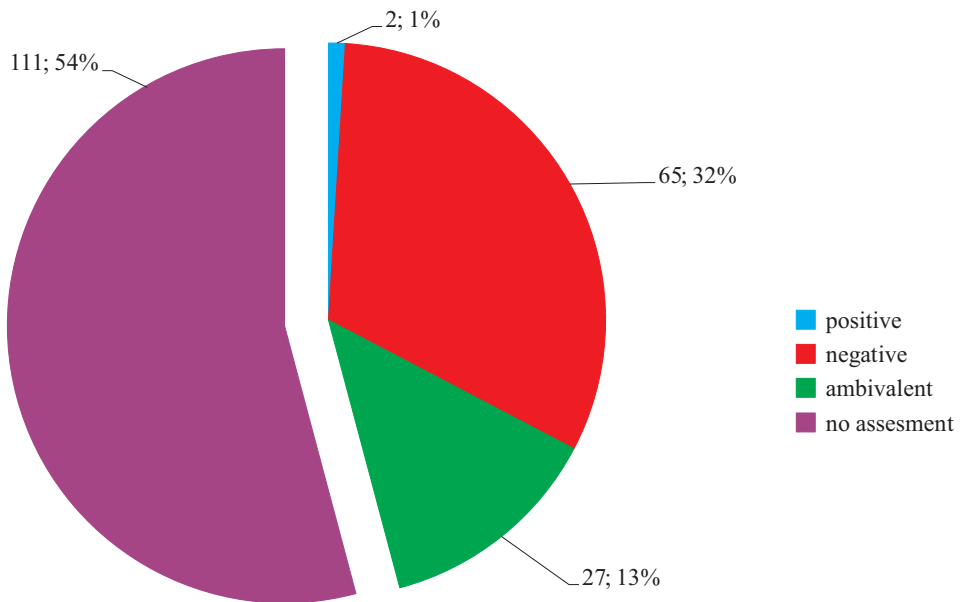
Source: Authors.

Assessment of the actions taken by the government in the research sample

Evaluating the assessment of the anticrisis actions and decisions taken by the Polish government made by journalists in the research sample is a crucial part of the

research conducted. A high degree of political parallelism present in TV media could be at root of the differences in coverage, as TVN presented a negative assessment of the government’s crisis handling, TVP1 a positive one, and Polsat has abstained from voicing its editorial opinion. TVN’s journalists were often relatively candid in their negative assessment of the government’s policies and its individual representatives’ statements and actions. They highlighted equipment shortages, inept and chaotic policy, shortcomings of the anticrisis “shields”, unclear business dealings relating to PPE purchases, pursuit of entrenchment of nondemocratic power mechanisms, or abuse of privilege stemming from party membership. In the entire TVN’s “Fakty” sample, 32% of materials were critical of the government pandemic-related policy, 54% were neutral, and mere 1% (two news items) contained positive assessment of the anticrisis action taken by the decision-makers, as presented on **Figure 46**.

Figure 46. Assessment of government’s actions in TVN’s coverage (% share, n=208)

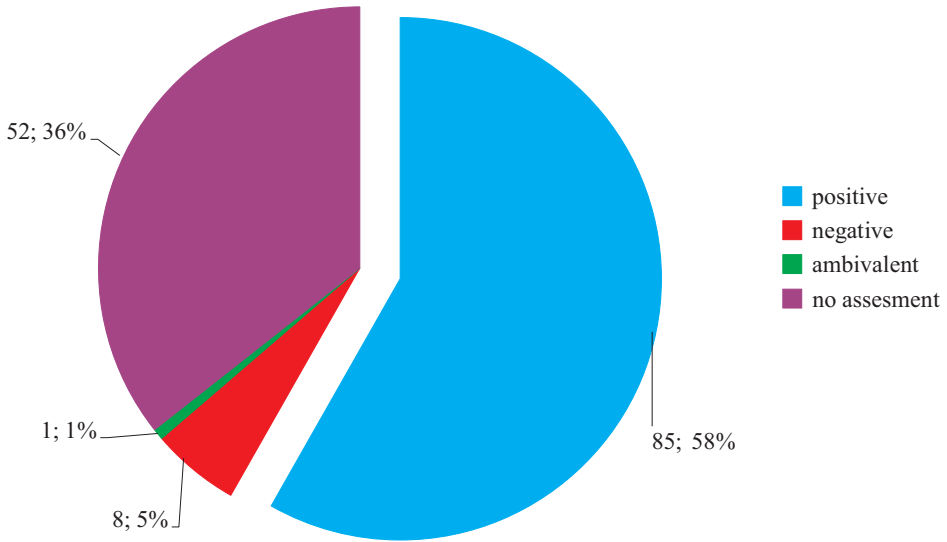


Source: Authors.

News items broadcasted in TVP1’s “Wiadomości” are in stark contrast to TVN’s portrayal, often broadcasting materials that portrayed government’s policies as unequivocally good, professional, and successful in combating the pandemic’s spread. Positive materials constituted 58% of the sample, while critical statements were featured in just 8% of news items, as presented on **Figure 47**.

Polsat exhibited a tendency to abstain from assessment on the anticrisis actions taken by the Polish government. The vast majority of news items (155,

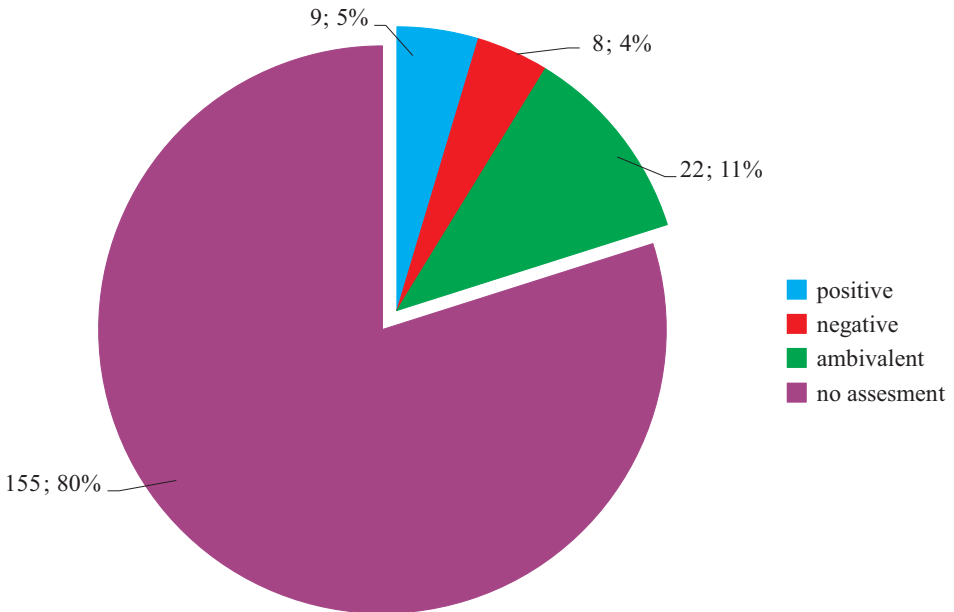
Figure 47. Assessment of government's actions in TVP1's coverage (% share, n=146)



Source: Authors.

80%) broadcasted in “Wydarzenia” did not attempt the assessment, as presented on **Figure 48**.

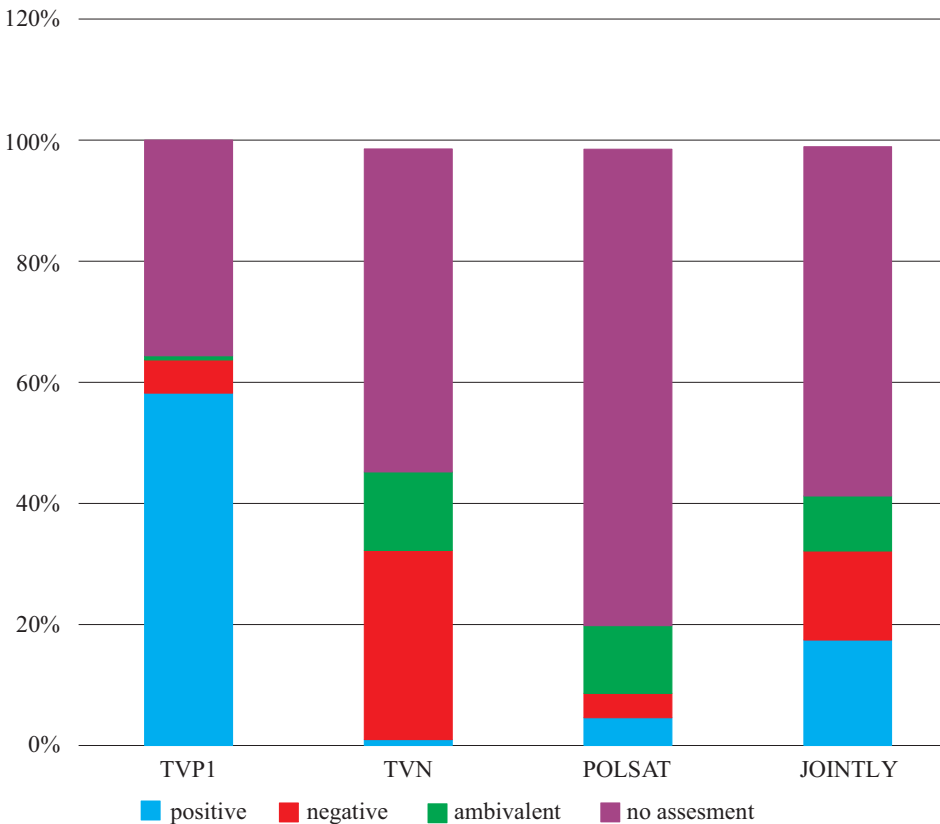
Figure 48. Assessment of government's actions in Polsat's coverage (% share, n=194)



Source: Authors.

The sample collected for this research once again revealed the ambiguity and high degree of diversification of the media narrative in the first wave of the pandemic in Poland. In TVP1's and TVN's case, both TV stations were relatively keen on presenting their journalists' opinion on the reported events. However, these assessments were utterly different, and the third broadcaster, Polsat, seemingly consciously and consistently avoided such assessments altogether. Television does not merely report, it also explains. As evidenced, these explanations often include an element of assessment as well. Based on the presented results, it can be concluded that these assessments were often inconsistent, and often presented contradictory pictures of the situation, if taking into consideration the entirety of the research sample. It may very well be that this diversity of views is yet another indication of the high degree of political parallelism, and the news media offering is simply a service – the presented assessment of particular political decisions facilitates audience reception and strengthens their convictions already held. The results discussed above are presented on **Figure 49**.

Figure 49. Assessment of government's actions in TV coverage (total, n=551)

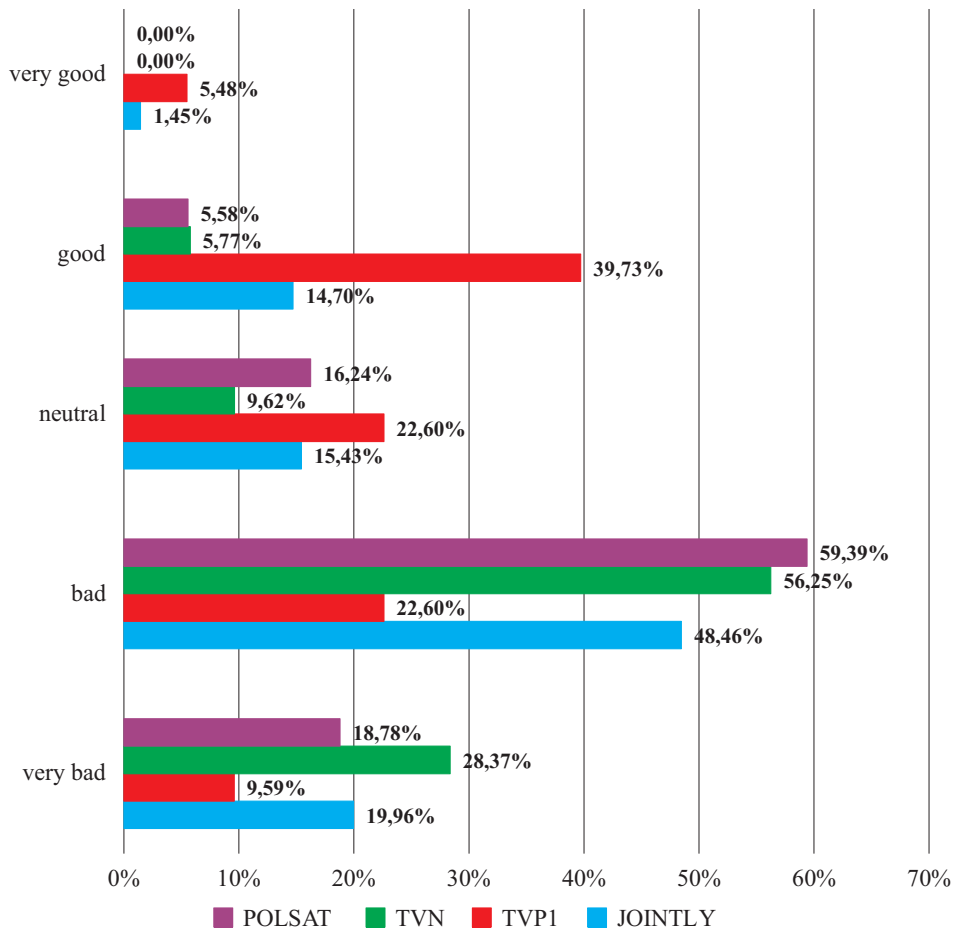


Source: Authors.

The situation in Poland as presented in the research sample

The situation in Poland, as portrayed in the research sample, can be described either as bad (59%) or very bad (19%), as presented on **Figure 50**. The results of this category are similar both in TVN's (56%) and Polsat's (59%) coverage. Once again, TVP1 introduces the dissonance in results, with its coverage indicating Poland's bad situation in 23% of cases, with 40% of their broadcasts portraying the unfolding of the pandemic in Poland as relatively good, which is a significant deviation from the other stations. This seems to evidence the aforementioned high degree of politicisation of the public broadcasters, associated also with the fact that the broadcaster was much more positive in its assessment of government's policy relating to the pandemic.

Figure 50. Picture of the situation in the country as presented in TV media (total, n=551)



Source: Authors.

This is also closely related to the potential to induce cognitive dissonance amongst the viewers. A viewer of TVP's research sample could determine that the research period in Poland was good, or neutral (23%), or bad (23%), but definitely not very bad (10%). On the other hand, a viewer of TVN could have a completely different view of the situation, as the station usually portrayed the same time as either bad (56%) or very bad (23%). Supplementing this with the aforementioned analysis results on the coverage on abroad, it can be determined that main news editions of main broadcasters were inconsistent across the board, and the view of the situation was not unanimous, but rather could be determined by the political preferences of a given broadcaster. Polsat in this context is the most neutral of the analysed media, as it offered very little assessment on the governmental policy, and portrayed the situation in the country as bad (59%).

