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CHILDREN AND THE WORLD OF TABLOID INFORMATION

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Abstract

This article deals with the role of tabloids and tabloid information in children's lives. The goal of our research was the analysis of influence of tabloid information on the children in the age of 11 until 14 years old, together with the role of media education in family and school environment. Our results showed that children avoid the classical (printed) tabloid media. Children are really not interested in the scandals of celebrities usually consumed by mainstream readers of tabloids. Children heroes are mostly youtubers, popular people in the virtual reality and the main criterion of the information value is the number of sharing. They want to be online all the time. However through the social sites they consume the contents which meet the characteristics of tabloids. Our research indirectly showed that the world of current children and their close grown-ups, like parents and teachers, is divided. For parents and teachers there is then very difficult to watch those very simple videos that are so popular with their children. The problem lies not only in the quality, but also in the quantity of the production of these contents. The question is how this kind of permanent online world could negatively influence this generation in the future.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Tabloids

The first tabloid was published in 1932 in London and was called *Pennymagazine*. Its price was 1 penny. Apart from Great Britain, also the United States belong to the founders of tabloids. The mass printed media were expanding very quickly there. *The New York Sun* or the *New York World* were the first ones. In the 19th century there had been published so called yellow press in the USA, characterized by big heading, huge amount of pictures, comics and the emotional accent (Mediagram /online/, 2016).

In the Czech Republic publishing of tabloids was suspended during the Second World War and also after the year 1948, when the communistic regime won the elections. It is obvious that tabloid do not prosper in totalitarian societies. Its existence is conditioned by freedom of speech. The resumption of tabloids in the Czech Republic came after the year 1989, when the political tabloids *Spigl* was being published and two years later the tabloid *Blesk* was created. The above mentioned encyclopaedia source also talks about German *Bild* or British *The Sun* (Ottova všeobecná encyklopedie, 2016, p. 184). In these days, tabloids are not only printed, but we can find them on television (VIP news) and most of all in Internet news (*Super*, *Express*, etc.) and TV shows with tabloid character (reality shows like *Big Brother*, *Wife Swap*).

There are differences between tabloids and other media that could be defined. Tabloids are very colourful, with lots of big photographs and striking headings. The main goal is of course to approach the emotions of a reader or viewer. On the contrary, writing notifications are short and unambitious by its content and form. The most common content represent various stories about celebrities, the most popular genres are scandals, affairs, accidents, cheatings, illnesses and so on. On the other hand, classical media (non-tabloids) work – or at least should work – with important and meaningful topics, which are relevant in general and most of the population is concerned about them. They make interviews with experts about politics, economy, health care, ecology and other social issues. Another different sign is their political correctness, reliability and objectivity of the information provided.

The main attributes of tabloids as for Hvižd'ala (2011, p. 79 – 80) are as follows:

- Better saleability
- Informal language, emotional accent
- Big headings, photographs, short articles
- Invading privacy
- Secret information/photographs

Despite these characteristics, tabloids held important position in democratic society. It provides information in an accessible way, even if they are very limited as for the content. They mediate the main political and social problems in an easy, brief, quick and transparent way. They could take a role of guard of democracy in such cases and occasions which investigative journalism cannot intervene. Also allow the readers to analyse the positive and especially the negative emotions of celebrities while going through their stories - and this is something very controversial.

1.2. Tabloidization of the Media

Tabloids are getting more and more popular, so that even classical media have to adapt to the rules and principles of tabloids for the competitiveness on the market. It influences the chosen topics, which should be presented in an attractive and simplified way. That is the reason why we are talking about tabloidization of the whole media market nowadays.

The term tabloidization used to be connected with the printed form of media. In these days, because of the social sites, everyone has a place for presenting their own opinions. There is this huge desire of authors of blogs, vlogs and videos for the fame of thousands, hundred of thousands and millions of likes and sharing. It is obvious that something ingratiating, sensational, unusual and very simple would be more popular. Facebook and its notifications are usually organized in the style of tabloid news. In the better cases these news are for the readers unimportant. A birth of a puppy, photos from holidays, Christmas presents and so on could have some meaning for close friends - but why the whole world should know these information?

The accessibility and huge amount of these easy information occupies time and space needed for the orientation in more important topics. So in some way it weakens the ability to create a critical opinion and to build the criteria of what is important and what is not.

We are talking about the general development of media. It means that good is what is easy to sell and for what the owner of the media could earn more money. Journalists then subordinate themselves to readers and what they want to read about. For getting an information they do not hesitate to disturb the private sphere of businessmen, celebrities and to show various scandal scenarios of their lives. This is the fight between the media and economy market. Who does not make money, cannot survive.

