


## ‘IMPORTANT, NOT MEDIA-WORTHY’ – THE SUBJECT OF SOCIAL WELFARE IN SELECTED MEDIA FROM A MESSAGE MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

In this article, I present the results of content analysis, extended by discourse analysis, which covered communications thematically related to social welfare in three media groups (*Rzeczpospolita*, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Fakt*, *Super Express*; Onet, WP), published between 2019 and 2022. The analysis of media narratives constructed around social welfare and social integration institutions, as well as social workers, is currently an important research gap, especially as the academic discourse of social policy and the professional discourse of practitioners (workers) in the social welfare system has been dominated for almost two decades by a perception of a negative, unfavourable, inappropriate and/or unfair media image of welfare institutions. I decided to verify this ‘hypothesis’ through a systematic analysis. At the same time, the study made it possible to identify the main thematic and situational contexts, narrative patterns, and quantitative proportions of individual ‘welfare motifs’ in situational frameworks such as *information*, *response to individual or collective tragedy or scandal and intervention*. The analysis confirmed the thesis of a highly schematic character of media texts dealing with the subject of social welfare and the particular phenomenon of message content management, oriented towards the preferences and expectations of individual media audiences. There is also a tendency to strongly link the ways in which the subject matter is framed, including the emotional tinge of the texts and the choice of narrative strategy, adequately to the frame and convention.

**Keywords:** social welfare in the media, content analysis, media image of social welfare, media message management, aid reporting, situational frames

## *Introduction*

Media discourse is an integral component of the contemporary cultural system. The media, which are the source of this discourse, are recognised as one of the key tools with a crucial role in the information society. As a constant source of information, they play a role as one of the most important elements shaping social and institutional reality (Czachur 2011, p. 84). In addition to their informational function, they are an important factor in socialisation, influencing the formation of mindsets and attitudes and the shaping of political and social views. They establish authority, ultimately influencing the way people perceive and communicate phenomena and problems. The saturation of society with media and the increasing dependence of various spheres of life, including public and political life, on media messages are the main determinants of the mediatisation of society. Prominent examples of the broad and multifaceted relationship between media discourse and perception or social perception and reputation can be found in the issue of social welfare, whose difficult presence in the media, especially in non-public media, linked primarily to crisis situations, has already become a model phenomenon (Brearley 2023). In welfare policy discourse, including among social workers, this phenomenon is seen as one of the correlates of the low social prestige of the welfare sector (Dudkiewicz 2012; Rymcza 2012) or even as one of the barriers to the system's effectiveness (ROPS 2012; Szyszka 2013, pp. 9–13). Of course, this phenomenon is determined by many factors. One can point out, for example, the high level of stereotyping of the public (local government) social support activities (Rek-Woźniak 2012), the unfavourable image of social welfare clients (Krzyszowski 2010, p. 125), historical associations with 'social care' (Grewiński 2011, p. 10), the unfavourable public perception of public social support activities perceived as ineffective (CBOS 2018, p. 8; Dudkiewicz 2014), the notably low media-worthiness of social work and welfare provision and thus a lack of media interest, and ultimately, the interventionist or reactionary nature of much media coverage (Szyszka 2013, p. 91). The low social prestige of the welfare support professions and deficits in the marketing and PR of the sector are also of great importance (Dzienniak-Pulina 2018; Dudkiewicz 2012).