The last element of the TV news analysis conducted was the language semantics used in the context of the coronavirus and its source of origin. The most common word in the context of the virus is, of course, the word "virus". Coronavirus was less frequent, and COVID-19 was very rare, used mostly in materials featuring statements from foreign experts or officials. Although emotional expressions such as "pandemic cyclone" or "plague" are used on occasion, they remain in the domain of the common citizen or reports from other media. TV broadcasters clearly avoided statements which in online journalism can be described as "clickbaits", meaning headlines that are designed to maximise attention.

The issue of the virus's source of origin was mentioned rarely in the research sample. There were statements indicating that the virus comes "from China" or, more precisely, "from the Wuhan Province", although it needs to be noted that these came mostly from foreign officials' statements. Researchers noted little interest in the source of the virus in coverage on national and regional levels. Even if this happened, the country of departure of the infected person was indicated, most often Germany or Italy, which, especially at the beginning of the research period, were the centre of the European pandemic.

The following final part of this publication contains data from a comparative study which employed a categorisation key divided between the Internet and television. The results of this comparative analysis are a valuable source of information on the differences between these media and are a worthy supplement to the already discussed results.

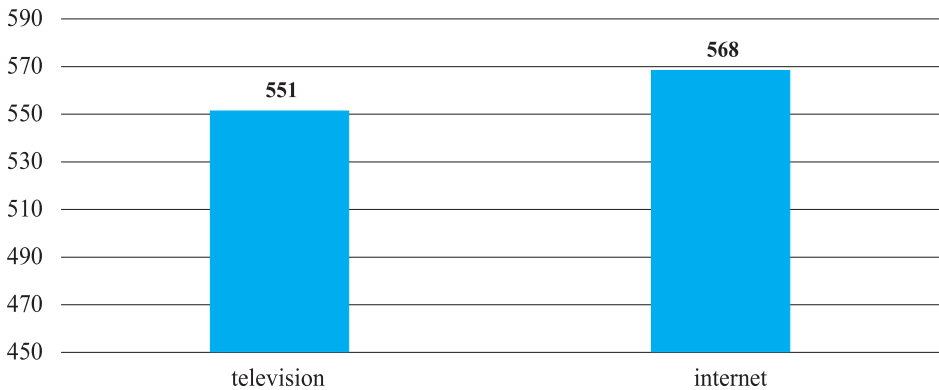
Chapter 4. Comparative analysis of the entirety of the research sample

The entire research sample included 1119 coded news items, from television and online news media. There is a slight disproportion in regard to the number of items sourced from a given medium, as presented on **Figure 51**. Moreover, even though the study included 3 TV stations and just 2 online media, the size range of items in the sample presents as follows: TVP1 has the smallest number of items in the sample (146), and wp.pl – the largest (342), which could be easily explained by the aforementioned factors: significant length of TVP1's broadcasts, and high dynamic of wp.pl reporting. News on wp.pl were often short, and at times, instead of updating a news item, the portal just published a new one instead of an update. TVP's materials were bridging³⁸ in nature, and combined a variety of topics, often disconnected with each other. One example could be a material which the journalists began by reporting on the number of new infections, to smoothly transition to opposition and its critique being a reason Sejm's remote access sessions are delayed in implementation.

TV coverage across stations was characterised by interweaving of varied topics, characters, and issues to a high degree. For television, where broadcasts, irrespective of station and the audition, run at minimum 3 minutes long, a more varied subject matter and actor selection is necessary from both the perspective of journalists (to fill in the broadcast with content), and viewers (who expect specific values from the broadcast). Moreover, TV news broadcasts are not interrupted by commercial breaks, which is worth noting, as online news publications are densely populated with advertising, regardless of the seriousness of the subject matter. However, online advertising functions based on appropriate ad positioning, with ads being planned ahead for the publication by external advertisers. Every online news item is a mere element of the portal's layout, and the location of ads is irrespective of journalists' intentions. This is why the adverts displayed, and their content, are oftentimes independent from the portal's owner, more depending on the algorithms based on user activity and their interest. This is why assessing advertisement accompanying online news would be difficult, as the ads are not related to the publisher itself, but user history and preferences.

³⁸ Meaning combining several varied topics into one material/news item.

Figure 51. Number of news items in the research sample by media type (total, n=1119)



Source: Authors.

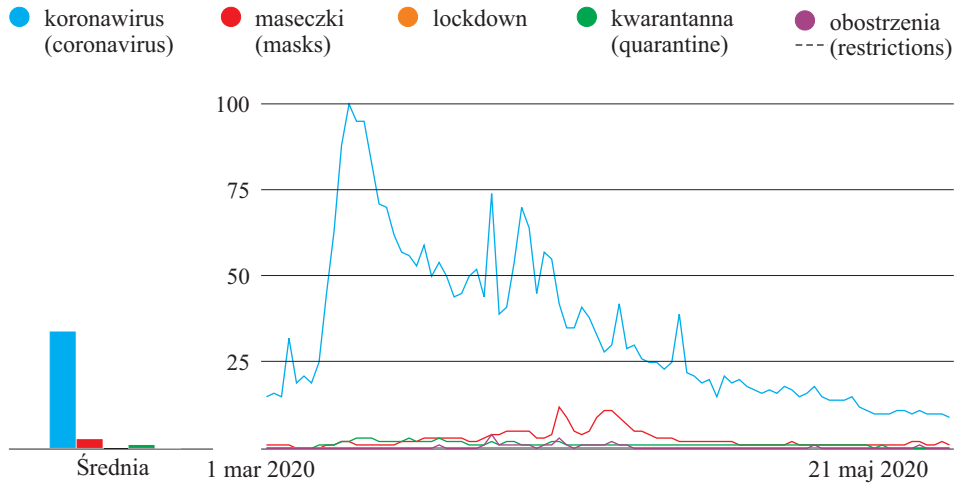
Number of news items relating to COVID-19 varied depending on the pandemic development in Poland. Worth noting is that TV broadcasters (especially) prioritised this subject matter and it was often the only topic covered in the main news editions across all researched stations. Initially, a degree of chaos resulting from the surprising nature of the virus in Poland, was noticeable. News broadcasts, both on TV and online, were mostly reactive towards past events at that point. There was little discussion on the development of the pandemic, its consequences, course, or the impact on the economy, politics, or the society. News items in the initial phase of the pandemic covered mostly reporting on the first case, activities taken by the government, characteristics of pandemic development abroad, and state of preparedness of the country and specific local governments (Kunert, 2020). Actions and statements from the Government and Poland’s president were deemed especially significant at that point, as it was the subsequent press conferences and press releases that served as the source material for broadcasts. This exemplifies the power of political elites to shape media discourse, especially in crisis situations.

Similar results can be obtained when using a popular tool to analyse interest, namely Google search trends. Taking into consideration the sheer number of people who get most of their information online, this is a worthy indicator to study. The newest report of Poland’s Central Statistical Office [Główny Urząd Statystyczny, GUS] entitled “Information society in Poland in 2020” noted that across all age groups Poles most often got their news on COVID-19 from TV or the Internet (GUS, 2020). **Figure 52** presents, in relative numbers, how often Poles (or Internet users in Poland³⁹) searched for particular phrases. This reveals an initial

³⁹ This tool is not perfect and is generally based on the location at which a given computer has connected to the Internet as a verification of the search origin. This is why there is a risk that people using VPN (virtual private networks, which can spoof the computer’s location) will not be

interest in the virus itself, which then fluctuates, and, by the end of May, decreases significantly. This could be related to some degree to the shift of focus to the then-upcoming elections and “defrosting” of the economy, as well as gradual adaptation to the new normal. The figure also reveals spikes of interest in searches related to the phrases: quarantine, face coverings, or lockdown relatively easy to associate with conferences or political decisions.

Figure 52. Interest in search phrases across the period of 01.03.2020–31.05.2020



Source: Google Trends, <https://bit.ly/3kd9d6L> (access: 21.02.2021). 100 = peak of popularity; 50 = twice less interest, 0 = no interest.

With the advance of the pandemic and the subsequent political decisions, other topics, pronoses and social actions increased in exposure. Moreover, the coverage increasingly featured other actors (which will be further discussed later on), and other sources of information. The initial communication chaos, brought to order by the subsequent press conferences, transformed into layering of other topics and issues, economic or social in nature. Additionally, there was an increase in news items discussing the accountability of decision-makers and including comparisons to other countries’ policies. In this instance, as already discussed, there were dissonant portrayals and opinions on the government’s policies. On the one hand, the situation was dealt with well or very well (TVP1), and on the other, TVN was very critical of the policies and presented a much better way of dealing with the pandemic in Western Europe countries. Comparisons with other countries were also featured in other media and were a popular topic online. Apart from discussions on specific themes, there were also publications comparing specific aspects (Rata-

captured. These instances are however assumed to be marginal in relation to the population, and hence should not influence the overall results.

zczak, 2020). Media oversight of government decisions has also taken ground, and critical discussion on callous or inconsistent transactions and decisions was more prominent (Gałczyńska, 2020). These themes were also noticeable in the research sample. TVN's journalists paid closer attention to unclear connections and controversial transactions of the Ministry of Health, and TVP1, to the fact that the opposition reportedly obstructed the move of Sejm's sessions to remote work environment, endangering the health and safety of politicians.

The character and leading topics of news items

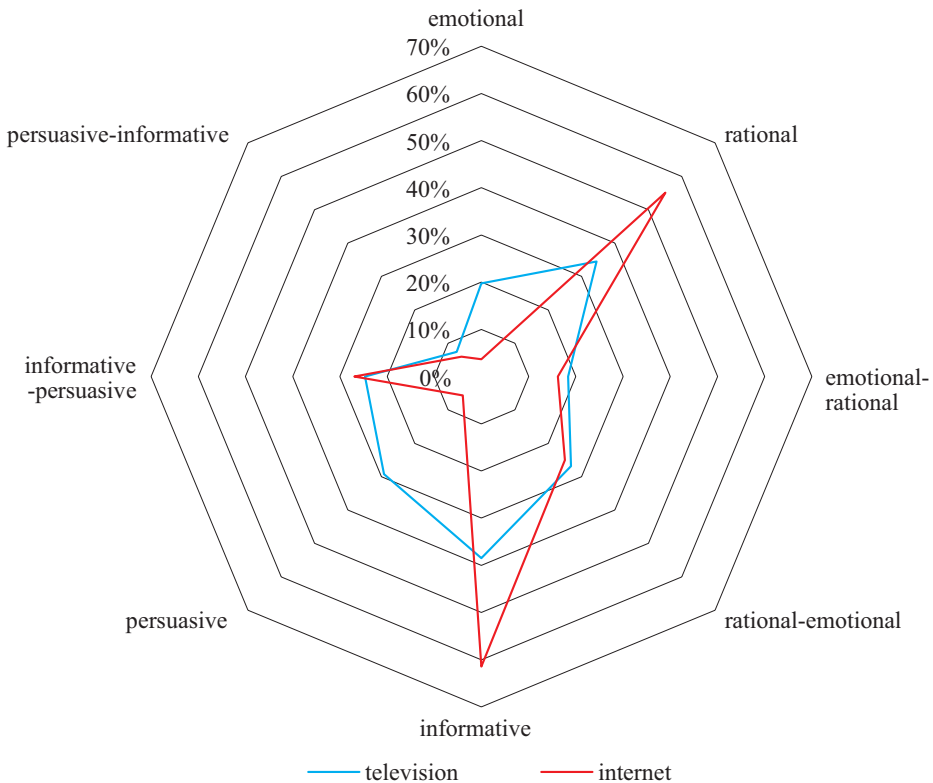
Figure 53 illustrates the character of news items in the general view, by type of media (online or TV). The basic distinction between these types of media is the informative (61.44%) and rational (55.11%) approach of online media, seemingly indicative of the Internet's focus on the information itself, and less so on supplying ready-made interpretative templates and opinions. This approach is more akin to journalistic objectivity and maximising the distance from subjective opinions. However, it needs to be noted that this approach somewhat limits the potential audience. Strictly informational content generally reduces uncertainty, but does not explain the surrounding reality. This explanatory function, which often goes hand in hand with persuasion and emotions (indicators typical for tabloidised media, relatively often for television, subject to market mechanisms and driven by viewership) is the basic difference between TV and online news items in the research sample (Piontek, Hordecki, 2010). While online media inform and their articles are rather rational in nature, TV deals mostly in emotion (over 64% in total), and partial or full persuasion (over 61% in total). The described differences will be reinforced in relation to the assessments and opinions stated by journalists or featured actors.

Nevertheless, even at this stage, television's more ludic approach to informing is evident. Alongside emotions, which are meant to enhance and support the broadcasted message, persuasion is also present, aiming to encourage a certain action, or a certain decision. Even though these actions were often aimed at virus-related prevention (e.g. social campaigns promoted by the media), they could also be critical reflections on particular social groups or phenomena. TVN for instance indicated that the rising numbers of infections and the decrease in number of administered tests was not only caused by inept government policy, but also – it may be – the result of a wider action aiming to decrease the official number of people infected, or at least limit access to such statistics.⁴⁰ The dichotomic divide of the world is

⁴⁰ This topic was included in media discourse and appeared in other media as well. At a certain stage of the pandemic some claimed that the government purposefully obstructed access to official infection numbers. On the one hand, data was given in a format that made it more difficult to ana-

typical especially for TVP1 and TVN, with the government, Law and Justice Party and the President of Poland serving as the axis of divide. In both cases, the viewers received a cohesive vision of the world as presented in news broadcasts, however based on entirely different sets of needs and values. In the case of TVP1, the viewers were supplied with a ready-made interpretative frame, in which they are a part of a society in solidarity with unified traditions and conservative values, which is often criticised by another (often foreign funded) private medium. This “package” included a vision of combatant Poland which triumphs over the pandemic, and is surely doing much better than the Western countries. On the other hand, in the case of TVN, the broadcasts portrayed the situation in the country as almost dramatic, simultaneously indicating blame (mostly on the government’s part) and projecting the viewer to be a part of the more progressive part of the society which holds influence and should object to government policies.

Figure 53. The character of news items relating to the pandemic by media type (% share, n= 1119)



Source: Authors.

lyse, on the other, with the pandemic on the rise, archival numbers were not presented anymore (see more: <https://bit.ly/2RHVECI>).

