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## **VIOLATION OF THE ETHICAL CODE THROUGH SENSATIONALIST REPORTING ON THE INFORMATION WEBSITES IN SERBIA**

Elena Deleva<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract :** Market-driven journalism, combined with the rise of the internet and social media, has significantly influenced media operations. Consequently, media content often becomes low-quality, unethical, and sensationalist, with clickbait headlines that misrepresent the truth. This study examines violations of the Ethical Code of Serbian Journalists in sensationalist reporting in digital editions of *Politika* and *Kurir*. The analysis focuses on the “Chronicle” sections published from July 28 to August 27, 2025, emphasizing principles of truthfulness, responsibility, and privacy. Content was evaluated based on clickbait use, objectivity, tabloid language, speculation, and coverage of sensitive topics like family tragedies and violence, including respect for privacy and dignity. Results reveal various ethical violations and differences in professional approaches, highlighting a crisis in media ethics where commercial interests override journalistic standards. This leads to lower information quality, loss of public trust, and a reduced space for serious public debate. The study calls for stronger ethical oversight, increased media accountability, and systematic future research.

**Keywords:** *digital media, reporting, standards, ethical code, sensationalism*

### **Introduction**

In the context of comprehensive digitalization of the media landscape, journalistic ethical standards are increasingly being questioned, particularly

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<sup>1</sup> PhD Candidate, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade, Serbia. E-mail: Deleva.1408@gmail

due to the dominance of sensationalist reporting in online media. The contemporary media environment, marked by competition for clicks, visibility, and profit, has contributed to the erosion of professional norms, often subordinating public interest to superficial, manipulative, and unethical content. This points to a deepening crisis of trust and a growing need to reconsider media ethics in the digital age.

Data from the Press Council confirm that many media outlets tend to violate the Ethical Code of Serbian Journalists, with numerous cases of sensationalism, privacy breaches, and unverified allegations. At a session held in April 2025, the Commission found that portals such as Kurir, Politika, Glas Zapadne Srbije, Alo, Informer, and Novosti had breached the Code. For Kurir and Politika, the violations related to truthfulness, independence, responsibility, and respect for dignity (Press Council, 2025).

The primary aim of this research is to critically examine the methods, scope, and mechanisms of Ethical Code violations through sensationalist reporting, focusing on the online media of traditional editorial offices. Today, an increasing number of people obtain information through online media, where aggressive language and sensationalist narratives dominate most texts. Whereas news in traditional media was once treated as a commodity, digital media now trade in audiences. To attract attention, generate clicks, and increase website traffic, journalists and editors employ various strategies. One of the simplest and fastest methods is sensationalism. In such texts, the topic itself becomes secondary, while real social issues are neglected, overshadowed, or portrayed as less important. The most essential journalistic building block — facts — is often missing in the construction of these articles.

### **Research Subject**

The subject of this research is to determine the degree and forms of Ethical Code violations through an analysis of the sensationalist approach in the digital editions of Politika and Kurir. The focus is on the “Chronicle” section during the period from July 27 to August 28, 2025, aiming to provide a precise understanding of reporting practices and adherence to ethical standards in two editorial offices that differ in their editorial policies and reporting styles.

If something was not published in newspapers, broadcast on the radio, shown on television, or increasingly posted on social media, it was increasingly considered as if it had never happened. Today, media outlets occupy a significant part of everyday life, influencing opinions, attitudes, and behaviors through a vast amount of information.

Journalists must adhere to professional standards and values to fulfill their fundamental functions and responsibilities. Like any profession, journalism has postulates that professional communicators must respect and follow when reporting. Professionalism is a crucial dimension of all media systems, and its development depends on the autonomy of the profession and the sophistication of professional norms (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: 10).

Technological advancement and globalization have led to intense media concentration and commercialization of information worldwide. Increasingly, commercial interests and audience-attraction tactics are valued more than the truthfulness of information. Digital media often publish content containing unverified or inaccurate information, or content based on speculation, rumors, or defamation. Less attention is paid to applying ethical codes and respecting the general standards and values that build trust between journalists and the public.

