
THE ASSESMENT OF THE ROLE OF POLICE OFFICERS IN LITHUANIAN NEWS PORTALS DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

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Annotation. In the 21st century the role of communications is given more functions and a wider context. The speed of information dissemination inevitably becomes an attendant of consumer society. The exclusive capability of the electronic mass media to provide its audience with info ‘*right here, right now*’ gives the public a prompt access to coverage of the events happening both in Lithuania, and globally. Articles headlines help us navigate through many of news items offered to readers. In order to keep this society constantly involved in this vortex, news portals use compelling headlines that are often either redundant, hyperbolized, or far removed from the article itself. Analyzing the role of police officers during a coronavirus pandemic, the headlines of news portal articles were examined. Articles headlines help us navigate through many of the news items offered to readers.

So the present research aims to explore headlines of news portal articles in the context of their relevance to the content of the article they present when news is about police officers and their role during the coronavirus pandemic. The object of the research is headlines of articles about police officers in Lithuanian news portals. The objective of the research is to analyze the propositional content of headlines of articles about police officers in the Lithuanian news portals. The used methods are qualitative content analysis to analyze the headlines and their context and descriptive methods to analyze scientific publications.

The research had shown that during the new COVID-19 pandemic, electronic mass media seemed to temporarily forget the negativity, and with the aim to maintain general discipline and order in public domain, practically totally refrained from posting any negative information on police officers. However the institution itself was still presented as playing the disciplinary and punishing role, but was changed the assessment of the role of police officers in news portal of Lithuania.

Keywords: communication, news portals, headlines, police officers, COVID 19.

INTRODUCTION

The exclusive capability of the electronic mass media to provide its audience with info ‘*right here, right now*’ gives the public a prompt access to coverage of the events happening both in Lithuania, and globally. It became highly topical in the light of *COVID-19*. Any information on changes in *COVID-19* case numbers, the decisions made by representatives of national authorities, the consequences of respecting or not respecting the introduced rules, the public attitude and societal responses as well as any other issues associated with the virus becomes accessible to the general public in no time when in the public sphere. A modern person

engulfed by the fast pace of life and work often cannot afford long-time reading, thus opts to only scan through the published information or run over the headlines. Whatever the media, a headline is the single most important component of any published article that unambiguously serves to capture the reader's attention, and determines his/her willingness to keep reading the article or refrain from it. However, it is important to bear in mind that both the headline and the publicistic-style article itself need also to play their informational role, which became critically important during the coronavirus pandemic. The general public tends to follow the information published in e-periodicals as the decisions made by authorities in response to changing numbers of virus cases are made quickly thus every member of the society rushes to find out the news that is particularly important to him/her.

So the present research aims to explore headlines of news portal articles in the context of their relevance to the content of the article they present when news is about police officers and their role during the coronavirus pandemic. During the coronavirus pandemic, the exchange of information about the rules and changes in the country was very intense. In addition, compliance was monitored by police officers, so their role as a supervisor and punisher was strengthened. In this context the question arises – whether the negative role of the police officer will only intensifies. So the problematic question of whether the coronavirus pandemic will strengthen the inactive role of the police officer on news portals raises in this article. Consequently, the object of the research is headlines of articles about police officers in Lithuanian news portals. The aim of the research is to analyze the propositional content of headlines of articles about police officers in the Lithuanian news portals. The tasks of the research is: 1) to analyze the headlines of articles about police officers of news portal; 2) to disclose an assessment of the role of police officers in Lithuanian news portals during the period of coronavirus pandemic.

The qualitative content analysis and descriptive **methods** were selected for the purpose of research. Qualitative content analysis helps to analyze the headlines and their relevance to the context, descriptive method used to analyze scientific publications. It's need to say that there are many scientific publication about communication, mass media, but there is no research where the role of police officers in news portal is discussed.