The aim of this article is, first of all, to capture the main typical features of media discourse on social welfare, including the perspective of its conscious shaping, the management of the communication of information, characteristic of publishers, which in this case translates into the use of characteristic patterns (scripts). The question I am trying to answer in my research is how the media image of social welfare is shaped in the selected publications, and more specifically, in which contexts and according to which models (narrative scripts) the indicated media report on the activities of institutional social welfare.<sup>1</sup> The operative question, on the other hand, is whether negative, neutral, or perhaps positive emotional messages dominate in the publications and what determines this. The question posed in this way in the

<sup>1</sup> In this regard, a monograph is being prepared on the basis of quantitative and qualitative research; in this article, I only highlight selected aspects of the analysed problem.

present discourse can be regarded as crucial or decisive, and the answer to it makes it possible, on the one hand, to fill an important cognitive gap and, on the other hand, provides one of the keys that make it possible to clarify the issue of the poor reputation and public image problems of social welfare. The issue of an unfavourable media image of social assistance has occasionally been raised in the academic literature to date, but it is dominated by either general conclusions (Morawski 2010; Rek-Woźniak 2012), conclusions from broader research (Dudkiewicz 2013), research on a limited sample (Róžański 2010) or the observations and opinions of social workers themselves who attempt to define their own image (Dudkiewicz 2012). In other words, although we are indeed aware of numerous examples of unfavourable or biased portrayals of JOPS (*jednostki organizacyjne pomocy społecznej* – organisational units of social welfare) in the media, and though we are also aware of aid workers' beliefs about their unfavourable media image, the actual scale of this phenomenon in the broader frame of reference remains unknown. The research conducted so far has also failed to identify the most common thematic contexts and reasons for the appearance of the topic of social welfare; what is the proportion of texts and publications presenting crisis situations compared to those presenting social welfare in a neutral or positive light. In summary, although the thesis of the dominant negative media image of social support is often reproduced in academic discourse and has become almost a dogma in the optics of aid workers themselves, there is so far no systematised research to verify it: to confirm or reject it.

### *Research method and procedure*

As already mentioned, problem-oriented media content research on social welfare and integration has been absent in the Polish academic discourse so far, with the exception of a survey carried by Magdalena Dudkiewicz. While the above-mentioned survey examined a broad group of publications but over a relatively short period of time and dealt more broadly with the topic of help and assistance, in my study, due to a different scope and different research questions, I focused on specific media over a longer period of time.

The articles analysed were published between 2019 and 2022 and recorded on online portals. The descriptive aim of content analysis is not only to reduce the complexity and ambiguity of the information stream of the various texts under study but also to formulate the meaning of the features of the information/texts in question (Michalczyk 2009, p. 98). For this purpose, two selection criteria were used: the first (formal) concerns the subject matter, namely the type of message, which must fit into the category of a news item, article or other journalistic genre. Analysis of polemical and promotional texts (e.g. sponsored articles) has been omitted. The second selection criterion, which can be defined as the relevance of the publication to the issue, is the thematic scope of the publication. The texts and communications analysed were those that directly or indirectly deal with the issue of social welfare (public, institutionalised) and social workers, or those in

which social welfare/the person of the social worker plays an important role in the frame of the substantive composition of the given narrative, e.g. it closes it, explains it or provides an important context. This relationship is usually direct (e.g. texts devoted to the problems of social workers or welfare benefits) and sometimes tentative (e.g. the subject of poverty, where social welfare appears in the background), but it is important that in each case, the subject of social welfare, regardless of the extent of the description, is an important element in the structure of the information presented.

The review and selection of texts covered six publications: two opinion-forming dailies (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Rzeczpospolita*, together with supplements and magazines), two tabloid-type weeklies (*Fakt*, *Super Express*), and two online news portals: Onet and WP.pl. It covered texts published between January 2019 and December 2022. The search for texts was conducted on the basis of thematic category keys (e.g. society, local government, social welfare, social care, social welfare centre, social worker, homelessness/the homeless) and the tags of individual articles. In total, a corpus of 955 texts was filtered and compiled, which, due to their content, are relevant to the subject of the study, i.e. they are informative, directly or indirectly relate to the issue of public support and social integration, and are set in a specific thematic context.

In order to describe the selected section of the media reality in as systematic and organised a way as possible, I used a combined type of content analysis in the study, including elements of frequency-thematic analysis (identifying a set of texts and determining the frequency of occurrence of specific features and elements in the research material according to a categorisation key) and value-evaluative analysis, similar to discourse analysis. On the premises of the latter, I have based the parts of the procedure that align with the qualitative strategy: among other things, identifying the most common contexts of the subject, placing them in a situational framework, and deriving generalised narrative models.