It should be remembered that the purpose of adopting ethical codes is to remind journalists of the moral dilemmas they face and to instill a sense of responsibility for what is expected of them in the performance of their duties (Žaket, 2007: 24). Recently, there has been a growing impression that journalists neglect ethical codes and responsibility in reporting, often leaning toward sensationalism to attract readers, generate clicks, and attract more users to the site.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Sensationalism in journalism has numerous definitions, with common characteristics including exaggeration of facts, publishing content based on gossip and speculation, and focusing on unusual and shocking stories, especially prevalent in digital media. Contemporary journalism is marked by widespread use of this approach, where truthful and accurate reports are often exaggerated and adapted to appear more dramatic and appealing. The primary goal of such content is to attract the largest possible audience while also increasing revenue.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, sensationalism in media organizations is defined as “reporting on events in a deliberately dramatized and exaggerated manner to attract public attention and increase circulation and revenue.” It is often associated with dumbing down the content, as well as with concepts such as infotainment and tabloidization (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.).

Since digital media revolves around clicks, it is essential that headlines and content be as unusual and shocking as possible. Frank Luther Mott, an American journalism historian and Pulitzer Prize winner for History in 1939, identified the following characteristics of media sensationalism:

- Alarmist headlines in large letters, usually about trivial news
- Excessive use of images and illustrations
- Sources including fabricated interviews, misleading headlines, pseudoscience, or false interpretations by self-proclaimed experts
- Dramatic empathy towards those opposing the system
- Emphasis on weekly color supplements, usually including comics (Mott, 1941: 569)

Sensationalism has become increasingly prevalent as a response to economic pressures and competition for audience attention. Although this practice can temporarily increase readership, it undermines the long-term credibility of the media (Lechpammer, Kanižaj & Beck, 2024).

Sensationalism in audiovisual news is expressed through both content and formal strategies aimed at capturing viewer attention. This includes highly negative topics—such as crimes, accidents, or disasters—and striking presentation techniques, like fast-paced editing, dramatic visuals, and intense sound effects. While these strategies increase viewer engagement and time spent watching, they may reduce the informational quality of the news content (Hendriks Vettehen & Kleemans, 2018).

There is no doubt that over time, sensationalism has become a daily phenomenon in the media; it can even be said to dominate media discourse. In journalistic practice, it has long been assumed that news about tragedies, crime, and accidents significantly contribute to readership and media sales.

## **Insight into Global Research**

Tabloid and stereotypical expressions in headlines often spark curiosity and attract attention. Numerous studies have shown that sensationalism directly influences the number of clicks and the time spent reading news in digital editions, confirming its dominant role. The commercialization of the media market and the predominance of entertainment content are recognized as two key factors contributing to the spread of sensationalism.

A 2016 case study analyzed 400 news items in online editions of newspapers in the United States, Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, focusing on the presence of sensationalism. The findings revealed that topics concerning officials' activities were treated as sensationally as traditionally tabloid categories, such as crime or celebrity life. Sensationalist articles circulate significantly faster on social media and reach a broader and more diverse audience, particularly those actively using modern communication channels such as Twitter and Instagram. The analysis showed that sensationalist stories accounted for approximately half of all content shared on social media—specifically, 45.8% (Brown, Harlow, García & Salaverría, 2016).

A 2022 media study revealed that 48% of reports contained spin in the headline, and 68% in the body of the text. The prevalence of jargon in texts was approximately 65% (Dempster, Sutherland & Keogh, 2022).

Numerous studies on sensationalism and tabloidization over recent decades share a common conclusion: sensationalism in news guarantees success in terms of “selling” the story to the public.

## **Hypothetical Framework**

Prior to the main analysis, this study establishes both general and specific hypotheses as part of the hypothetical framework, aiming to define the fundamental assumptions that will be tested throughout the research.