A strong use of emotion in messaging can also be noted in other cases. Influence over the audience can also be exuded by presenting a sort of dissonance between image and context, and the actual statement featured from the journalist or a news actor. For instance, at the beginning of the pandemic, “Fakty” broadcasted a segment featuring a paramedic dressed in full protective suit asking the public “not to panic”. The segment ended with the journalist voiceover stating “this is working for now”, however preceded with such footage as to indicate that that the author puts more emphasis on “for now” than “this is working” in terms of Poland’s preparedness for the pandemic.⁴¹ The research sample collected indicates that this news station often used a similar way of constructing its messages. Hospitals as presented resembled a fortress under siege; cinemas, airports and airlines were “going into bankruptcy”; parents were “chained” to their homes because of the introduction of remote learning; the national health service was about to be “clogged”; respirators have become goods “people were physically fighting for”; people “had no means to live”; medical personnel was at the “battle front”; and breaking quarantine or lockdown rules could result in a “punishment”; there was “an avalanche” of new infections. Broadcasts featured materials from other media, including emotional statements from local Italian authorities. Amongst them, there was an emotional statement from the Mayor of Lucera, commenting on hairdressers doing home visits to cut their clients hair.⁴² The mayor of Italy’s tourist town noted the frivolous attitude towards the virus, using vulgar phrases to describe this as “stupid” or even “idiotic”. This was not an isolated statement, and especially in the case of TV, it was a relatively frequent occurrence when depicting the course of the pandemic abroad (Decaro, 2020).

Further differences in the approaches taken by online and television media are clearly visible on **Figure 54**, which compares the leading topics relating to the pandemic. Presented data indicates that TV often takes the perspective of a common man, with almost 35% of coverage including human interest stories as leading topics. Wide and complex issues were portrayed on TV in the most accessible manner, relatively often through the influence they had on specific individuals. If a news item discussed social ostracism directed at infected or quarantined people, the social relationships behind this phenomenon were not discussed. Instead, the focus was on a particular individual facing death threats and having their recreational property destroyed.⁴³

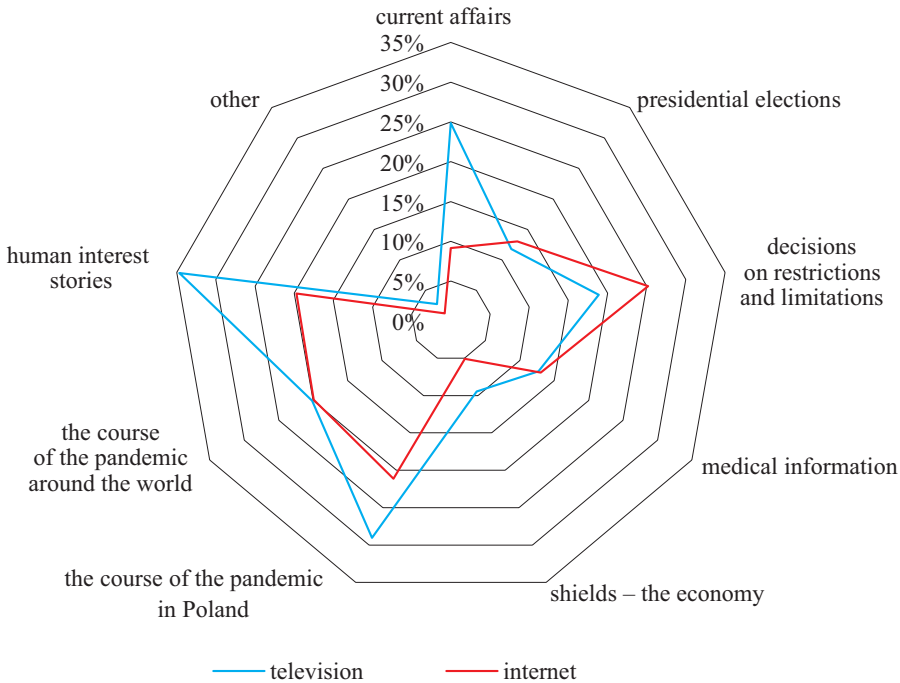
TV was also more reactive to political decisions and the politics itself was, both directly and indirectly, entangled with the pandemic issues. Even though reports on restrictions were less frequent (18.87%) on TV than online (18.87%), current affairs were a more prominent topic (24.86% vs. 9.15%). Online media featured general politics more often, with the research sample featuring mostly controversies

⁴¹ Fakty, TVN, 05.03.2020.

⁴² Fakty, TVN, 25.03.2020.

⁴³ Fakty, TVN, 05.05.2020.

Figure 54. Leading topics in sampled news items (% share, n=1119)



Source: Authors.

surrounding government policies and reaction to the course of the pandemic. The case of nursing homes which often became sources of the virus outbreak is a relatively stark example. Carelessness and disregard exhibited by local and national politicians made addressing the issue difficult. Similarly, the aforementioned case of inept and controversial purchases of PPE and respirators made by the Ministry of Health was linked to general government policy and presented as an argument weakening trust for public institutions. In TV's case, politics was present with almost every topic, as every topic could have been described as either a good decision on the government's part, or it's incompetency to a lower or higher degree. Even with relatively objective approach to reporting (Polsat featured the smaller degree of assessment) current affairs were difficult to avoid, as politicians, when given voice, used it to attack the opposing party.⁴⁴

Another relevant field of analysis are the differences between information itself being broadcasted as part of the main news editions. For instance, TVN did not inform the public about a government helpline dedicated to people who wanted information on the virus itself, while Polsat displayed an appropriate graphic with

⁴⁴ The aforementioned debate on the remote working of the Sejm could serve as an example where politicians battled with each other through criticism and commentary.

details. The researchers also noted frequent mentions of the Catholic Church in “Fakty”, often used to criticise the government (i.e. through showcasing the inconsistency in lockdown which was not applicable to an extent in cases of religious worship); as an authority and a role-model (using, amongst other, the Pope or other important clerics from Poland or the Vatican and their statements calling for lockdown or informing about online masses and worship); or as yet another public institution influenced by the virus, whose changes in functioning evoke cultural changes (i.e. different ways of receiving communion, confessions, or celebrating holy days).

The main difference in the analysed TV materials vs. articles published online was in their approach to social issues. TV, as noted before, presented news touching actual, real people, localised as close as possible (at least on a national scale), and relating to current affairs. Portrayal of politics is an integral element affecting the entire public space citizens exist in. It was not the virus that changed the many aspects of the human line, but the associated political decisions. As it turned out, the decisions taken in the context of such a serious situation as a global pandemic, have a direct impact on the organization of public social life. They can lead to months-long quarantine, which is difficult to leave because of the systemic and procedural challenges or an impossibility to get a test. They can also strand Poles staying abroad, who find out overnight that all flights are cancelled and the special ones organised by the governments are not gonna reach them. Governmental decisions can also induce chaos and misinformation, such as when hospitals were converted to dedicated Covid wards without prior information to their usual patients. Last but not least, the idea for postal presidential elections is worth mentioning. Even though it did not provoke longlasting medical or social consequences, it ended up being a very costly and ill-conceived idea.⁴⁵

Actors, general sentiment, facts and opinions present in broadcasts

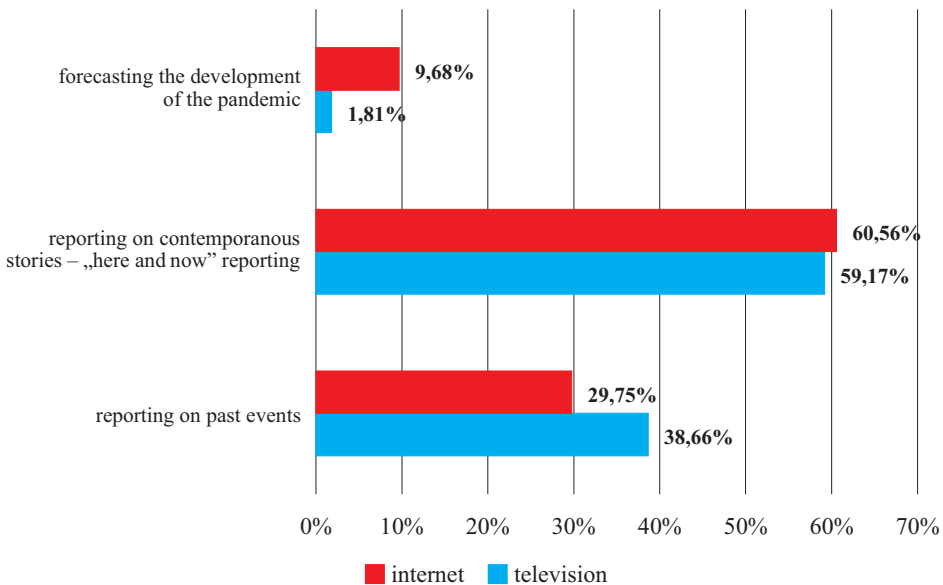
Prognoses (forecasts) for the development of the pandemic was not a priority of any news outlet (**Figure 55** and **Figure 56**). There are several reasons why this might be the case. Firstly, forecasting requires expertise and specialist knowledge that would require additional resources. Secondly, the high degree of importance being placed on the present, which makes the audiences consume media content in a more “live” way. TV is already a live broadcast, and the online news items were also characterised by high timeliness and were often constantly replaced by ever-newer news. It may be that viewers and readers are used to getting the freshest

⁴⁵ The planned postal elections were to take place on 10 May 2020, however they did not. As it turned out, the printing of ballots and commencement of various procedures cost the Polish Post Office (per TVN’s reports) PLN 70 million (see more: <https://notesfrompoland.com/2020/05/27/70-million-zloty-bill-for-polands-abandoned-presidential-election/> [access: 22.02.2021]).

news when reaching for news. For issues which do not require timeliness – such as polls or research results – they would look in more specialistic and technical media.

The relatively high number of forecasts present in online media is often related to its more specialistic character. Sample selection included informational news, from the “News” segment of both studied online portals. Apart from current news, publications on the development of the pandemic were also present. However, the vast majority of publications focused on “here and now”, or on the reports of past events.

Figure 55. Possible scenarios of the pandemic development (% share, n=1119)

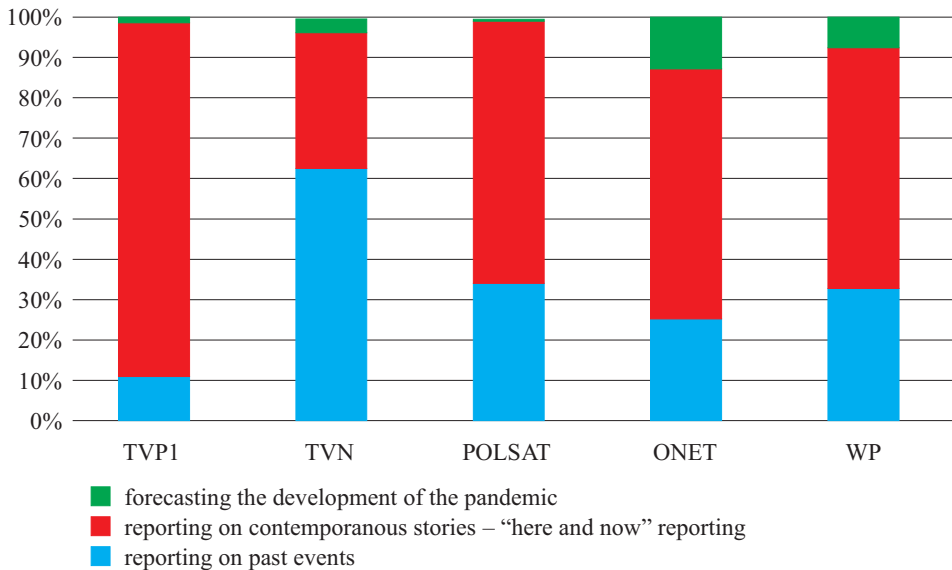


Source: Authors.

The reactive nature of the media stems from several factors. Firstly, it could have been related to the dynamics of the reported events (the development of the pandemic). Furthermore, the way news editorial staff worked was greatly influenced by the restrictions and limitations introduced by the government, which would influence the way materials were prepared. There was no room for forecasts, as all technical and human resources were dedicated to report on current or, if required by the situation, past events. Political decisions were also relatively chaotic and unpredictable which generated an element of surprise not only for the public, but also for the lower-level officials who had to implement the new laws and regulations. Subsequent restrictions were often introduced without consulting anyone, and often within weeks or even days, which caused issues for, amongst many, uniformed officers who for some time also had a duty to monitor people on

quarantine. Moreover, with evernew restrictions came doubts about their legality, which brought about many new topics for media coverage.⁴⁶ The sheer volume of timely and potentially important topics was so substantial, that the media could have little choice but to focus on reporting on the present and the near future. Notably as well, TV coverage expanded the reports on the present with commentary and clear-cut journalistic opinions. Detailed results are presented on **Figure 56**.

Figure 56. Forecasts of the development of the epidemic in Poland and abroad in main editions of news broadcasts on TVP1, TVN, POLSAT and news articles from wp.pl and onet.pl (% share, n=1119)



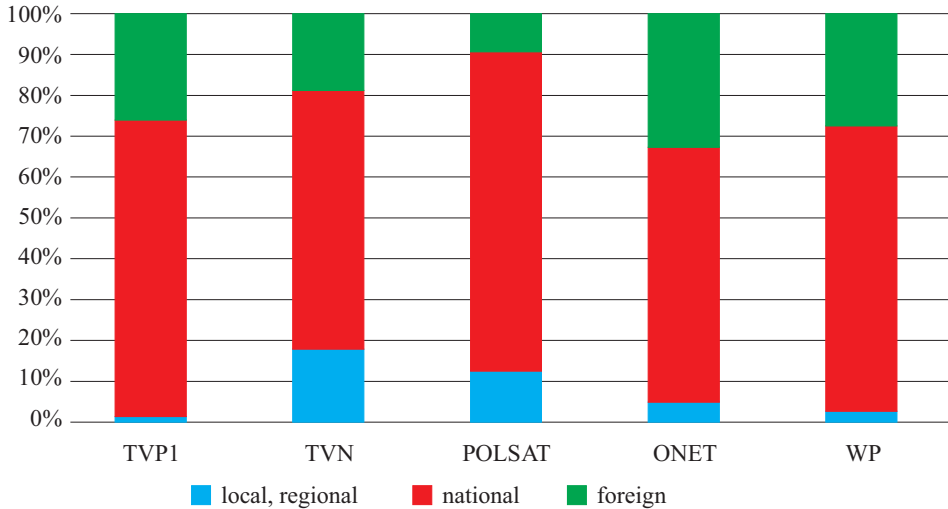
Source: Authors.

There are no distinct differences in approach to territoriality and geographical coverage across the researched media, as presented on **Figure 57**. When the media attempted to forecast the development of the pandemic, they focused almost equally on the situation abroad (48%) and in Poland (52%) as presented on **Figure 58**. Interestingly, there was absolutely zero (0%) interest in forecasting local developments. Even if the news item went down to the local (gmina or powiat)

⁴⁶ Decisions on restrictions were rooted in care for public health and attempting to limit the pandemic spread. However, the unclear procedure of introduction needs to be noted. The government chose not to introduce one of the states of emergency which would legitimate the limitation of civic freedoms as protected by the Constitution, yet introduced subsequent Regulations, and later on, Acts, which would drastically limit these freedoms. This should not happen, as no legal Act can be put above the Constitution (see more: <https://notesfrompoland.com/2020/04/18/polands-coronavirus-restrictions-are-unconstitutional-unlawful-and-risk-years-of-legal-chaos/> [access: 22.02.2021]).

level, it dealt exclusively with the past and the present, and there were no attempts to forecast the situation on a local level. This can be a result of the lack of space in national programming to cover complex issues touching local communities.