All texts dealing with the subject matter in question were analysed, regardless of what genre they represent. I focused on the content of the materials examined. The analysis was diachronic in nature. I considered the 'How' question to be crucial: how the topics of social welfare are addressed in the studied media? How are social workers and the institution of welfare presented in them? Additionally, what emotional content is conveyed by the published communications, and what are the contexts of the analysed content? The specific problems of a part of the conducted study presented in this article can be narrowed down to the following points:

- In what thematic contexts do social support and social workers appear in media narratives?
- What are the dominant situational contexts (frames)?
- Is the image positive, negative, ambivalent, or neutral, and how does the emotional impact of the message develop in relation to the frame and thematic context (relationships between the framing of the social welfare issue and the communicator)?

The categorisation key was built on the classical model of content analysis; in addition to the formal part, it includes a substantive part, which was developed in the course of a casual reading of the material. Ultimately, the code table covered 11 substantive questions, requiring 29 decisions.

## Results

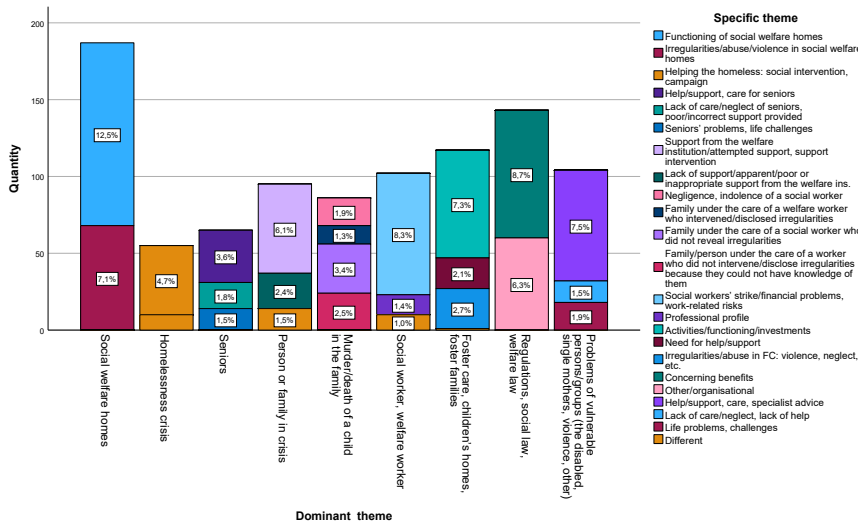
### *Thematic contexts*

The thematic context of the presence of the subject of social support in the studied media is of central importance; its quantitative systematisation allows us to identify the typical and most frequently reproduced frameworks, backgrounds, and even matrices of this non-media issue and in which situations (contexts) it becomes media-related. On the basis of the analysis of various cultural texts, the discourse present in the social policy space, and the results of spot surveys or qualitative reviews, it is possible to identify interesting hypotheses and reduce the contexts to several interesting narrative models for the portrayal of social welfare, such as superheroes in crisis situations (created in the TV series *Głęboka woda* – ‘Deep Water’), officials (most often female) of bureaucratised ‘social care’, a social welfare institution wrongfully taking away children, etc. However, even the first casual reading of the studied material has proved, and several attempts at thematic categorisation have indicated, that the media narratives that have emerged deviate from common patterns and are based on different characteristics, often internally inconsistent, requiring a different method of analysis. Therefore, in the end, the categorisation scheme (categorisation key) included several levels of material grouping, the first of which, crucial for the identification of patterns of narrative formation, is the thematic group. In the course of the analysis, due to the variety of texts and the complexity of social policy and social welfare issues, 9 general categories of thematic context were identified, and two to four specific categories were assigned to them (e.g. Seniors: help/support, care for seniors/lack of care/neglect of seniors/poor help/problems of seniors, life challenges; Person or family in crisis: help from the OPS [*Ośrodek pomocy społecznej* – Social Support Centre] or the PCPR [*Powiatowe Centrum Pomocy Rodzinie* – County Family Support Centre], attempted help, effective intervention/lack of help/apparent or inadequate help [OPS]; being wronged by the OPS, clear injustice to a family/life problems of those under the care of the OPS).