### **Main Hypothesis:**

The majority of news articles feature clickbait headlines containing sensationalist and tabloid expressions.

### **Specific Hypotheses:**

- Most news articles cover family tragedies and accidents and include disturbing content.
- More articles violate the section on respecting privacy than the section on truthful reporting.
- The number of articles revealing the identities of suspects (perpetrators) is approximately equal to those neglecting the protection of the identity, rights, dignity, and integrity of children and victims.

### **Methodological Approach**

The research was conducted using the method of content analysis. The sample included two digital news media—Politika and Kurir. The corpus covered the period from July 28 to August 27, 2025, during which a total of 690 articles were identified and analyzed—190 from Politika’s portal and 500 from Kurir.

These two media were selected due to their contrasting editorial policies and the diversity of their reporting approaches. Politika is a long-standing media outlet with a well-established online edition, whereas Kurir is a tabloid-style portal that also publishes a daily print edition. This selection provided a balanced perspective on the content diversity within the Chronicle section.

For the purposes of this research, the following methods were used: the classification method (categorizing texts into analytical categories), the statistical method (quantitative representation of findings), and the comparative method (comparison of content volume and quality across the selected media). In addition, deductive and inductive reasoning were applied to draw general and specific conclusions from the analyzed content and to formulate recommendations.

The research was based on principles outlined in Chapter 1 (Truthfulness), Chapter 4 (Responsibility), and Chapter 7 (Privacy) of the Journalists’ Code of Ethics. Content was analyzed according to the following categories: use of clickbait headlines, degree of objectivity, presence of tabloid expressions, reliance on speculation and gossip, and reporting on disturbing topics such as family tragedies and violence, with a focus on evaluating respect for the privacy and dignity of the persons involved.

## **Research Results**

At a time when many people question the credibility of the media, adherence to ethical standards represents the most effective way for media organizations to retain or restore public trust. The media landscape is increasingly flooded with fake news and unverified information that spreads rapidly.

Ethical codes play a crucial role in ensuring the accuracy and reliability of reporting, which is essential for maintaining public confidence. This study was conducted to determine the extent to which ethical codes are violated in two relevant digital news media in Serbia—Politika and Kurir. Understanding the degree to which media adhere to ethical standards is key to enabling the public to trust the objectivity and accuracy of news content.

Based on the findings, it is possible to identify the problems and challenges currently present in digital journalism in Serbia, with the goal of preserving media ethics and the overall quality of information. The analysis may serve as a useful tool for media organizations and regulatory bodies to better understand where the most significant weaknesses lie and how to develop more effective oversight mechanisms.

The following sub-sections present the results of the content analysis, including the use of clickbait headlines, dominant topics, accuracy of reporting, journalistic responsibility, and respect for privacy in published texts.

### **Clickbait at Any Cost**

The research analyzed a total of 190 published units in the “Chronicle” section on the official website of the daily newspaper Politika. The analysis showed that none of the headlines contained clickbait characteristics. Typical tabloid expressions such as “shocking,” “horrific,” “terrifying,” “drama,” “chaos,” “reckless,” and similar were not found in the headlines, and none of the texts contained speculative elements. A significant portion of the headlines — 55 units (29%) — provided a concise description, without emotional charge or teasers designed to provoke curiosity for the sake of clicks.

Some headlines from Politika's digital edition include:

- “Ministry of Interior of Republika Srpska: Searches at 40 locations, 16 arrested”
- “Blockaders caught at the border with drugs”
- “Two men detained for 30 days due to theft”
- “Jewelry store owner robbed near Veliki Trnovac”
- “Boy died after falling from a cliff at a waterfall”
- “Experts conducting new analyses in the case of the disappearance of Danka Ilić,” etc.

None of these headlines are frightening or written in all caps. They do not contain mystery or riddles and do not emotionally manipulate the audience.