Figure 57. Geographical coverage (territoriality) of the research sample (% share, n=1119)



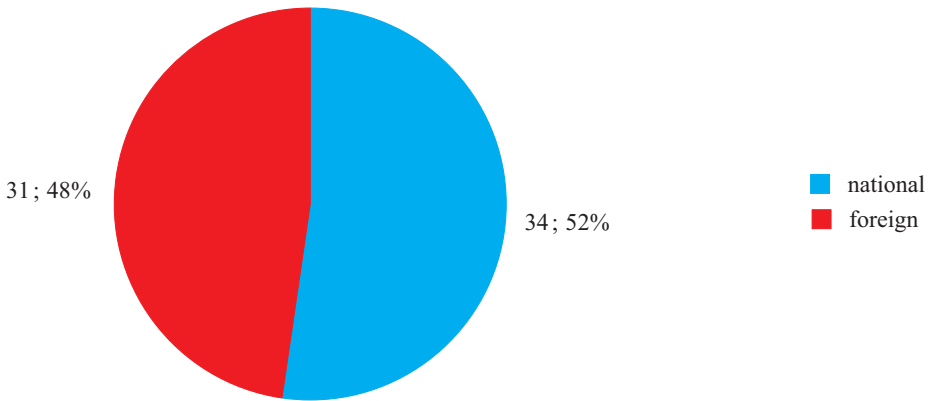
Source: Authors.

At the initial stages of the pandemic, TV media, covering local news, focused mostly on controversial events, such as a representative from Ślubice’s Sanepid⁴⁷ sharing intimate details from personal and sexual life of an infected patient during a press conference, the town of Kozy featured being the first town in Poland to close cultural and some commercial establishments, and a voyt who started an infectious domino effect after contracting the virus, passing it on to his teacher wife and needing to close down the school. This is evidence of local news to be both detailed and incidental in nature, and rarely related in any way to the wider context of the national, or global course of the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic was portrayed in the research sample predominantly as a threat and a phenomenon negatively impacting Poland (Figure 59). The only difference worth noting was a (relatively small) variation in terms of neutrality, with TV broadcasting just 5% of neutral news items, and online portals publishing 12% of neutral content within the research sample. Such categorisation was closely related to the materials on a variety of social campaigns, where the seriousness of

⁴⁷ Sanepid is a colloquial name for the State Sanitary Inspection, a public health institution whose responsibilities include the oversight and control over the health and safety in different areas of life. During COVID-19 pandemic Sanepid was also responsible for collection and compilation of associated statistics from across Poland.

Figure 58. Location (geographical coverage) of news items featuring pandemic forecasts across the research sample (% share, n=313)



Source: Authors.

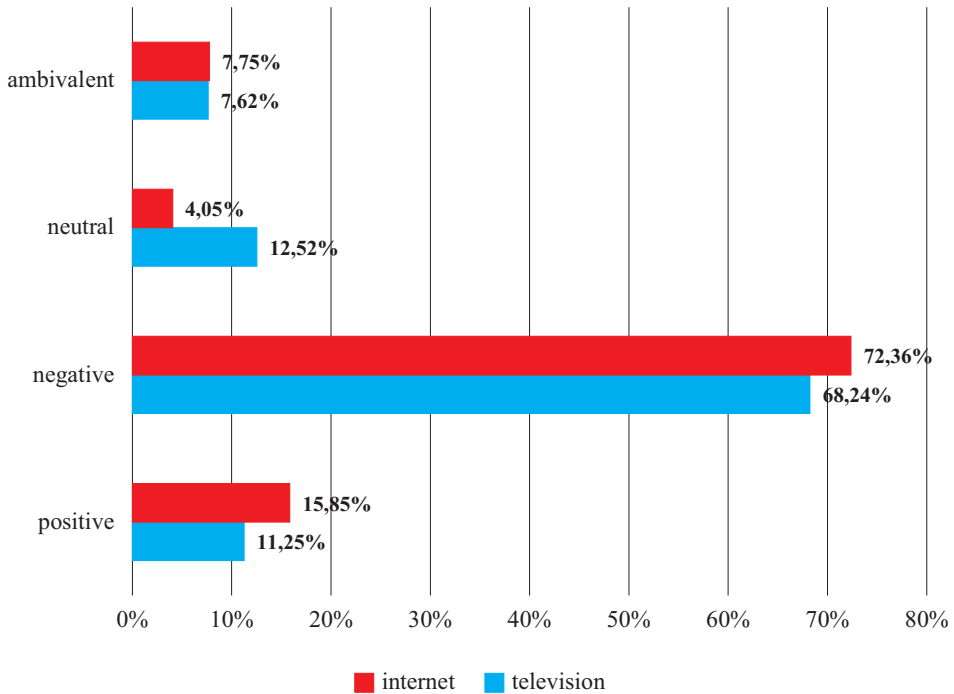
the virus was discarded for the sake of the growing solidarity, social sensitivity, or empathy. The virus then became something “almost neutral” that people got used to, and thanks to which they discovered the existence of their neighbours, elderly people, and those exposed and worth helping. This brought a number of fundraisers, campaigns to help the elderly, balcony concerts, and other initiatives. The situation as it related to the pandemic became an afterthought, and even though it was still current and influenced people’s lives, it became something neutral. Neutral like the seasons who prompt us to change our wardrobe.

A positive sentiment was present in news items in the second half of April and beginning of May 2020 in particular. The pandemic situation was said to be improving, and the improved outlook on the situation was partly caused (especially in TVP1’s case) by the upcoming presidential elections. These weeks heard voices that the pandemic has been restricted, the virus is in retreat, and there is nothing to indicate that the elections should not take place.⁴⁸ Moreover, the decisions to ease the restrictions and begin the “defrosting” of the economy further fuelled this relatively positive outlook on the situation, which was then reflected in media coverage. The short lifespan of this optimism however led to positive sentiment being present in just 18.85% of online and 11.25% of TV coverage. This difference could be explained by the frequent and daily updates of online news portals, as the TV has limited options to include specific topics in main news editions.

Crossreferencing general sentiment and the main news actors yielded some interesting results, as presented on **Figure 60**. This perspective reveals a much higher exposition of political actors in television than online, regardless of sentiment of coverage. Similar is the case of experts, whose opinions were often featured

⁴⁸ See: “Wydarzenia”, Polsat, 10.04.2020; “Wiadomości”, TVP, 10.04.2020.

Figure 59. General sentiment expressed in the COVID-19 pandemic coverage across all media types (n=1119)



Source: Authors.

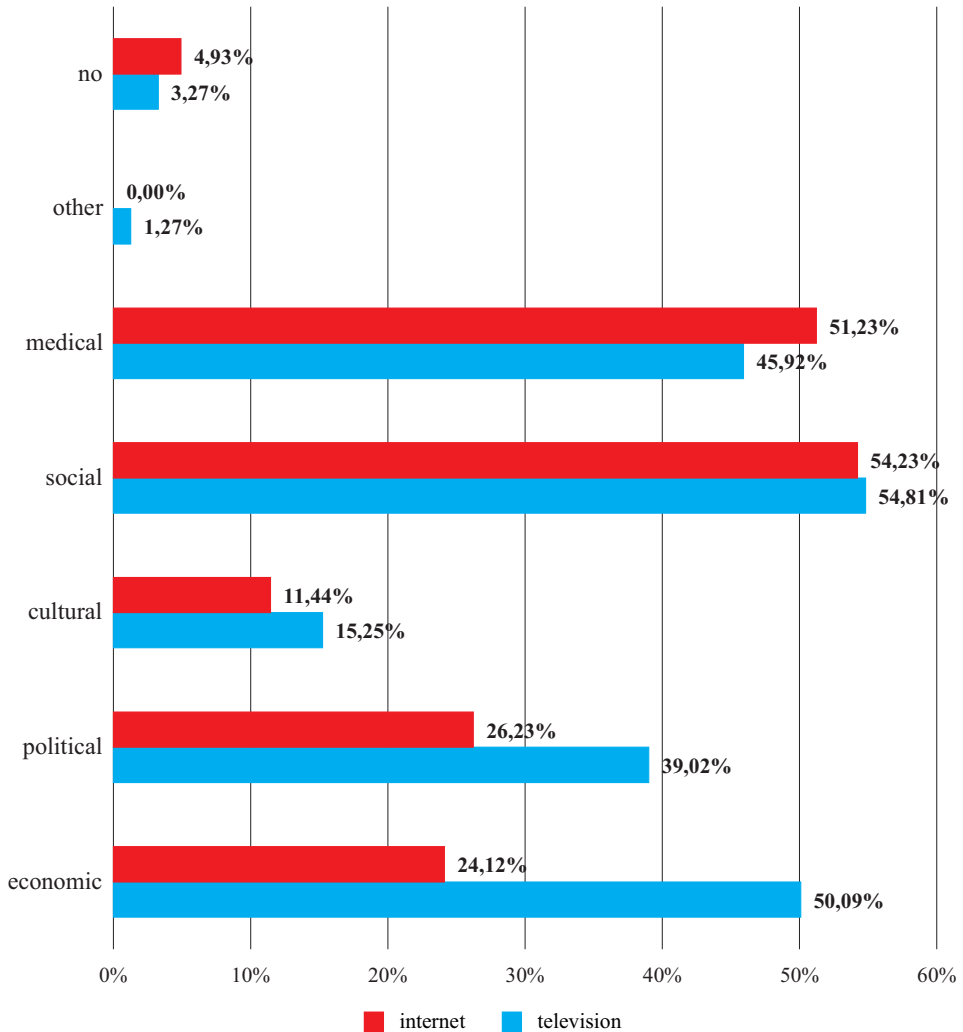
across sentiments. Expert opinion was relatively often used to highlight certain issues and to legitimise certain views. For instance, if a given news items discussed the shortcomings of the financial support programme aimed at entrepreneurs, TVN’s coverage built its narrative around experts critiquing the shortcoming and the convoluted application process.⁴⁹ For the same issue, TVP1’s experts not only praised the idea, but also the form of execution, as well as an incredibly fast legislating procedure.⁵⁰ Experts included scientists, academics, and professionals. For instance, a cultural topic would feature a director of a theatre, and remote learning coverage a psychologist or a school’s headmaster.⁵¹ TVP1 also featured experts who were in fact journalists from other media in “Wiadomości”, which could be the cause of the 29.03% of positive materials having other media’s representatives featured, as TVP1 projected the most positive outlook across the research sample, as stated in previous sections.

⁴⁹ Fakty, TVN, 17.04.2020.

⁵⁰ Wiadomości, TVP1, 17.04.2020.

⁵¹ Fakty, TVN, 06.03.2020.

Figure 60. Information actors and the positive or negative sentiment of coverage (n=1119)



Source: Authors.

Notably, in the case of TV, not a single opposition politician was featured in positive materials. This can stem from the previously discussed model of crisis management adopted, where political actors were at the forefront of communication. It was the government who mandated the narrative that the media and the society adjusted to, and the role of opposition was, most often, to merely refer to this narrative, as illustrated by the fact that governing party politicians were featured in almost 70% of positive news items. For online news portals, the distribution of government’s politicians across sentiments was relatively equal, with 32% of negative content and 36% of positive content featuring politicians in power. Moreover,

the virus and its victims rather naturally determined the negativity of a news item, although they were not a commonplace feature (7% of negative online coverage and 23% of negative TV coverage).

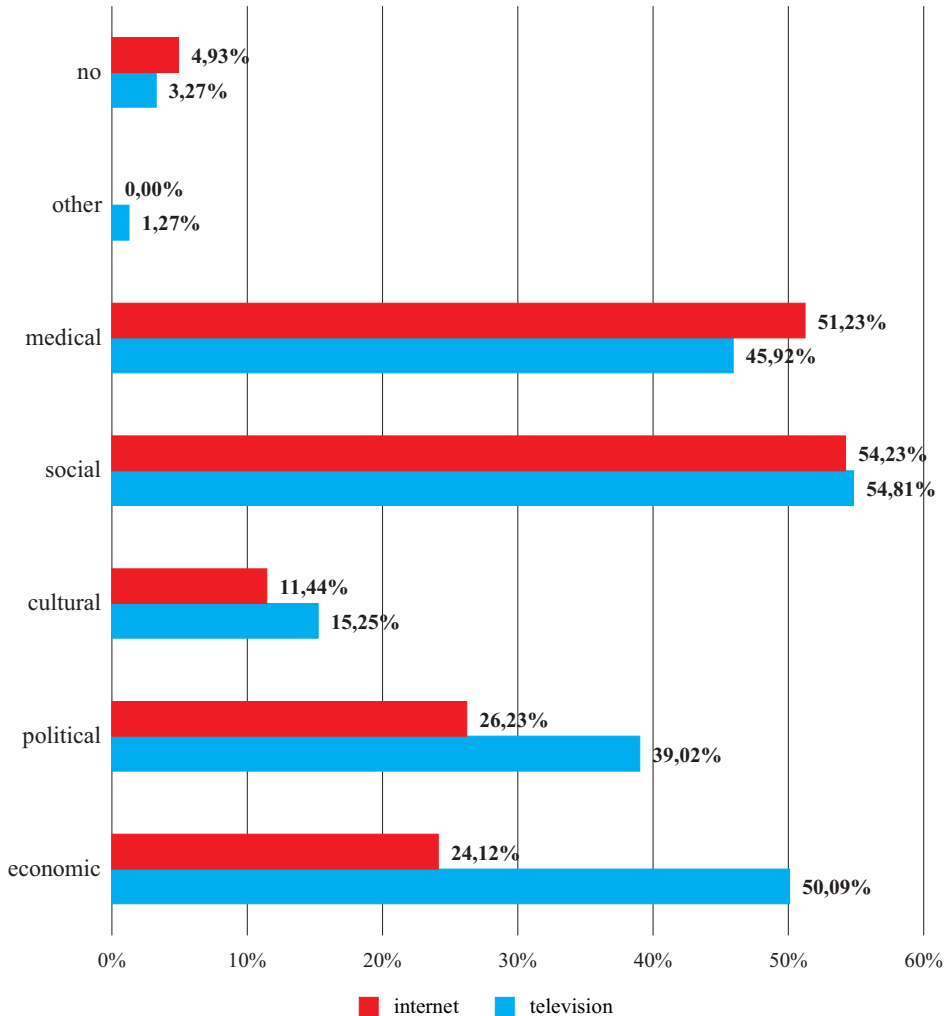
Yet another difference between TV and online coverage can be found in their approach to the common citizen. In almost 50% of TV broadcasts featuring the common citizen, the sentiment expressed was positive. This is indicative of a certain dichotomy in presenting issues, typical of tabloidised media, as the clear divide of the world facilitates the consumption of content by the viewer. If citizens are presented in a positive light, it is relatively easy for the viewers to associate them with “the good ones”, and understand who “the bad ones” are, regardless of political affiliation.