Review of the publicistic-style articles found in two the most popular. Lithuanian news portals, namely *delfi.lt* and *lrytas.lt*, revealed certain trends of changing the role of police officers, and even shaping a different image thereof. The role played by the police institution

and police officers in e-periodicals during the period of coronavirus pandemic appeared when some rules introduced in the period of pandemic as soft recommendation were changed to being mandatory. The main violations reported were not wearing masks and breaches of self-isolation with only rare cases when police officers had to search for individuals who run away from medical facilities despite they were infected with coronavirus or awaiting for their test results. Accordingly, in the background of such topics, the aspect of cautionary information about the eventual sanctions and penalties appears, as well as the role of the police institution and a police officer as a warden and punisher emerges. Despite the fact that there was some information showing that police officers often only warned those oblivious citizens, while punishing only the most defiant and malignant ones, the headlines of the articles published in news portals foremost posted the information on fines imposed.

THE INFLUENCE OF MEDIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

In the 21st century the role of communications is given more functions and a wider context. Especially the great reaches of communication available on the internet that not only offer new opportunities, but also threaten to get lost in spaces of the information spread. That is precisely why modern society is identified as the Informational News Society – a society where resources (Jarockytė, 2003) of news are available to each citizen, where members of the society have access to modern information technologies, information resources and public information. The speed of information dissemination inevitably becomes an attendant of such consumer society. The entire contents of the world is being consumed, entire culture that has been industrially remade into final products, into the system of signs which ceased having any cultural or political value (Baudillard, 2010) or value of events. Media is functioning in a very wide multi-layered space of the socium and influences many different structures and levels. It is being identified as “memory storage” or “maps” guiding us where we are currently present and what our prospects are for the future (McQuail, 1994). Media manages, encodes and concentrates our perception of the reality. However at the same time media inevitably distorts this reality. Within the media, the levelled-out world becomes a product that is supplied to the public. And when the world is in confusion, contradictory and full of conflicts, each media tends to enforce its own logic upon it which is even more abstract however consistent (Baudillard, 2010). Such trends become especially obvious with respect to electronic media. Currently the electronic media turns into a transforming social force that determines a different

and novel perception of the reality in the light of globalization, and influences the new attitude towards phenomena of life and mental values (Kavolis, 1996).

The productive interaction between certain media and its audience determines successful and progressive existence of mass media. It depends on the ability of the certain media to persuasively convey the global events, to affect the mindset of the target audience and the understanding of these events. That is precisely why all the media effects' theories are based on the *sender–receiver* structure of the communication process, i.e. they analyze the “spreader”, the “affected” and their internal and external interrelations (Fiske, 1998). The interrelation between the sender and receiver of the information is also relevant for the science of pragmatic linguistics. It is especially important when analyzing perception and interpretation of the message sent. In other words, the science of pragmatics covers „researching of human communications with respect to the individual: what is happening inside the individual who sends and receives the message; which is essentially determining the form of communication (in particular situation)” (Ivič, 1973). The speaker emerges in the field of pragmatic linguistics, sayings of whom reveal the intentionality of his/her speech. Whereas speech acts are closely related to speaking, for the purpose of analysis of which not only grammatical expression of the saying is important but also mental status of the addressee and the addresser, the social context, etc. (Dobržinskienė, R., 2012). Consequently, media and audience become the addressee and the addresser, respectively – two participants of the communication act. Indirect communication continuously takes place between them. Accordingly within the *socium*, mass media acts taking into account needs of the audience: prepares info relevant for this particular audience; provides the real-life assistance (audience uses messages of the mass media to find the answers to relevant real-life issues and the options to solve problems faced); disseminates scientific knowledge and educates. (Furst, 1998). In any case needs is also closely related to intentional provision of information which is supposed to intrigue, to raise the interest, to prompt the reader to “consume” the information.