The analysis of posts on the Kurir portal shows dominance of a sensationalist approach. In the sample of 500 headlines, 396 (79%) contained clickbait features. In 244 texts (49%), tabloid formulations were recorded, which amplify the emotional impact and undermine objectivity. Although 280 headlines (56%) describe the event in detail, the descriptions are often emotionally charged and dramatized, aimed at increasing readership. The results indicate an editorial model that prioritizes attracting attention and generating clicks over respecting journalistic standards of objectivity and restraint.

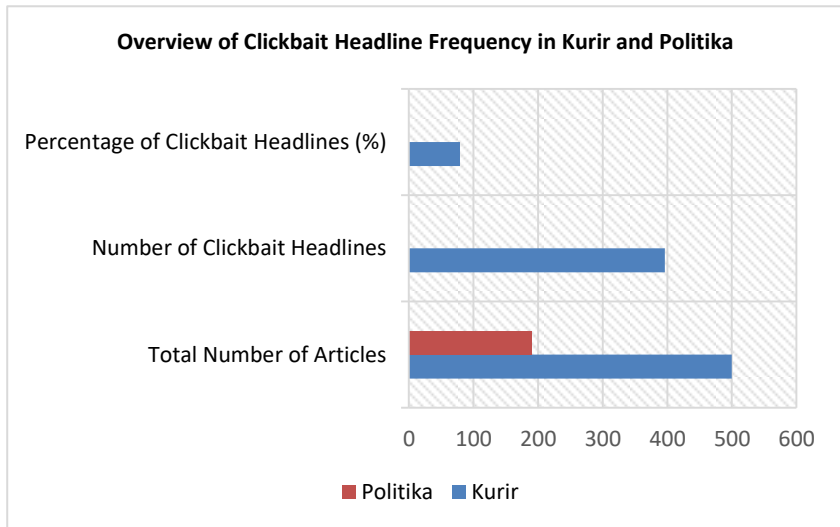
Some headlines from Kurir’s website include:

- “**DRAMA ON THE HIGHWAY TO NIŠ!** Girls were in a burning Peugeot, saved by a **MYSTERIOUS HERO** who then **DISAPPEARED**: He was choked by smoke, we thought he was dead (VIDEO)”
- “**BROTHERS ENDED UP IN A CANAL ON THEIR FRONT SIDE, A TERRIER WAS OVER THEM.** Mother arrived at the scene to identify the body, collapsed when she saw the sight (PHOTO)”
- “**RESULTS OF THE RECONSTRUCTION OF DANKA ILIĆ’S DISAPPEARANCE READY AFTER TWO MONTHS (2):** Reports sent to the parties, these are the next steps!”
- “**SHINE, MY STAR, I WANT YOU, I’M SEARCHING FOR YOU...** The sister of the liquidated Škaljari member Ivan Milačić spoke out, masked attacker shot him in front of his wife and friends”
- “**SCHEDULED A MEETING VIA APP, THEN THE HORROR FOLLOWED:** They broke into her apartment, sprayed tear gas, and robbed her”

- “TERRIFYING SCENE IN MIRJEVO: Body of a 28-year-old man from Nepal found in the apartment,” etc.

Each of these headlines is frightening and written in all caps. They contain mystery or riddles, appeal to readers’ emotions, and arouse curiosity. The examples show the first step towards violating the ethical code.

**Figure 1.** Distribution of clickbait headlines in digital media



**Source:** Author's analysis

Analysis of headlines in the “Chronicle” section highlights significant differences between the two media outlets regarding editorial policy and journalistic standards. Politika maintains an informative and neutral style, with headlines that are linguistically balanced and serve an informative purpose. In contrast, Kurir employs sensationalist formulations, frequently repeating expressions.

These differences reflect a deeper divide in the Serbian media landscape—between traditional journalism and a tabloid model oriented toward commercial gain, where ethical codes are often disregarded.

## **Speculation Conceals the Truth**

Regarding the first category, namely the truthfulness criterion in the Code, the research revealed that 70 out of 500 posts (14%) on Kurir's website were based on gossip, speculation, rumors, or defamation. In most cases, journalists failed to clearly distinguish between commentary and statements from eyewitnesses or other sources.