Framing pandemic news, consequences of the pandemic in sampled broadcasts

The most frequently featured consequences of the pandemic across the research sample are either medical or social, and **Figure 61** presents a significant difference in terms of economic ones. Online media focused on this narrative much less frequently (24.12%) than television (50.09%). Changes in the economy resulting from the pandemic severely influenced entrepreneurs and citizens, and money was a frequent topic mentioned in various contexts. Political decisions had a twofold impact, both on the national scale (enterprises closing down, restriction in business operations), and in the microeconomic perspective. Economic consequences impacted students (who lost means to live as many establishment who usually hire them could not do so and because of the fact that they would normally be covered by social insurance), business owners who were both directly (e.g. restaurateurs who faced restrictions and many, subsequent closures) and indirectly (e.g. those who supplied catering or other services for offices whose employees started to work remotely) influenced by the restrictions, and people in general (who complained about e.g. price increases for items for personal hygiene, medications, or even air purifiers). These economic consequences were most frequently portrayed in a negative light, even though the pandemic also had a positive influence on some branches of the economy, as reflected in source materials. These branches include technology firms, companies selling electronic equipment necessary for remote work, or specialists in ozonation, who generated huge profits, and for which demand far outgrew the supply (Smart, 2020). A comparative summary of the consequences of the pandemic are presented on **Figure 61**.

TV coverage featured politics more frequently than online articles, which seems to be a natural consequence of its approach to reporting in general. While online media discussed political consequences of the pandemic in 24.12% of articles, TV broadcasts totalled around 40%. This generates an array of questions, in-

Figure 61. Indications of pandemic's consequences in the research sample (% share, n=1119)



Source: Authors.

cluding ones on media politicization. Although political decisions instituted public discourse, political consequences were discussed less frequently. The results of the analysis indicate that messaging in TV broadcasts was more extensive and complementary, and the negative consequences of the pandemic were discussed in every category classified in the categorisation key. This is why TV coverage contained more visible assessments, subjective opinions, or blame attribution in regards to the situation or dealing with it. The case of television illustrates the far-reaching external pluralism under which a variety of views are represented. TVN presented

liberal worldview, strongly connected to the opposition, much more often than TVP1, where there is strong support for the government and related politicians, and whose decisions were hailed, and the situation in the country was presented as either good or relatively good.

Online media featured less topics who could evoke such strong emotions. There was a smaller focus on politics and the economy, and more medical and social changes were discussed, associated with the reporting on the course of the pandemic in Poland and abroad. Here, issues were presented as less individualistic and touching the entire society, and as such online coverage featured, as aforementioned, less common citizens and their individual issues and comments. A wider, macro approach to reporting was taken in this case. This could also be indicative of a more specialist and technical approach to the matter. Online publications are also more fragmented and shorter, because of their characteristics and indexing requirements for search engines, making them often 300 words at maximum. As such, television broadcasts had space to base their entire piece on a quarantined family, who remained under restriction for over 3 weeks because of the lack of procedural clarity,⁵² or to include interviews with (in)direct victims of the virus.

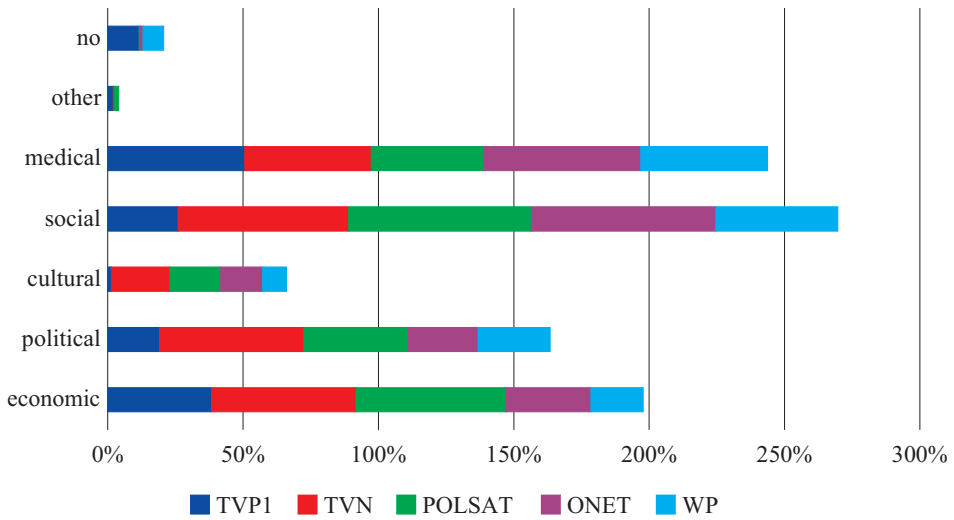
That being said, the differences in reporting across research media are not significant nor far-reaching, and are in line with the character of the media type and its systematic shape. Politicisation of television is visible, which in turn relates to its tabloidization which influences the emotionalisation and dynamization of the content included. More persuasion and emotion is present, but also assessments and morality and blame attribution (as previously discussed). Online portals informed mostly on consequences in a wide and far reaching context, not only for particular social groups, but also for entire nations. The analysis of the research sample did not indicate any significant differences in describing the consequences of the pandemic across types of media. Detailed results are presented on **Figure 62**.

Consequences of the pandemic spreading, as captured in the research sample, touched numerous social groups, which was presented in a way most accessible to the audience. If medical consequences were discussed, it was through the prism of the effects on people, methods of protection, course of the infection, and things to note in one's own prophylactic. If social consequences were discussed, it was in the context of the virus and the subsequent restrictions and their influence on human habits and behaviours, be it communication through the Internet, remote learning, or empty city centres.

Economic consequences were mostly the ones which touched people themselves. The media did not attempt to discuss the pandemic's influence on the complex processes and mechanism of the global (or national) economy, but reported on things directly influencing individuals: price increases of specific products, or financial troubles of particular industries, their employees, or entrepreneurs.

⁵² Fakty, TVN, 12.03.2020.

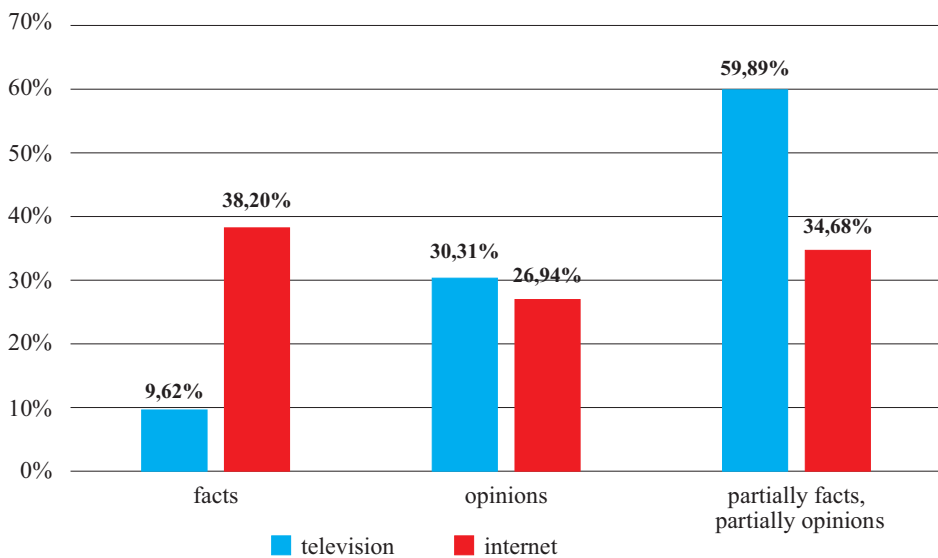
Figure 62. Indications of pandemic's consequences in the research sample (total, n=1119)



Source: Authors.

News items broadcasted on TV were longer and more complex than those published online. This stipulated the diversity in sources of information across media types (Figure 63). Sources as described were not just factual, stemming from their

Figure 63. Facts and opinions present in the research sample (% share, n=1119)



Source: Authors.

sheer volume and the characteristics of television. Explaining the surrounding reality within specific frames required employing facts and opinions interchangeably. This resulted in relatively rare exclusive use of facts on TV (9.62%) in comparison to the Internet (38.20%). Interestingly, online publications almost never featured statements diluting the source of information, such as “it’s being said”, “as commonly known”, “according to the majority”. These were much more prominent in the main news editions of TV broadcasts, where statements like “the society understands the reasons behind restrictions”, or “entrepreneurs are sure to appreciate the governmental «shield»” were common. Moreover, experts (especially ones distant to the subject matter) featured referred to such “common knowledge” and general awareness.

Television often created a dichotomic divide in its messaging, as captured in the research sample, by dividing the society into “us” and “others”, who could be for example the politicians responsible for small businesses closing down. Relying on opinions, or partially opinions and partially facts, facilitates this portrayal of reality. Additionally, it allowed for creation of the sense of belonging and a common cause. For instance, TVP1’s cause could be reliance on the government who never failed, and the protection of morality and tradition. For TVN – critique of the government and social groups who stand in the way of liberalisation of values, typical of countries with a strong and long-lasting democracy.

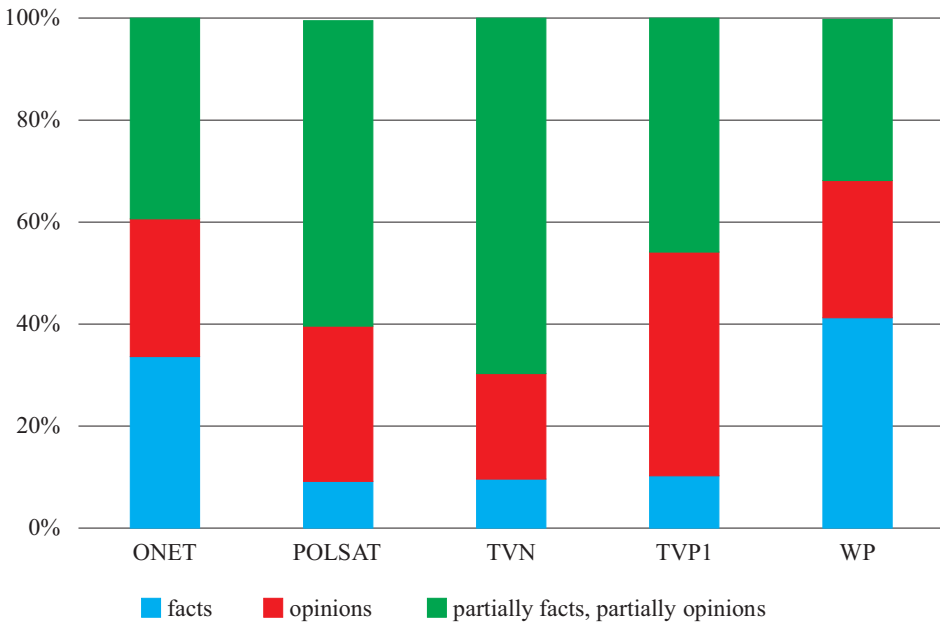
It is notable that these issues are presented in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as noted in the literature on the topic, politics is often a catalyst for conflict regardless of the leading topic of the messaging (see for instance: Hatalaska, 2020). In terms of the pandemic, descriptions of politics, policy, and politicians, associated decisions, issues, statements, and conflicts, were prominent in media coverage, and the audience was constantly exposed to them.

If media type is taken into consideration, distinct approaches to building messages are revealed. A summary is presented on **Figure 64**. Fact-based news items gain importance for online publications (41% for wp.pl and 34% for onet.pl), and reliance on opinion decreases (both online portals at 26%). This could be somewhat caused by the condensed format of online news items, often limited to one topic.

Although TV broadcasts had limited time, they were no shorter than 3 minutes and one news item featured various experts, opinions, topics, or issues. This could be the reason why multiple types of sources were often used, as one item would feature data from official documents and statistics, but also opinions and comments from politicians or common citizens.

Television featured politicians more often than online media. **Figure 65** contains data on information actors from the research sample by media type. TV journalists commented, rather pejoratively, on the establishment of many crisis management teams as a way to combat the pandemic. They also give platform to politicians who question, comment, critique, praise, or appeal to the audience

Figure 64. Facts and opinions present in the materials by media type (% share, n=1119)



Source: Authors.

to “look at government’s hands” or “stay at home”.⁵³ Politicians are in charge of the discourse, press conferences serve as a reference point for news broadcasts. Even when vaccinations are discussed, it becomes political. When one of the Polish companies designed a quick test for coronavirus, it was immediately painted both as a success of an innovation-financing policy, and an enterprise which faces a long and painstaking process to implement its product to a market colonised by politicians stumping innovation.⁵⁴ The research sample also included humorous content. For instance, presenting politicians in a typically ludic role who present novel forms of greetings in a humorous way, or face coverings which can serve not only for protection, but also as a fashion accessory.⁵⁵ However, politicians were not exclusive to discourse creation. Apart from independent factors (such as infection numbers) politicians also had to react to topics created by the society itself and promoted by the media. For instance, the Minister of Health spoke on a dynamic purchase drive for disinfectant products and other basic need items, commenting that “there is no need to attack the shops”.⁵⁶

In the Internet’s case, there are no distinct differences in this aspect. The number of actors featured was relatively lower in comparison to TV broadcasts, as the

⁵³ Fakty, TVN, 04.03.2020.