2. Problem Statement

2.1. Critical Thinking and Tabloids

When the tabloids are harming and when they are not? If the main interest of a person still stays the authorised and serious information, then the reading of tabloid news or seeing a photo of a celebrity will do no harm. But when the tabloid information and topics are dominant, then it changes the situation. There is a lot of risk in there. Primarily there is the perception of life through unimportant events, big amount of superficiality and in a high emotional rate. The low ability to think rationally causes the tendencies to believe even to a manipulative information, for example some conspiracy theories, astrologists, numerologists or even the religious fanatics sending people to commit a murder in the name of Allah.

In the very term of critical thinking is hidden the ability to decide and distinguish which information we accept and which we could label as valuable. The most important thing is not to decide on the first impression, to keep distance and allow yourself another point of view to make your own opinion on the basis of achieved knowledge and experience of yourself or another qualified persons. Cultivated, sophisticated thinking lowers the risk of accepting superficial information from any type of sources and also the risk of thinking on the basis of stereotypes and prejudices.

If the ability of critical thinking was important in the previous historical times, in nowadays it is a necessity. The huge amount of information of any kind, their contradictoriness, the unstableness of their quality makes us, the educators, put the media education or the work with information in general in the centre of teaching. The principles are evident: teaching children from the young age, what is a serious source of information and what is not, which characteristics form valuable information, what is their verifiability and credibility. In short, to teach a method, “instruction“, how to work with information.

3. Research Questions

It is a demanding and not easy task to orient yourself in a world full of stimuli and not let yourself to be influenced by information, TV shows or programs of tabloid character. It remains difficult even for people with rich life experiences, so it is not surprising that children and young people are more vulnerable and influenceable in a negative way. How are contemporary children influenced by tabloid information? Can they identify and characterize this information?

As for the theoretical basement, we used the studies that map the current conditions of media education and its dynamic changes (Jiráček, 2009; Mičienka, 2006; Frank, & Jiráčková, 2008), together with the risks the modern technologies bring (Ševčíková et al. 2014). We also reflect the wider spectre of so called “generation Z” till the end of the second decade of the new millennium and the influence of modern technologies on them.

4. Purpose of the Study

The goal of our research was the analysis of influence of tabloid information on the children in the age of 11 until 14 years old, together with the role of media education in family and school environment. Our next task was to explore how we could evolve a child mind from superficial using of information to using the critical evaluation.

5. Research Methods

In our research we combined the quantitative questionnaire form (viewer ratings of tabloid media, knowledge of tabloid media of our target audience and so on) with qualitative access realized via structured dialogues in the groups of pupils of second grade in the elementary school (Chráska, 2016; Skutil et al., 2011; Gulová, et al., 2013). Our research groups were composed by 274 respondents who filled in the questionnaire forms. It consisted of 128 boys (47%) and 146 girls (53%) in the whole age range from 11 till 15 years. The structured dialogues were realized in 10 focal groups with 84 participants at the same range and the representations of both genders were equal.

6. Findings

One of the basic information from the questionnaire forms was represented by the frequency of using all media by our respondents. As expected, the frequency of using Internet is mostly 4 times and more time per day, for specifically 154 children (64%). The second place as for used media was taken by

television. Most of the respondents watch television once or twice a day. Out of their attention stay reading newspapers, magazines and listening to radio. 50% of them use the media for fun and entertainment. Another 40% use the media not only as an entertainment but also as a source of information. Only 7% of respondents are using media only for searching the information and getting some knowledge.

Another task for the respondents was to choose from the list of concrete media the brands which they get in touch with most often. Moderate majority of the respondents (53%) signed in currently the most famous daily newspapers - the tabloid *Blesk*. Next in order they were choosing the internet tabloid media - *Super*, *Extra* and also *YouTube*, social site *Facebook*, etc. - each of these was chosen by 10% of the respondents. The results from the forms were evolved during the discussions in groups where the tabloid *Blesk* was mentioned as a typical tabloid medium by 70% of children. The other periodicals they did not know and, as for their own words, they are not interested in them. The interesting fact - which came out from the group research - was that they do not realize that the tabloid media are also on the Internet. With this fact correspond the answers for question: “Which word will come out for you when you hear the term ‘tabloid’?” The first two places at 50% of respondents take words *scandal* and *lie*, and the same results came out of the discussion in groups. That was completed with similar terms by its content like *piffle*, *pursuit of people*, *false information*. In the forms there were the terms “newspapers and magazines” placed on the third place as an association with tabloids.

During the discussion in groups the participants were able to indicate the basic characteristics of a tabloid article (big headings, colourful photos, sensational titles, etc.). They agreed on the main topics of tabloids - sportsmen, actors, singers, well - known famous people, so called celebrities. But there was a hesitation who such a celebrity really is. The explanation that this is a person nobody knows about his or her job, what is the reason why is famous but still is very often seen on the pages of tabloids did not help. Children did not fill in any name.

Table 01. Do you consider tabloid information credible ones?