A compilation of the results is presented in Figure 1. It turns out that the most common category (thematic context) of social welfare is the issue of social welfare homes (subcategories: neutral functioning of social welfare homes and often interventionist or scandal-immersed irregularities and abuses in social welfare homes). The COVID pandemic, during which the issue of the functioning of care homes took on particular importance and generated increased interest, most likely played

a major role in causing the exposure of this particular context. The second dominant category is the context of regulations, legal developments, and procedures concerning social benefits (tangible and intangible) and the practical dimensions of organising public support activities; the third covers foster care issues. The high number of publications in the category directly dealing with social welfare issues (social workers and welfare workers, including care services), also attracts attention. The qualitative analysis of the texts clearly shows that the high saturation of this category was also influenced by the pandemic, as well as by the organisational crisis of social support, reflected in, among other things, the numerous strikes and protests of social workers during the period covered by the study.

Figure 1. Media contexts of social welfare issues: Groups of general themes and their constituent specific themes

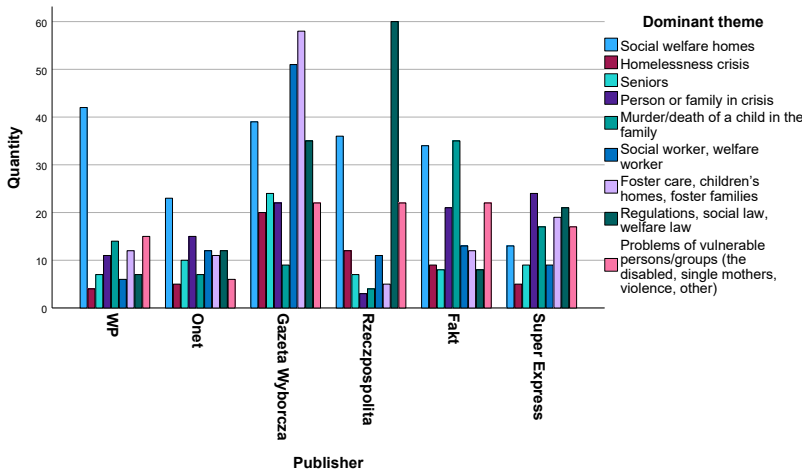


Source: own work. N = 955. Specific themes occurring below 1% were reduced to the 'other' category, these are: Issue of homeless people/issue of problems posed by homeless people; Lack of assistance for the homeless, neglect of the homeless (Homelessness crisis); Clear injustice towards the family, being wronged by the support institution; Life problems of individuals/families (Person or family in crisis); Irregularities/abuse committed by an IPS employee; holiday, awards, social worker day (Social worker, welfare worker).

The quantitative overview gives us a generalised picture of the contexts of this particular issue, and practically already at this stage, the perspective of content management in individual publications and its shaping according to the profile of the respective medium becomes clear. Examples include the high saturation of social welfare issues (portraits of social workers, frequent coverage of social welfare strikes) in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, or the wide representation of topics related to law and organisational solutions in *Rzeczpospolita*. Essentially, however, social welfare as a topic gains the status of importance according to the media emphasis on the context, background, and protagonists (problems of the elderly, the functioning of care

homes or problems of people with disabilities). The perspective of people needing or expecting help, let alone those overlooked by the aid system, is dominant. In part, I present the trends of the large representation of specific subject groups in specific publications in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Grouped bar chart: Main topics (quantity) vs publisher



Source: own work. N = 955.