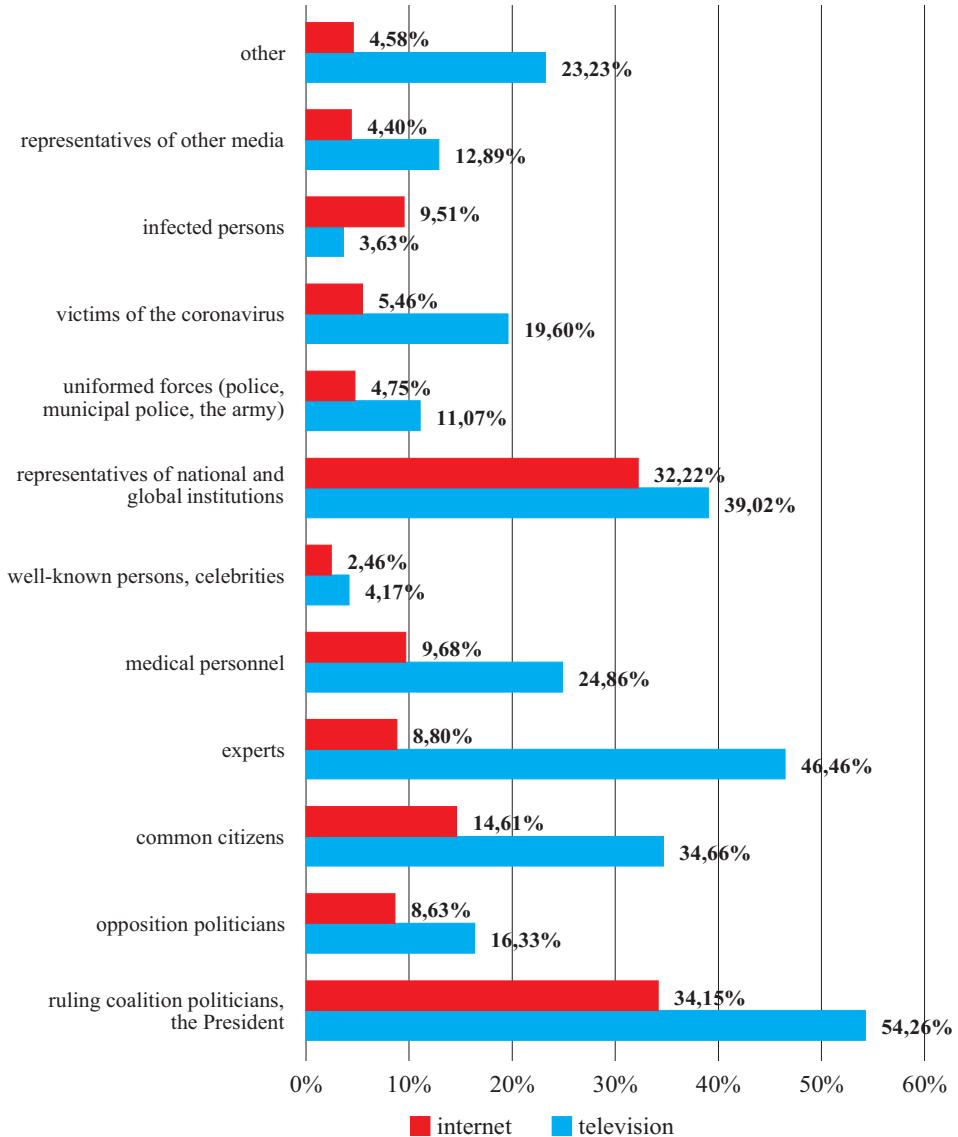
⁵⁴ Fakty, TVN, 15.03.2020.

⁵⁵ Fakty, TVN, 23.03.2020.

⁵⁶ Fakty, TVN, 12.03.2020.

news items themselves were far less complex and relied less on external voices. Except for the people infected (9.51% online, 3.63% on TV), there was no particular group of actors who received particular attention. Even though politicians were present, this can be explained (as aforementioned) by them being discourse creators and as such gaining more exposure, as it was their decisions at root of the reported item.

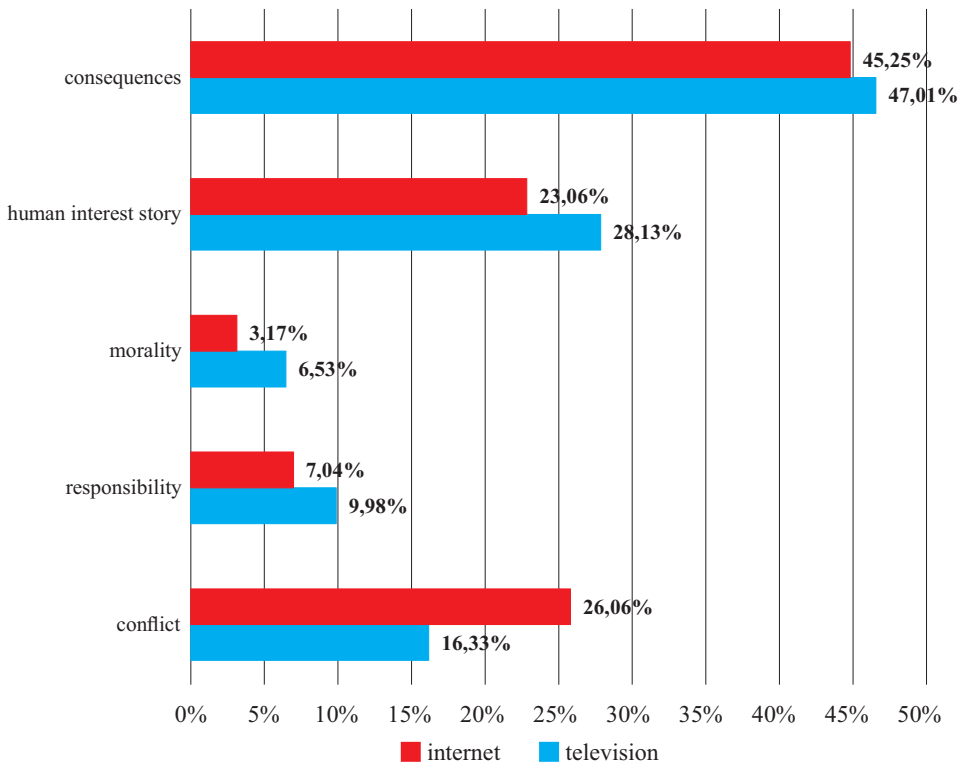
Figure 65. News actors present in the research sample (% share, n=1119)



Source: Authors.

Paramedics and common citizens were also not a common feature of online coverage. This further reinforces the notion that online media focused more on impersonal and relatively distant to individuals issues, publishing non-emotional materials, more informational in character. This is further reinforced by the dynamic of subsequent news and their frequency. There were so many news items published that they generally presented a rational and informative approach to reporting. Comparative analysis of the cognitive frames employed in the entirety of the research sample brings some interesting results. An overview of results for all frames coded in the categorisation key across all media is presented on **Figure 66**.

Figure 66. Cognitive frames used in the research sample (total, n=1119)



Source: Authors.

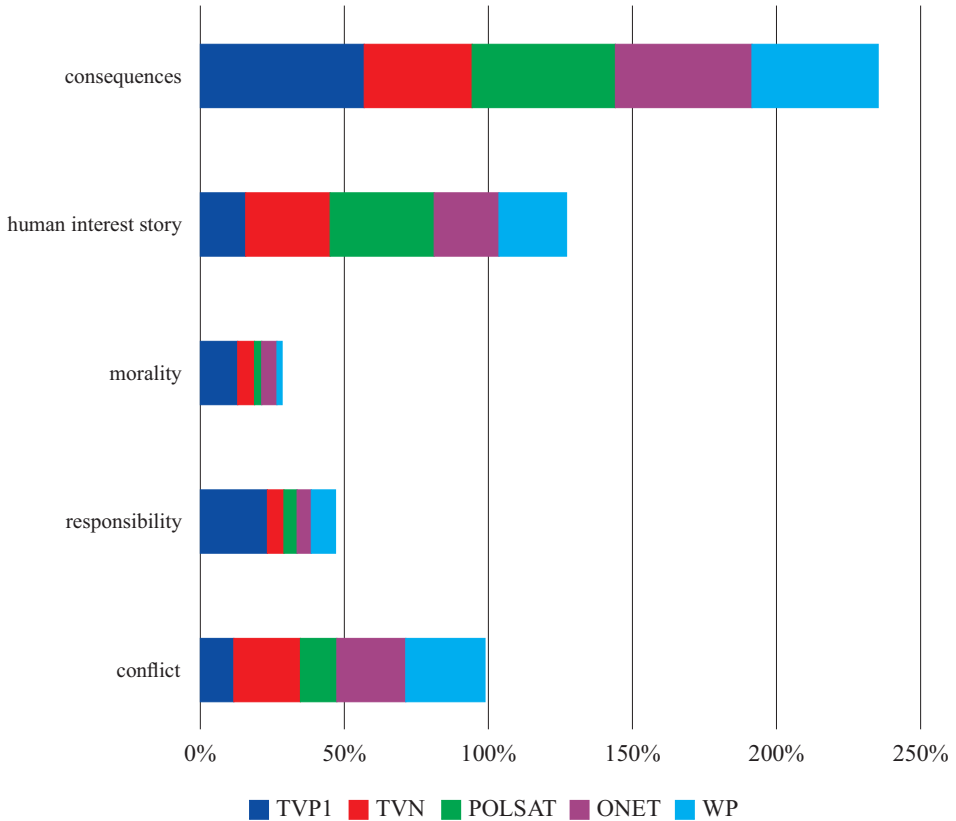
The difference in use of conflict framing could come as a surprise in context of the previous results. Used relatively rarely in TV coverage (16.33%), it was more prominent in online articles (26.06%). Even though conflict is inherent in public discourse, it was found more often in online coverage. This could be the result of the condensation of the news item to one topic.

Consequence frame was the most prominent across all researched media, and consequences were the most common topic, followed by human interest stories. In the latter case, even if the issue was complex, it was brought down to a specific, named person. This frame would in theory be more appropriate for TV coverage, however, research showed that human interest stories were more common in online coverage (23%). Online articles also featured collective actors, such as entire families. Morality and responsibility frames were the rarest occurring in the research sample. Especially in the Internet's case, where there were no appeals for action and rare references to morality. Online coverage contained morality framing in 3.17% of materials, and responsibility – in 7.04%. Television on the other hand was a place filled with vivid commentary and appeals to stay at home, or for support (both financial and psychological) for particular individuals or social groups (**Figure 67**). These aforementioned frames often featured celebrities and famous persons from the pop culture world. They taught society how to wash your hands, queue, and take off your face coverings safely. Pandemic times have been full of a variety of social campaigns, where various social groups promoted, amongst other things, social distancing. Sampled media promoted content with celebrities who either led by example or appealed for respecting the restrictions. The morality frame was used to construct messages relating to socially desirable attitudes in line with morality and ethics. The responsibility frame, also most common on TV, was used to present people or social groups that were responsible for a given situation. A detailed analysis of the usage of this frame was presented in the previous chapter on TV coverage. Political responsibility attribution by journalists, whether to the ruling coalition (for the inability to deal with challenges presented by the pandemic) or parliamentary opposition (delays in legislation) was most common. Responsibility was a relatively rarely used frame, yet revealed political preferences of the editorial staff. As aforementioned, these political preferences were most visible in the case of TV, while online publications were more critical of the entire political sphere. Notably, there were also cases of responsibility attribution to citizens or entrepreneurs. Politicians responsible for decisions on restrictions blamed entirely people not respecting the regulations on multiple occasions, and at times, even journalists themselves attempted to indirectly blame the Polish society. When remote learning and subsequent issues with national examinations were concerned, either in terms of preparation of the teachers or the entire infrastructure, the research sample contained mentions of unpreparedness of the schools themselves, which was a direct result of unclear policy and not specifying the entities responsible for implementation. The government introduced ever-newer changes without delegating any specific tasks to entities which were to support the implementation.

A detailed overview of cognitive frames present in the research sample by specific media providers is presented on **Figure 67**. The results revealed that across the researched media, TVP1 used the consequence frame most often (56%), and

the frame itself was the most prominent in the sample. Human interest story frame was most often used by Polsat (36%), and TVP1 used morality (13%) and responsibility frames (23%) the most out of all institutions. Conflict framing was most often used by online portals – 27% for wp.pl and 23% for onet.pl.

Figure 67. Cognitive frames used in the research sample by medium (total, n=1119)



Source: Authors.

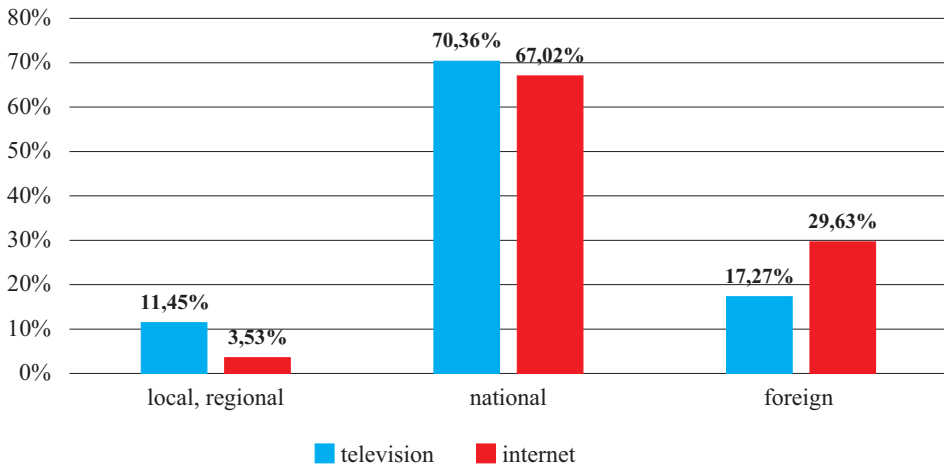
The results presented indicate a high degree of similarity in news framing. TVP1 was a distinct outlier in terms of use of responsibility and morality frames, and used human interest story frames least often. This frame was most popular in Polsat’s “Wydarzenia”.

Geographical location and the sentiment of broadcasts

Local news was the rarest feature of both online and TV coverage, as presented on **Figure 68**. Local and regional issues were relatively rare (11.43%) in the research

sample, and even rarer just online (3.52%). TV coverage was closer to the Polish citizen, and issues that could directly influence their life. Journalists visited places facing restrictions, gave voice to those affected, actively observed the movement across closed borders, or passively lived a day as a person in quarantine would. Domestication of messaging is also typical of tabloidised media, as it facilitates audience identification with the issue presented. Coverage on abroad, even though relevant to the knowledge on the development of the pandemic, would not influence audiences the way issues in Poland or its close neighbourhood would.

Figure 68. Territoriality and geographical coverage of events featured in the research sample (% share, n=1119)



Source: Authors.

Online media took more interest in events from abroad, which allowed for a fuller picture of the COVID-19 pandemic. TV broadcasts related to the abroad rarely, and almost exclusively through a superficial mention on the course of the pandemic. Conversely, it was not uncommon to find online news articles discussing a particular country's approach to the pandemic, vaccination and medication development abroad, or even just describing the situation in a given nation. This approach seems fuller in scope and underscores the wider – global – aspect of the issue. TV journalists were very focused on personalisation of the problem and maximising the ease of understanding it, a treatment typical for e.g. pop culture. In line with one of the assumptions of critical theory, the cultural industry was meant to create the simplest of messages, aimed at the widest group, to reach the furthest distance. Polish TV, as captured in the research sample, is nearing this approach to message construction, made even more probable in case of commercial media whose success is measured in ratings and profit margins. In this view, even news items should fulfil functions typical for TV and media, in order to gain this

viewership, and especially to avoid limiting its audience. This can be achieved by bringing down the complexity of broadcasts.