One example includes the following excerpt: "It is suspected that the group was active from 2020 to early 2021... According to evidence collected from Skype, Momčilović likely cultivated so-called gardens in Germany before entering the cocaine trade... His murder is allegedly the result of a personal conflict but is treated as part of a broader criminal context." Other parts of the text state: "This is a mafia battlefield! Clan wars have moved to Spain, and over five years, around ten criminals from Serbia and Montenegro have died."

Frequently, when reporting on murders and suicides, journalists relied on statements from unnamed neighbors discussing the living conditions of affected families. For example, coverage of criminal groups and the killings of members of the Pink Panther network continued for several days.

The research shows that journalists at Kurir violated the guidelines of the Serbian Journalists' Code in the analyzed texts. Their reporting was based on speculation and conjecture, making it impossible to claim that events of public interest were reported accurately, promptly, and truthfully. This approach reflects sensationalism and breaches one of the fundamental principles of journalistic ethics.

In contrast, Politika adheres to journalistic standards when reporting on criminal events. Their coverage relies exclusively on official and verified information from institutions such as the prosecutor's office or courts. This approach avoids sensationalism and clearly maintains the boundary between factual reporting and gossip. Sensationalism is not necessary for informing the public; rather, it diminishes media credibility and erodes public trust.

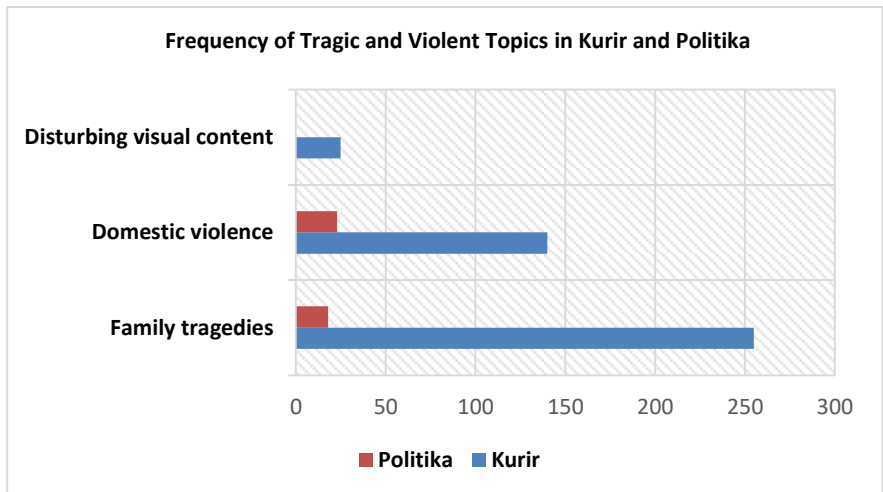
### Family Tragedy as the Core of Media Reporting

The analysis of published texts in the “Chronicle” section reveals a significant number of stories related to tragic family events — murders, suicides, assaults, and violence.

A total of 273 texts about family tragedies were recorded — 18 out of 190 in Politika and 255 out of 500 in Kurir. Assaults and domestic violence were the topic of 163 texts — specifically, 23 in Politika and 140 in Kurir. In total, 25 posts contained disturbing content (photos or videos). The results show that the media construct family tragedy as the central theme of the chronicle, combining both informative and emotional aspects of reporting.

Dramatic headlines such as “Dear relatives, my daughter Jelena has passed away — the father of the girl who died with her friend near Bileća left a painful message! The sorrow does not fade” are examples of how Kurir employs emotionally charged messages. These are not merely reports of personal tragedies but also include comments from acquaintances expressing condolences, thereby bringing private family grief into the public sphere.