N = 274	n	%
Absolutely not	161	59
Rather not	102	37
Rather yes	9	3
Absolutely yes	2	1

We have also been interested in the experience with tabloids of pupils at school. The following table will bring the results.

Table 02. Have you learned at school what is tabloid, tabloid information or tabloid media?

N = 274	n	%
Absolutely not	73	27
Rather not	120	44
Rather yes	50	18
Absolutely yes	31	11

From these results it is obvious that the topic of tabloids is left out of elementary education. More than 70% of pupils will not get much information about it. Only every 10th pupil seems to be educated about this topic.

Our expectation as for the question: “Have you learned at school how to deal with tabloid information?” were even lower.

Table 03. Have you learned at school how to deal with tabloid information?

N = 274	n	%
Absolutely not	114	41
Rather not	120	44
Rather yes	35	14
Absolutely yes	5	2

The involvement of teachers and school in deeper knowledge of the role of tabloids in the media world is minimal. In better cases it is 15% of pupils who are involved, in the worst it is 2%.

Of course, we were also interested in the role of parents. How much children can learn from them.

Table 04. Did your parents tell you what the tabloid information is and how to deal with it?

N = 274	n	%
Absolutely not	70	25
Rather not	128	47
Rather yes	69	25
Absolutely yes	7	3

From this table we can read that neither parents provide information about tabloids, so their children stay uninformed.

Some kind of optimism could bring the question about children’s reading of tabloids.

Table 05. Do you read tabloids?

N = 274	n	%
Absolutely not	116	42
Rather not	128	47
Rather yes	28	10
Absolutely yes	2	1

Distinctive lack of interest in tabloid information was confirmed during the group’s discussions. In both cases the results show that close relatives consume tabloid newspapers or magazines. From the forms came out that the children get in touch with tabloids mainly thanks to the parents, but - broadly speaking - they do not read them. During the discussion they mentioned that it is their grandparents who

read the tabloids most. We should mention again that our respondents understand the tabloids as a synonym for printed tabloids.

We were trying to influence the children's minds and evolve their abilities to orient themselves what is tabloid information and what is not. For that we used some of the questions in the form as well as the ones in the discussions in the focal groups. We asked them if there is a possibility to get to know an important information only from the headings of the article. Only 5% of them fill in "absolutely yes". Most of them (46%) said "rather not" and 32% said "rather yes". Then we asked them if there exists the necessity to make some agreement between heading and the content of the article. 50% of respondents said "absolutely yes" and 35% "rather yes".

In the discussions we were also trying to uncover the main attributes of tabloid information on the level of important and unimportant information. For the respondents the important information consider school, timetables of the transportation and weather forecast. Other than the mentioned information they considered in different ranges as unimportant. Personal contact with children helped to move the debate to the questions of possible risks and danger of tabloid information. They came to an agreement on the dangerousness for people the tabloid journalists write about. It is not easy to handle with the scandals and lies. Step by step the children started to realize that tabloids are also dangerous for their readers. The information shared by majority of people easily becomes a truth. |

7. Conclusion

|What are the answers for our questions dealing with the problem how the tabloid media enter the lives of children and how they influence them? Our results show that children avoid the classical (printed) tabloid media. Children are really not interested in the scandals of celebrities usually consumed by mainstream readers of tabloids. Contact with these types of tabloids is only random and episodic for them, primarily because their closer relatives read them - the grandparents most of all. They are also not interested in TV or internet reality shows which try to come near to the lives of so called celebrities.

Their media world is elsewhere. The main part of their media communication is realized on the social sites (Facebook), then comes pc games playing, and lately watching and making youtube videos has become their dominant in the field of media. Children celebrities are therefore mostly youtubers, popular people in the virtual reality and the main criterion of the information value is the number of sharing. In short terms, the generation Z wants to be online all the time. Refuses and ignores the traditional types of tabloids consumed by the grown-ups. Through the social sites they consume the contents which meet the characteristics of tabloids without knowing them. The question is how this kind of permanent online world could negatively influence this generation in the future - or if they just so to say grow-up from this virtual reality.

Our research indirectly shows that the world of current children and their close grown-ups, like parents and teachers, is completely divided, even separate. For parents and for teachers there is then very difficult to watch those very simple and "stupid" videos that are so popular with their kids or students. The problem lies not only in the quality, but also in the quantity of the production of these contents. Modern technologies allow everyone to get the access to Internet, to place there anything he or she wants

and to consume anything you find. So educators have a big disadvantage in getting closer to the children in mutual understandings and sharing life values.

Nevertheless some kind of optimism came out from the direct communication during the qualitative part of our research. Our experience has shown that there is a huge educational potential in this field, because the interviewed children were able to come to some kind of critical thinking even after just one session. They were able to distinguish a serious information from a tabloid one, and a credible source of information from a suspicious one. Schools and teachers should be more and systematically concerned with this field and choose professional methods which would really reach out this new generation. |

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