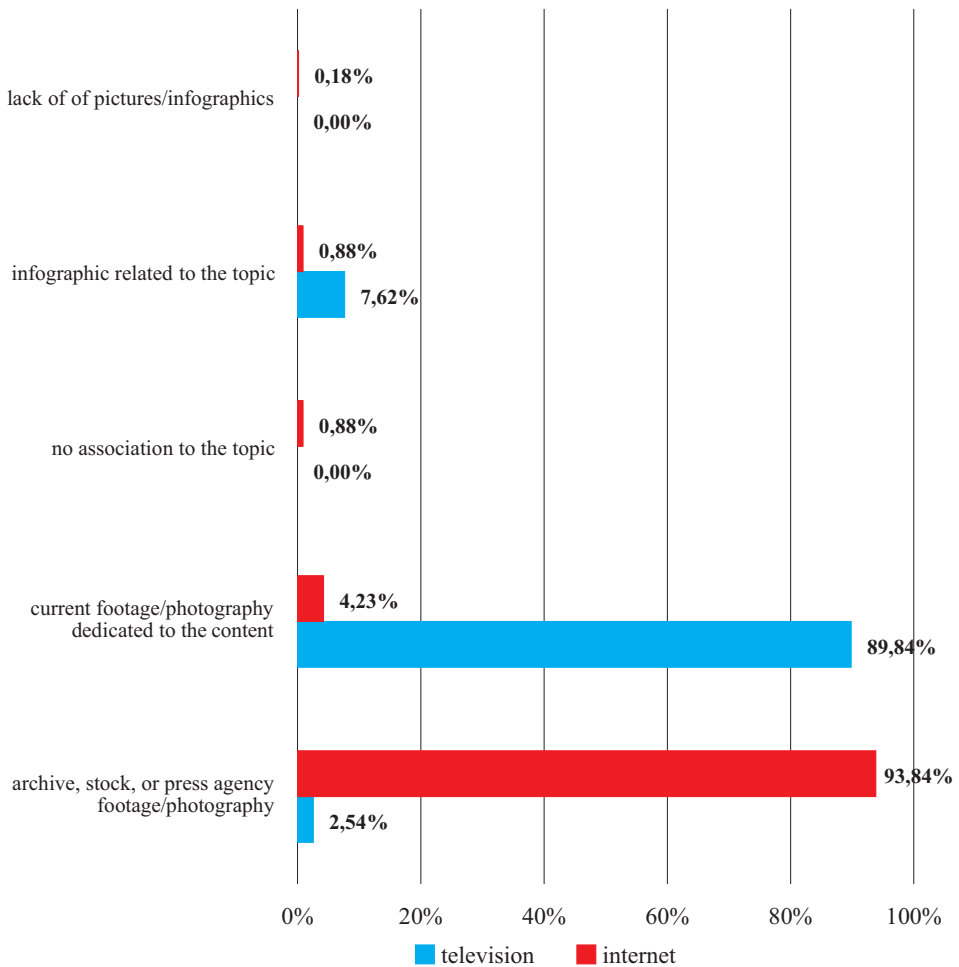
Footage and photography in the research sample

Figure 69 presents the percentage share of visual aids and photography used in constructing broadcast and online articles. TV used mostly archive and stock footage, saving resources needed to send TV crews on site. Transportation costs and salaries of journalists and cameramen are often a significant part of a channel's budget. Moreover, sending a crew to one site can prevent the ability to send it to another that could occur in the meantime. However, the fact that almost every topic (89.84%) was supplemented by materials dedicated to the particular news item indicated the importance of pandemic for broadcasters, which is further reinforced by the sheer volume of materials dedicated to the topic. Journalists went to the news sites, often providing live coverage, and the cameramen tried to capture everything relating to the topic. At times, journalists' preparation for pandemic conditions of work was also highlighted, with them being shown wearing masks or supplying microphones to speakers using long rods.⁵⁷ In many cases, the visuals were more expressive than the verbal content included. Wardrobe choices could raise the profile of both the speaker and the subject matter. They could also be used to build up fear and anxiety, i.e. when paramedics spoke dressed in full protective suits, or when journalists followed such a fully-suited crew around during a call. The audiovisual character of television also allowed for the uses of intertextual commentary, when the preparedness of TV crew was highlighted in contrast to lack of such preparedness on e.g. politicians' part. Even at this level, TV allowed for added emotion, which is why it was often coded as emotional and persuasive. When the topic of empty cities was discussed, drone footage of Poznań's Old Market Square, completely empty, did not even require commentary. The image itself was suggestive enough and could evoke feelings almost automatically. Online media had less space for pictures and graphics. This is why almost all news articles featured archival, stock, or press agency sourced photos. Online news outlets did not have human nor technical resources to send their own photographers, and there was not much photography included anyhow. However, the seriousness of the subject matter was visible through the association of visuals with the topic. There were some red exclamation points and other graphics at times, resulting from the dynamics of the ever-newer topics. When the topic was gravely important, "hot", and ready to publish, photos were often omitted. Sometimes, the breaking news was deemed so "breaking", that even linguistic edits were foregone before publication, and eventual corrections done through updating an already live news article,

⁵⁷ Fakty, TVN, 10.04.2020.

sometimes with an update disclaimer, and sometimes without. This was not difficult in terms of the content management system, and if the publisher chose not to annotate an update, retrieval of the previous versions was possible only through manual saving of all the versions being published.

Figure 69. The relation of footage used to the topic of broadcasts in the research sample (total, n=1119)



Source: Authors.

There is additional value in supplementing an online article with a photo, and this stems from the way search engines – primarily Google – and their algorithms treat content for positioning. Adding a picture to online articles attracts not only viewers already on the website, but also is an unspoken requirement to gain positions in search engines. Search engine positioning is an extensive topic, and the

optimisation in terms of number of characters, appropriate headlining and captioning, internal link inclusions or simplifying the language has a significant impact on news items' design. The primary difference in written materials published online, in comparison to e.g. printed press, is the role an introduction to the piece serves. As online articles need to capture the audience's attention from the get-go, introductions are often just summaries of the entire article, while in printed press or TV, they serve exclusively introductory role (Giomelakis, 2019).

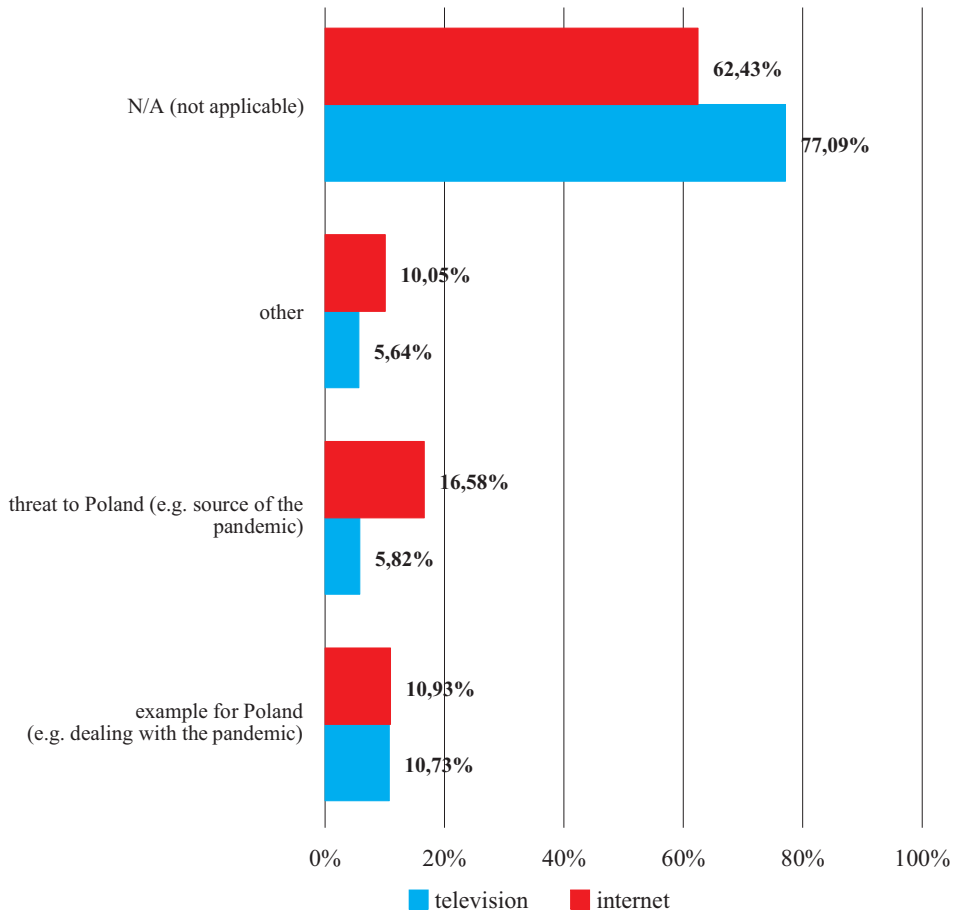
Situation abroad is relatively rarely portrayed in the TV research sample. When broadcasts did include it, it was usually through a superficial report on the course of the pandemic in a given country. Most often, they featured countries relevant for their relatively high infection numbers (Italy, Spain, USA), ways to approach the virus (idle Sweden vs. meticulous China), or controversial events (such as Belarus, whose President at one point claimed that the virus does not exist because it cannot be seen). These news were not related nor referred to Poland in any way. The narrative presented an independent, separate country and its sovereign fight (or lack thereof) against the pandemic. TV also portrayed the situation abroad as a threat to Poland more often (16.55%) than online news outlets, either directly (as a source of the pandemic, where people got the virus they brought to Poland from), or indirectly (as a competition for vaccination purchases or financial aid). Relevant results presented below reflect the detailed analysis by medium, conducted in the previous parts of this publication.

In TV's case, especially TVP1 and TVN, widely understood "abroad" had various different connotations (**Figure 70**). On the one hand, Germany or France were often portrayed as a role model in fighting the pandemic and state aid for entrepreneurs, and for another station, viewed as a threat because of their proximity and the potential relocation of the infected. These discrepancies were not particularly prominent, yet did occur and were confirmed by the research results. France, who chose to organise its local elections during the pandemic, was on the one hand a role model on how to conduct Polish presidential elections for those who agreed with their organisation then, and on the other an anti-role model for those who disagreed.⁵⁸

News items considered in the research sample revealed that the media used similar sources of information, although with some degree of variability. Online articles sampled used official press releases (37%), and replicated content from other media (57%). They referred to content published by politicians, national and

⁵⁸ 47 million citizens were eligible to vote, who in the vast majority, were set to vote in person at the polling stations opening at 8 AM. After elections, members of local electoral commissions criticised this decision and reported subsequent infections. After elections, there were reports about groups of doctors who wanted to sue the Prime Minister and the then-Minister of Health to the State Tribunal. The doctors noted that the politicians had full awareness of the developing pandemic and the direct threat to public health, voters, and anybody involved with the elections (Giommoni, 2020). The Polish media used this example in multiple ways, highlighting specific aspects of the situation and omitting others.

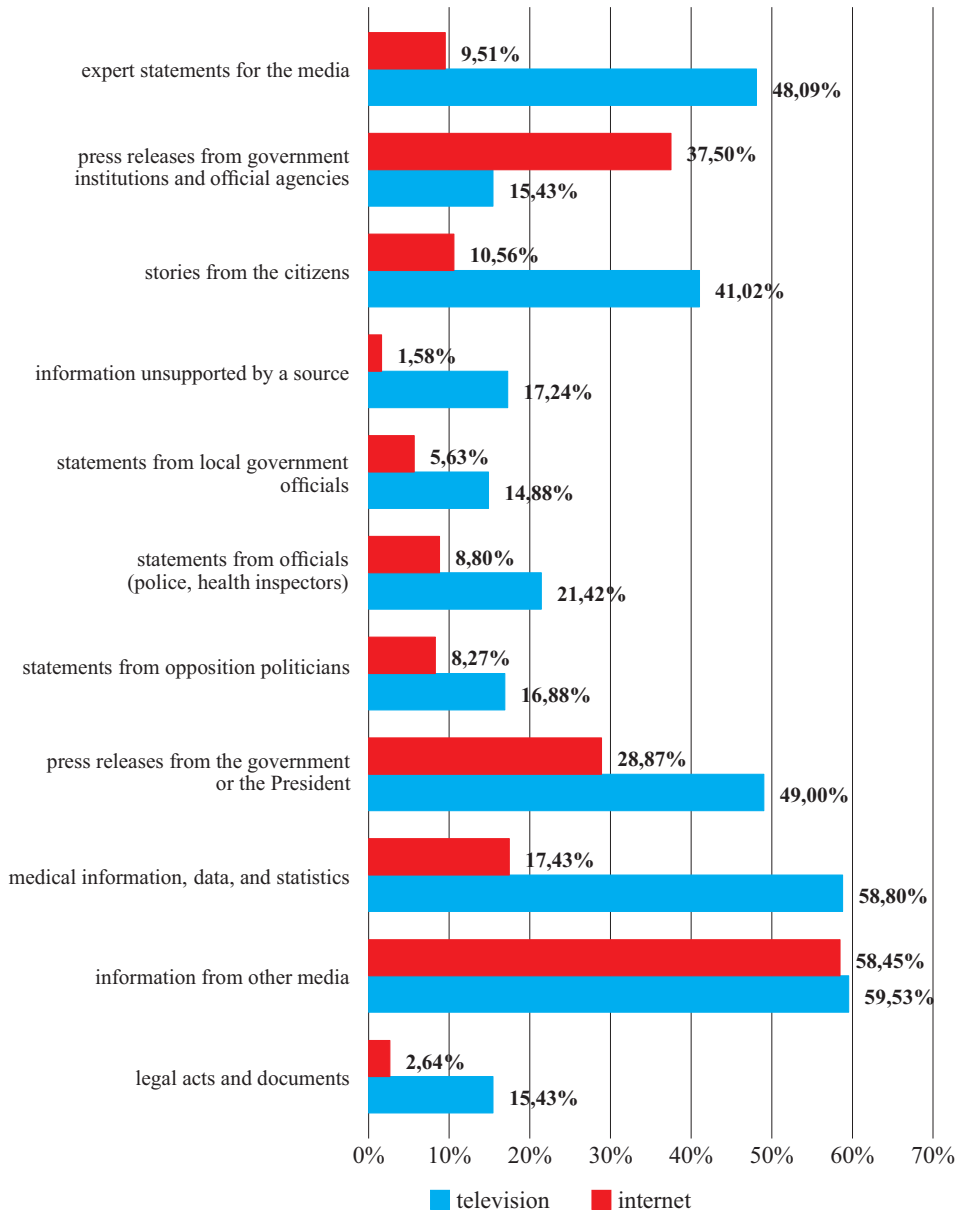
Figure 70. Picture of the situation abroad in the research sample (% share, n=1119)



Source: Authors.

global organisations’ representatives, and other materials sourced from other media, often social media. Even though Twitter culture is nowhere near as developed in Poland as it is in Western democracy countries (see: Wanat, 2019), it has become one of the most prominent communication tools during the pandemic, used also by government institutions (Ministry of Health, Sanepid). Online news outlets published sourceless content very rarely (1.5%), especially in comparison with TV, who did so in 17% of news items, which has been explained in detail in Chapter 3. Online portals supplemented almost every information with its source, and each statement was directly quoted and described. The researchers noted no publications quoting “common truths” or similar phrases, aforementioned in this work as ones which obstruct verification of the information source. Comparative results for both media types are presented on **Figure 71**.

Figure 71. Sources of information used in the research sample (total, n=1119)



Source: Authors.