**Figure 2.** Prevalence of Family Tragedies, Domestic Violence, and Disturbing Content in Kurir and Politika



Source: Author's analysis

Such an approach demonstrates a tendency to violate journalistic ethical standards, as this manner of reporting can lead to the exploitation of privacy and additional emotional burden both for grieving families and for the public, thereby calling into question the professionalism and responsibility of the media.

### **Boundaries of Privacy in the Age of Sensationalism**

In *Politika*, 23 articles revealed personal identity, 18 ignored privacy concerns. In *Kurir*, 127 articles disclosed identities, while 129 failed to protect the dignity and privacy of victims, including minors.

One example from *Politika* includes publishing the full name and initial of a suspect—"Nikola V. (34)"—which partially discloses identity. *Kurir*, on the other hand, frequently names individuals without official confirmation, citing security reports, as in the case of Marko Čubiša Kan allegedly targeted by Radoje Zvicer.

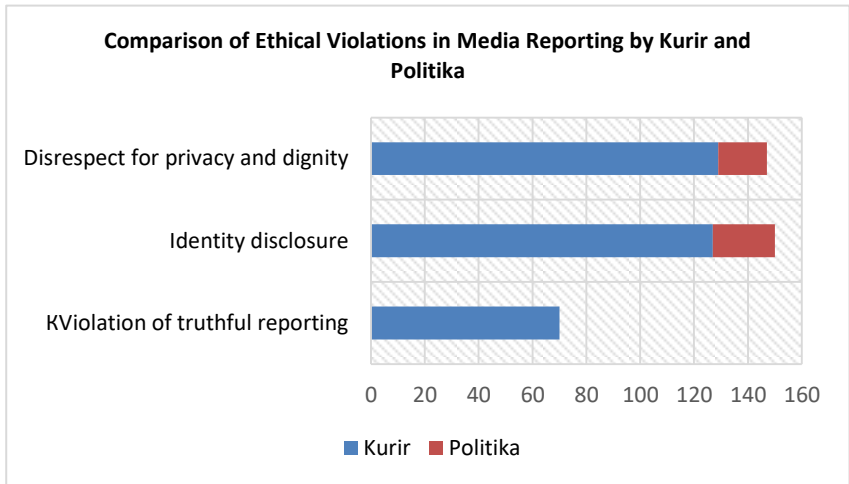
Editorial decisions about revealing identities carry significant ethical weight. Even when not officially confirmed, media may justify disclosure based on public interest. However, such decisions must be well-grounded, especially when sensitive data is involved. Balancing public interest with privacy protection remains a core ethical challenge in journalism.

This analysis shows that privacy is often compromised, particularly in *Kurir*, pointing to the need for stricter editorial standards and ethics training. Even *Politika*, known for a more professional tone, occasionally skirts ethical boundaries, raising questions about presumption of innocence and respect for individual dignity.

A clear contrast is seen in reporting family tragedies. *Kurir* published: "This is the teenager (15) from Aleksinac who died on Stara Planina! Mateja slipped and fell from a cliff at Tupavica waterfall in front of his parents (photo)". *Politika* simply reported: "Minor dies at Stara Planina waterfall."

While *Kurir* exposes personal details and emphasizes emotional aspects, often with visual elements, *Politika* reports the core facts without violating privacy. These differences highlight how editorial choices directly impact the ethical quality of media content.

**Figure 3.** Ethical Violations in Media Reporting: Kurir vs. Politika



Source: Author's analysis

The research showed a similar number of news items in which the identity of the suspect is revealed and those in which there is a lack of attention to protecting the rights, dignity, and integrity of children and victims.

The analysis revealed that, in most cases, the criterion of privacy is not respected, while the guidelines related to truthfulness in reporting are violated less frequently. In Kurir, nearly one-quarter of the analyzed articles (26%) breach this chapter of the Code, while in the case of Politika, the percentage is significantly lower—only 9%.

### Conclusion

Violations of the journalistic code of ethics in Serbia, based on this research, are frequent, systematic, and deeply rooted. These practices include sensationalism, breaches of privacy, emotional manipulation, and the blending of factual reporting with commentary. Such actions directly undermine the integrity of journalism and the democratic capacity of society.