Modern news portals are perfect reflection of the above discussed relation between mass media and the world. They offer ever-changing information that reports on events that take place in a confused world while selectively choosing what consumer society needs to know, to see and to hear. In order to make this society constantly involved in this swirl, the electronic news sites tend to use attention-grabbing headlines that often happen to be redundant, hyperbolized and sometimes even far from the contents of the article itself. Generally, “headline

is a text expressed in one sentence which serves to convey the essence, the main contents of the publication” (Koženiauskienė, 2013). Accordingly, the primary function of any headline is to give the main idea of the article it belongs to, and to offer some information, which might be of interest for the reader (Iljina, S. 2016). Authors of electronic periodicals are well aware that this is one of the most effective ways to catch the attention of the reader and to make him/her at least open the article. For this reason headlines are often used as a manipulation to achieve the maximal effect. Manipulation is some “indiscernible deception enabling you to indirectly achieve your own ends” (Juodytė, A., 2008). By way of manipulation author seeks to make other person to willingly do what the author wants him/her to do” (Joule, R. V., Beauvois, J. L., 2005). Creating headlines in this particular manner results in significant deviation from what is reported in the publication. With respect to pragmatic linguistics, headline serves as a primary and critical entanglement that catches the reader. For this reason current research paper focuses primarily on the information conveyed through headlines of the publicist-style articles while analyzing the role of police officers in electronic periodicals.

THE ASSESMENT OF THE ROLE OF POLICE OFFICERS IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

With the aim to grab reader’s attention, news portals strive to post mostly intriguing, sensational information while focusing mainly on headlines. Like any other group of the society, police and police officers receive more attention from news portals only when they happen to take part in positively or negatively exceptional situations. Negative information is undoubtedly more effective and is stored in readers’ memories for longer periods. Consequently, this may give the impression that there is more this type of information in electronic publicistics. However, image of police is usually conveyed in equal portions by posting one half of positive and another half of negative information. This notwithstanding, during the new COVID-19 pandemic, electronic mass media seemed to temporarily forget the negativity, and with the aim to maintain general discipline and order in public domain, practically totally refrained from posting any negative information on police officers. However the institution itself was still presented as playing the disciplinary and punishing role. This is obvious from the following headlines of articles:

Pamanė, kad tai nerimta? Policija nesigaili tų, kurie nepaklūsta reikalavimui dėvėti kaukes (Just thought to be not serious? Police have no mercy for those disobedient to wear face masks)¹.

Grįžtant prie privalomo kaukių dėvėjimo, žinios iš policijos: dirbs intensyviau, primena baudas (Returning to mandatory wearing of face masks, here come news from police: will intensify their work, and reminds of fines).

Dėl apsauginių kaukių nedėvėjimo savaitgalį nubausti aštuoni žmonės (Eight persons fined for not wearing face covering masks during weekend).

Į nurodymus dėl kaukių numojusiems Druskininkų politikams išsisukti nepavyko – turės patuštinti pinigines (No escape for politicians from Druskininkai who shrug off directions to wear face masks – will have to dip into their pockets).

It is worth noting that headlines are prevailed by the lexis of negative connotation: *nesigaili (no mercy)*, *primena baudas (reminds of fines)*, *nubausti (punish)*, *išsisukti nepavyko (no escape)*. On the other hand, means of language that justify such a punishing role of police officers are found in the same headline, too: *kurie nepaklūsta (those disobedient)*, *privalomo kaukių dėvėjimo (mandatory wearing of face masks)*, *apsauginių kaukių nedėvėjimo (for not wearing face covering masks)*, *į nurodymus dėl kaukių numojusiems politikams (politicians who shrug off obligation to wear face masks)*. Such headlines while being oppositional serve to justify the punishing and controlling role played by police officers, and substantiate its importance as they are simply doing what is legitimate and indicated by the State *privalomo (mandatory)*, *nurodymus (directions)*. Besides headlines, strange to say, articles themselves are not sensational at all. They are mainly articles simply covering general information, that can be attributed the action mode of preparing the information relevant for that specific audience within the socium. Only the article with the headline *Į nurodymus dėl kaukių numojusiems Druskininkų politikams išsisukti nepavyko – turės patuštinti pinigines (No escape for politicians from Druskininkai who shrug off directions to wear face masks – will have to dip into their pockets)* introduces some intrigue: despite the fact that it covers decisions made and fines imposed for lawbreakers, it still highlights the delay by police officers to decide upon imposing the fines to well-known politicians from Druskininkai.