Television, on the other hand, constructed its broadcasts based on sources which are close to people, including statements from citizens themselves, and ones whose impact can be translated into real world examples. For instance, if medical statistics were used, most often they were the changing infection rates. Even if the

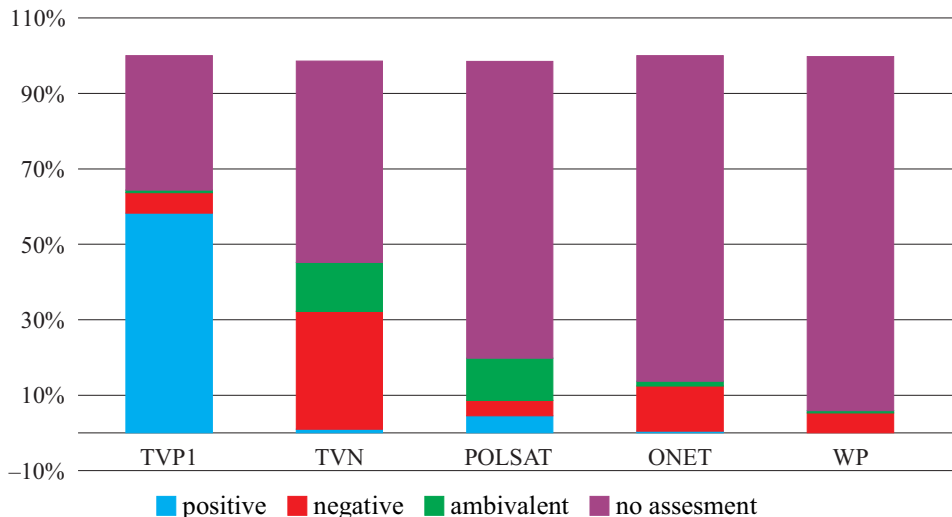
numbers were related to abroad, they were related back to Poland and commented on the comparison. Depending on the narrative, Poland was doing either better (e.g. in comparison to Italy in terms of infection rates), or worse (e.g. in comparison to Germany in terms of testing rates). Audience was not required to have any specialistic knowledge to correctly interpret medical data presented. Many more complex issues were presented with the aid of expert explanations, who deconstructed the issue into less complex parts and paid particular attention to the widest possible context. If the topic of EU aid for the economy appeared, it was further deconstructed into, for instance: (1) Poland ruled by the Law and Justice wants to receive economic aid, however (2) it does not want to fulfil EU's recommendations. Another example, the relatively complex issue of the Anti Crisis "Shield", was brought down to either (1) essential, thoughtful, and substantial help for enterprises or (2) something indeed essential, yet ill-conceived and difficult to obtain. These two narratives coexisted and there was scarce space for detailed description of the programme itself, although it was presented through infographics (most often on POLSAT and TVP1) on many occasions. For online media, more informative and less opinionated, more formal, often official, sources were the most prominent. TV broadcasts featured more statements from citizens, experts, police officers, or politicians, and also included information from unknown sources. The latter facilitated TV journalists the use of conflict framing, which was particularly visible in TVP's case. Citizens appeared more frequently on TV (40%) than online (10%) when looking at the entirety of the research sample, even though human interest stories were more popular in online coverage. This did not influence the general rule in which the pandemic media discourse was mainly influenced by the ruling party politicians. Press releases from the government and the President of Poland, statements from opposition politicians, and legal acts and press releases from officials and institutions were the most commonly featured sources, differing in volume depending on the medium, however very important. Press conferences dictated public life, and were the main subject matter debated during the research period. This was visible in traditional media, public spaces, and social media, where these conferences were the subject of memes, humorous or ironic remakes, and their content entered public communication. Many social groups vividly commented on politicians' failures, shortcomings, hypocrisy, or lack of knowledge. New groups were formed on Facebook facilitating knowledge sharing, for example on how to avoid fines for free movement under restrictions. Social groups debated on future decisions, and how they can best prepare for them. Ideas were shared, and "secret" lists of businesses open against restrictions were circulated, alongside discussion and commentary on the reality. In many cases, people were terrified of the virus, yet still critical of the chaotic, in their view, restrictions being introduced. Interestingly, the researchers did not find a single news item directly questioning the purpose or legality of the restrictions, even though it was a common issue raised by the public (see: Oberlan, 2020).

Assessment of the actions taken by the government in the research sample

There was no assessment of governmental decisions in over 90% of online coverage studied, as online news portals did not assess, but inform and acted based on the most official sources available. **Figures 72 and 73** highlights the difference between this approach and the assessment on part of TV journalists. Even though main news editions broadcasted on TV remained opinionless in 57.71% of coverage, there was positive (17.42%), negative (14.79%) and ambivalent (9.07%) assessment present. This ambivalence is exemplified by TVN's approach to the Anti Crisis Shield aimed at entrepreneurs. They noted that although its existence and quick introduction into law was positive, the disregard for amendments suggested by the opposition, bureaucratic difficulties in the application process or unclear criteria created doubts.⁵⁹

The design of TV news items, based on emotions and persuasion, created a space for responsibility attribution. On the one hand, "the responsible" could be criticised for some decisions and ideas, and on the other, hailed for the great preparation of Poland for the pandemic and limiting the possibility of the Italian situation (sudden and dynamic rise in infections) occurring. There is a variety of opinions in the TV research sample, and television in general provided more ready-made templates for attitudes and opinions for its audience than online publications. There are distinct differences between TVP1 and TVN, and Polsat (**Figure 72**) in this context. When looking generally at the media type, assessment of the governmental decision is much more common on TV than it is online (**Figure 73**).

Figure 72. Assessment of government's actions in the research sample (total, n=1119)

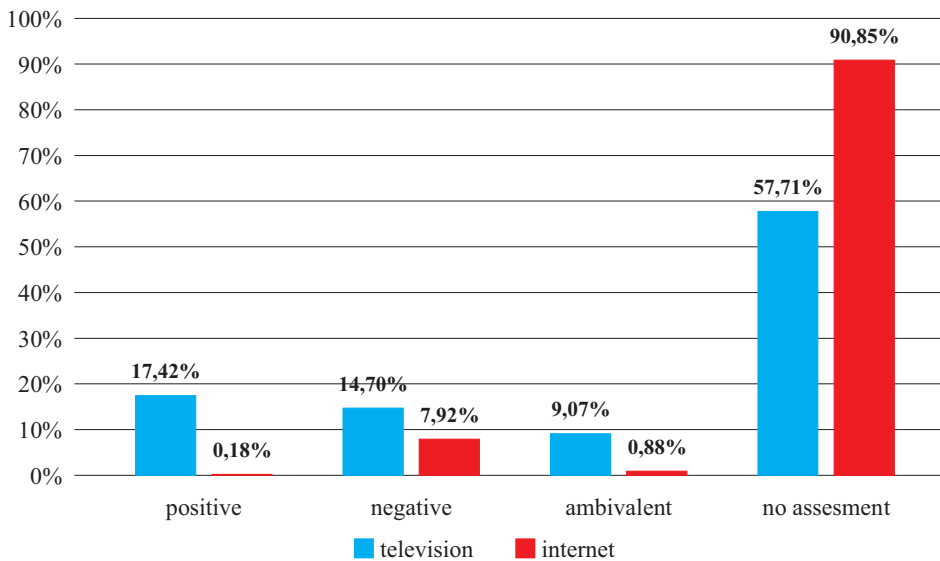


Source: Authors.

⁵⁹ Fakty, TVN, 24.03.2020.

The issue of assessment made by journalists and the degree to which it is determined by the editorial pressure is a topic worth its separate study. Especially as during times of perturbation and crises people often choose television as their prime source of information (Lawson, 2020). Taking into consideration the sheer scale of variability in portraying reality and various social phenomena, it seems prudent to study this in context of potential influence of such messaging.

Figure 73. Journalists’ assessment of pandemic-related governmental actions in the research sample (total, n=1119)



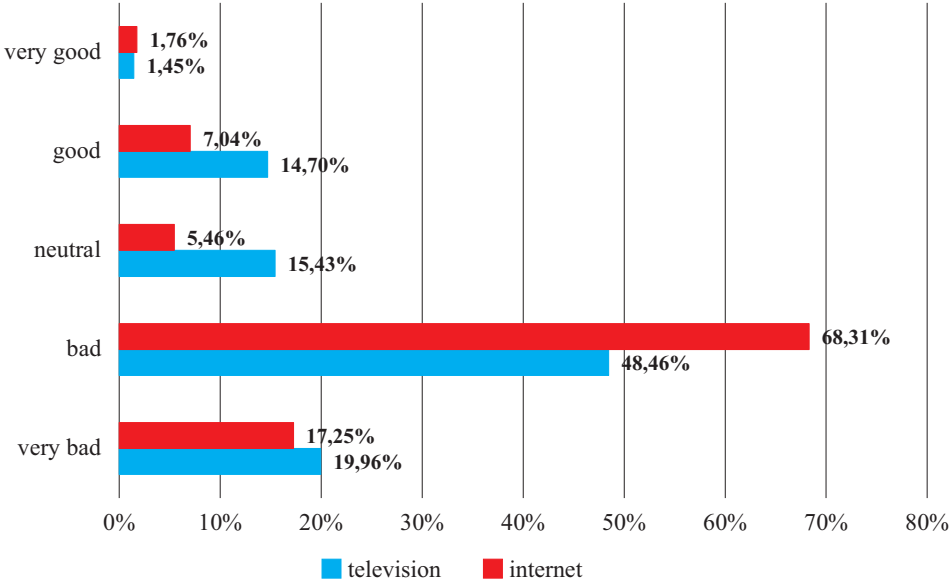
Source: Authors.

The situation in Poland as presented in the research sample

Media included in the research sample vary in their portrayal of the situation in the country (**Figure 74**). While its negative and bad character is a common feature, the extremes (“very bad” for 19.96% and “good” for 14.70% of TV coverage) indicate the subjectivity and assessing nature of the messaging.

The negative outlook in many cases came from the assessment of current events, as many news items featured new infections, mounting restrictions, difficulty in access to treatment and hospital beds, issues with education, social changes, and other negative consequences. However, only television portrayed these consequences in a wider context, for example as a result of governmental policy.

Figure 74. Picture of the situation in the country as presented in the research sample (total, n=1119)



Source: authors.

Conclusion

This publication is a result of the first of two stages of research planned for the research team. The results of the analyses as presented serves as the basis for construction of a research tool to analyse the influence of the sampled news item on the attitudes and emotions of the news audience. This will be analysed in the second publication of the series, which will holistically analyse the research sample as presented here, and its influence on the audience.

The research aims have been achieved through the presented analysis. A research sample selection was adopted based on the timeline of the first wave of the pandemic in Poland as created by the authors, and allowed for performing analyses in line with the assumptions. The results indicate that news items in the research period were characterised by reporting and reactivity, and publishers focused on event reporting. Most samples were rational and informative in nature, although TV coverage presented significant outliers. Other research objectives were also fulfilled, as governing party politicians were determined to be the most featured actors in the research sample. In the context of sources of information, government press releases and statements from politicians and experts dominated. The presented results are indicative, as often mentioned throughout this publication, of the high degree of politicisation in the Polish media studied, as well as the high degree of political parallelism and external pluralism present in the Polish media system.

Both hypotheses outlined in the introduction to this publication have been confirmed over the course of analysis. Firstly, there was a significant differentiation in the assessment of governmental policies across the TV sample. Undoubtedly, the sampled media do not present a cohesive and coherent vision of the events of the first months of the coronavirus pandemic in Poland. Thus, the second hypothesis was also confirmed, as there were significant differences in the state of awareness and knowledge of audiences of particular media. While online news outlets did not present any stark differences between each other, TV broadcasts varied significantly, especially in the context of interpretation of political decisions and assessment of pandemic-related events in the country. This resulted in an incohesive and heterogenous “pseudo-environment” (Walter Lippmann’s concept) in the research sample. The influence of these news items on the opinions and behaviours presented by the audience will be studied in an accompanying publication.

The authors of this publication are well aware of the limitations of the adopted research perspective. The study covered just a part of Polish media discourse relating to the coronavirus pandemic, limited to the first wave of the pandemic, and as

the situation has been very dynamic, a lot has changed since. However, the results of the analyses were enough to fulfil the research aims as presented, and resulted in obtaining significant and important information about pandemic narratives created in the Polish media. Undoubtedly, the messaging is non complementary and incohesive in many instances. The main differences in messaging are found predominantly in TV broadcasts, which construct their news items in similar fashion, more emotionally than rationally, more persuasively than informatively, yet differ significantly in content presented. TVP1 (the State broadcaster), aligned with the government, stands in contrast to TVN (a private broadcaster), who opposes the government, in approaching reports on the same events (introduction of “shields”, restrictions), with both networks attributing different meanings and tone. Polsat seems to be a conciliatory medium, abstaining from taking sides (Public Opinion Research Center, 2019).

The research sample was dominated by the consequence frame, but political context was also heavily featured where conflict framing was visible, especially in contradicting portrayals of the government’s crisis management. This politicisation was in part determined by the presidential campaign and the looming elections, however the researchers found such an obvious following of the political line in the face of the pandemic and a public health crisis surprising. The results leave no doubt that the messages broadcasted and published are determined by political will, with politicians being given voice on health, the economy, or science.

The sampled media did not differ in pandemic portrayal in quantitative categories, as evidenced by similar results in sentiment or character, featured actors, or general assessment of the situation in the country. However, there were significant differences in terms of qualitative categories, which indicated that even though TV stations reported on events in a similar manner, the tone differed. TVP1 avoided criticising the government, often using appropriate frames to shift blame for a negative outcome to opposition actions. TVN, on the other hand, clearly opposed the ideas and measures proposed by the governing coalition, which resulted in a small number of positive broadcasts in the research period. Online news outlets and Polsat were relatively neutral, although still featured instances of extreme views – from open criticism of the crisis management strategies adopted, to the full-throated support for the decisions.

This diversification of narratives employed across the research sample can have far reaching negative consequences for the audience in the authors’ view. On the one hand, when sourcing their information from just one medium, the viewer risks being confined to their informational bubble, which inherently does not represent objective values, reinforcing a priori attitudes and views aligned with the given medium. On the other, viewers who decided to follow multiple, or all, media, are facing cognitive dissonance, as they were confronted with starkly opposing depictions of reality. In light of a public health crisis this leads to serious doubts as to the responsibility of the entire mass media system, which seems to be providing

audiences with content in line with their views and value systems, and not, as the doctrine of social responsibility of the media would require, reliable, objective and professional reporting.

Research results also revealed that online news outlets are keen to take the role of a neutral reporter who distributes information about the course of events, in contrast to TV, which focuses on emotions, conflicts, and dramatic reports from the frontlines of the pandemic. TV broadcasters, wanting to attract viewership, are prone to use persuasive elements aiming to influence their viewers' attitudes and behaviours. A clear weakness of that system is the fact that TV broadcasters are not pursuing conciliation and solidarity among the audience to combat the virus. On the contrary, the negative reports feature attribution of responsibility for the pandemic to various political actors or citizens' callousness. Thus, media create an additional enemy, common for their inner circle of viewers, one which does not have a bio-medical source and is endogenous; something that has been a feature of Poland's deepening stratification and social polarisation.

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