The results of the analysis confirm the first hypothesis: in the tabloid media outlet Kurir, as many as 396 out of 500 analyzed articles contain clickbait

headlines, indicating the dominant use of sensationalism as a means of attracting an audience. In contrast, in the traditional media outlet Politika, none of the 190 headlines meet the criteria for clickbait. These findings point to a clear difference in editorial policy and adherence to ethical norms, confirming the initial assumption that clickbait is primarily characteristic of tabloid media.

The differences in audience engagement strategies and writing styles are not merely stylistic—they reveal a deeper crisis in Serbian journalism, where market logic increasingly displaces professional standards. The consequences of this trend are reflected in the shrinking space for informed public debate and the degradation of the media's role in a democratic society.

The second hypothesis, which assumed that most news stories cover family tragedies and accidents and contain disturbing content, is partially confirmed. In Kurir, more than half of the articles focus on family tragedies, indicating a strong reliance on emotionally charged and shocking topics to attract readers. In Politika, that percentage is significantly lower. Only 25 articles contained disturbing visual content, suggesting that such material is not the dominant mechanism in either outlet. These results suggest that sensationalism is primarily achieved through narrative and linguistic devices rather than visual elements.

The observation that tabloids most often generate a disturbing effect through language and writing style—rather than visual tools such as photographs or videos—highlights the important role of narrative and rhetorical techniques. This means that word choice, dramatic headlines, and descriptive style are the main ways media evoke emotional responses, emphasizing the need for a more detailed analysis of language as a key tool in creating sensationalist effects and violating journalistic ethics.

The third hypothesis, which assumed that violations of privacy are more frequent than violations of truthfulness in reporting, is largely confirmed. In Kurir, 70 out of 500 analyzed texts violated the principles of truthful reporting—failing to clearly separate facts from commentary. In contrast, 127 texts revealed the identities of victims, and 129 disregarded privacy, dignity, and integrity—particularly concerning children and victims of violence. This indicates that personal rights are more frequently compromised than the publication of inaccurate information. On the other hand, Politika mostly

adheres to the principles of truthful reporting, relying on official sources such as prosecutors and courts.

These findings suggest that privacy violations have become an “acceptable” practice in tabloid journalism, more visible and frequent than the publication of unverified or false information. This shift in focus—from truth as a fundamental journalistic value to the exploitation of personal details for emotional effect and reader engagement—is especially troubling. The disclosure of identities and disregard for victim protection highlight deeply rooted ethical violations and a complete subordination to commercial interests.

The fourth hypothesis, which assumed that the number of articles revealing the identity of a suspect is roughly equal to those disregarding the protection of victims, including children, is confirmed through the content analysis of Kurir. Of the 500 texts analyzed, 127 revealed the identity of the suspect or perpetrator, while 129 violated the privacy or dignity of victims, including particularly vulnerable groups such as children. On Politika’s website, 23 texts revealed identities, and 18 texts showed a lack of regard for privacy.

The broader picture emerging from these findings shows a media model in which human integrity is subordinated to the commercial value of the story. Such practices not only violate the Serbian Journalists’ Code of Ethics but also influence public opinion, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish the right to be informed from mere curiosity. In this sense, the fourth hypothesis illustrates how tabloid media undermine the foundations of legal and ethical standards of communication.

Sensationalism is not merely a poor journalistic practice—it poses a systemic threat to the public interest, informed citizenship, and the quality of democracy. Continued sensationalist reporting and systematic violations of the ethical code lead to further degradation of the media system, erosion of trust in journalism, and weakening of democratic processes in society.

Therefore, it is crucial to remember the first and most important goal of the journalistic profession: truth in reporting. Although the ways in which journalists gather and present information have changed, and many aspects of the media landscape have evolved, this fundamental goal remains unchanged. Truth, as a guiding star and primary aim, is deeply embedded in the professional and ethical codes of journalism.

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