¹ The translation of headlines is made by author of this article.

Probably the only one truly intriguing headline was found, associated with wearing medical face masks and suggesting, that police did somewhat inappropriate, because the man “at least partially won” in this conflict:

Su policija į kovą dėl kaukės stojusiam vyrui pavyko laimėti bent iš dalies (The man at least partially wins the face mask fight with the police)

However, reading through the article makes it obvious that the headline was hyperbolized and higher sounding than the situation itself. Police officers did not exceed their powers and arrested the man lawfully. However the District Court of Vilnius city after hearing the case has imposed a fine of EUR 520, and when this decision was appealed at Vilnius Regional court, the fine was reduced to EUR 220.

Police are characterized by epithet *griežta* (*strict*) which is soothed right away in the headline following the colon by explaining usage of this epithet in headlines:

Policija griežta: per parą skyrė 122 nuobaudas už karantino pažeidimus (Police are strict: 122 lockdown-breach fines imposed per day).

Another aspect why police institution is mentioned in news portals – for the sake of control of people self-isolation. Headlines of this type of the articles often use various grammatical forms of the verb *nubausti* (*to punish*):

Per mėnesį policija patikrino apie 1 tūkst. turėjusių izoliuotis, nubaudė – 215 (Police checked approx. 1 thousand of people that must have been in self-isolation, and total 215 were punished).

Į saviizoliaciją spjovę lietuviai toliau pildo išdą: nuo rugpjūčio pradžios nubausti 268 pažeidėjai (The Lithuanians heedless of self-isolation keep filling up the treasury: total 268 offenders punished from the beginning of August).

Per parą nubausta 70 žmonių už karantino reikalavimų pažeidimą: net pirmą kartą bauda skausminga (Total 70 people punished per day for breaching lock-down requirements: fine painful even if imposed for the first time).

Praėjusių parą penki žmonės nubausti dėl saviizoliacijos pažeidimų, dėl kaukių – nė vienas (Five people punished over the last 24 hours for self-isolation breaches, whereas none for face masks).

Dėl kaukių nedėvėjimo savaitgalį nubausti du žmonės, dėl saviizoliacijos pažeidimų – 13 (Over the weekend two people punished for not wearing face masks, and another 13 – for self-isolation breaches)

Izoliacijos reikalavimų laikymąsi nuo šiol tikrins savivaldybės ir policija (From now on, adherence to self-isolation requirements will be checked by the municipalities and the police)

More strict connotation of such headlines must have been determined by the fact that self-isolation was imposed upon people arriving from the foreign countries affected by the virus, those who contacted with the infected persons, etc. For this reason, breach of the indication to be in self-isolation was considered to be more dangerous for the society than not wearing face masks in public spaces or enclosed facilities. Consequently, the role played by the police, again, seems to be that of a punisher, however despite that, it obtains a positive assessment, because by punishing police keeps protecting the greater portion of the society from disobedient offenders. It might even be seen as the institution having obtained function of trust and assistance. Nonetheless, police had not only to punish and control people, but also search for those who run away from hospitals, kept hiding from medics, or even to still foreigners isolated in medical facilities.

Policija įspėja: Kaune iš ligoninės pabėgo koronavirusu sergantis vyras (Police warning: a man infected with coronavirus escapes from hospital in Kaunas)

Uzbekų grasinimai sulaukė ir policijos dėmesio: ligoninės vadovas atskleidė, kas dedasi viduje (Threatening by Uzbeks attracts police attention: the Head of the hospital reveals what's happening inside of it)

The word *patikrinimas* (*inspection*) is also often found in the information publicly posted in news portals which also presupposes some sort of a restriction and potential punishment:

Prasidėjo patikrinimai, kaip kavinėse, baruose ir klubuose žmonės laikosi taisyklių dėl koronaviruso (Inspections were started to check the cafés, bars and nightclubs for abiding rules regarding coronavirus)

Pradėtas patikrinimas: pareigūnai stebi, ar kavinės ir barai laikosi koronaviruso prevencijos priemonių (Inspection undertaken: police officers keep monitoring if cafés and bars practice and comply with the coronavirus prevention indications)

Police even control and stop celebrations:

Policija nutraukė neteisėtą reiverių vakarėlį: surado miške (Police break up the illegal party of ravers: find it in the woods)

Rugsėjo 1-osios šventė Lietuvoje prasideda su naujais apribojimais: daugiau dėmesio skirs ir policija (In Lithuania, the celebration of September 1st starts with new restrictions: police shall focus their greater attention, too)

Policija įspėja dėl savaitgalio: daugiau dėmesio – renginiams ir izoliacijos taisyklėms (Police warn regarding the upcoming weekend: greater focus will be on events and abiding rules of isolation).

Police control the movement of persons within the country during festive period:

Kaip per Velykas atrodys Lietuvos miestai: kelius blokuos policijos ekipažai ar betoninės užtvartos (How Lithuanian cities are going to look like during Easter: roads to be blocked by police crews or concrete barriers).

Pajūris per Velykas bus kone apjuostas pareigūnų: keli kontrolės postai bus mobilūs (The seaside during Easter will be almost totally surrounded by police officers: several control stations will be mobile).

Such headlines only prove once again that news portals indeed tend to assign not so much positive roles to the police however their presentation, dissemination of the neutral information in articles that they belong to show that media of electronic websites deliberately provide news, avoid taking advantage of people weakness who are already confused to a significant extent, do not make intrigues and do not hyperbolize events being highlighted. They simply inform about the activities undertaken by the police in order to make people aware of it and prevent any misunderstandings. Accordingly, it can be noted that during the period of COVID-19 spread that significantly shocked Lithuanian society, news portals shifted their position and attributed other features to the role of the police when compared to some other cases. Although the punishing role attributed to the police and police officers was sort of enhanced, and controlling role was assigned, it still had a positive connotation in context of both headlines and articles posted because of the favourable actions performed with respect to the general public.

CONCLUSIONS

Modern mass media often strives to intrigue, to hyperbolize events, and to manipulate the headlines, but the research results showed that during the COVID-19 pandemic headlines of publications posted to news portals were only of the informative nature, and often provided only the basic information: presented number of persons punished over certain period of time for self-isolation breaches or not wearing face masks, wrote about the checks undertaken by police officers or termination of events. Yet, in this particular case police officers did not receive negative coverage in Lithuanian news portals, and the punishing role attributed to the police did not seem to be blameworthy. Normally it did not give any positive meaning to the

police image however during the period under consideration this aspect received neutral or even positive coverage in electronic periodicals as regards police job. It might appear that electronic publicistic has sort of ‘forgotten’ its functions, aims, consumerism, and got solidary identified itself with one of the society groups, namely police officers, involved in maintaining public order, compliance with instructions to wear face masks, requirements of self-isolation and social distancing in public places over the respective period of time. Consequently, the research under consideration showed that during the period relevant for the society, when maintaining discipline was of huge importance for the sake of everybody’s health, activities of the police in public were presented and assessed merely as the fact, as the necessity, and no attempts to create shocking headlines or introduce extra concern to the confused society were observed. So the role of the supervisor and punisher of police officers got a positive assessments in the Lithuanian news portals during the coronavirus pandemic.

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