### Situational framework

The indicated tendency to manage the content of the message becomes more apparent when we rank the corpus units according to the categories of the situational framework. This division of texts concerning aid was used by M. Dudkiewicz, and because of the pioneering nature of this study, it is worthwhile to refer to it and adopt a similar categorisation of messages reduced, in this case, to 6 frameworks. It has been used as another layer of content ranking and classification (in addition to thematic order) in an inductive order that involves searching for and identifying discourse features in the material under study, defining and describing them, as well as content analysis itself (Lisowska-Magdziarz 2007).

The analysed materials were divided according to the following categories: *holiday-occasional frame* (a social welfare holiday, an important event related to the activities of JOPS, a celebration, a context of special circumstances, e.g. holiday, anniversary); *specific action frame* (narrative dedicated to a specific initiative, solution or support action initiated, carried out independently or in partnership with JOPS); the *frame of reaction to a tragedy, individual or collective misfortune* (texts related to an individual or collective crisis situation), the *frame of scandal and intervention* (exposing and intervening publications, mostly related to the revelation of irregularities, abuses or negligence in JOPS or other social policy institutions), the *frame*

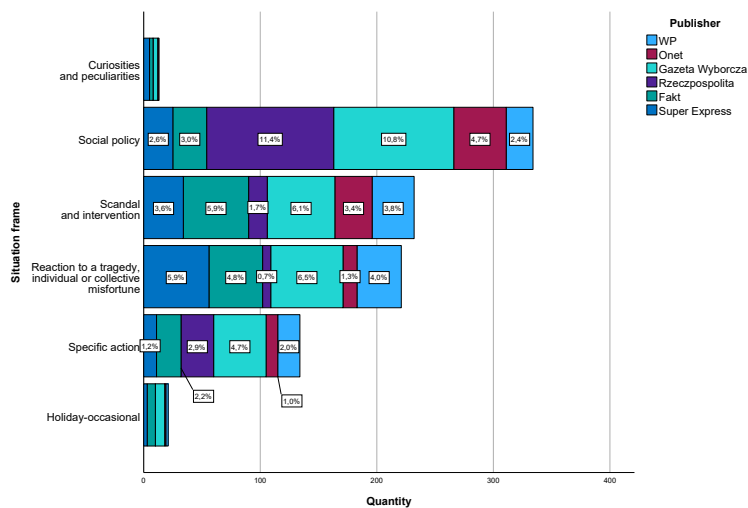
of *social policy* (informative and cross-sectional publications about the social welfare and integration system, its institutions and staff, and the solutions and procedures in place, but lacking the features that would allow them to be classified in the other frames) and the *frame of curiosities and peculiarities*.

The frame categories have proved particularly useful. They meet the conditions of relevance, unambiguity, uniformity and disjunctiveness, and are exhaustive. The working category 'other' was practically eliminated in the course of the analysis of the texts. Importantly, a text's situational frame classification usually correlates with a reason: the mechanism by which the journalist or media worker took up the issue of social welfare. Thus, while the *holiday-occasional* and *specific action* frames usually comprise texts initiated through the media relations activities of an institution or local authority (press release, press conference, invitation to a journalist), the *reaction to tragedy* and *scandal and intervention* frames mainly comprise texts resulting from journalistic work in the contexts of situations that – naturally – generate heightened societal reactions, such as sympathy, outrage or indignation.

It will not be revelatory to state that the category of frames reflects content selection mechanisms well-known and well-described in the literature. If the *social policy* frame, comprising texts oriented towards informing and dealing with important social problems and issues, appears more often in traditional, opinion-forming publications (*GW*, *Rz*), then texts falling within the framework of *scandal and intervention* and *reaction to tragedy* quantitatively dominate in tabloid-type publications (Figure 2). There is also an important regularity: a very low representation of texts fit into the frame of *curiosities and peculiarities* that are attractive to the audience, and of the *holiday-occasional* frame, especially in tabloid media, as well as a generally low saturation of the specific action frame. This trend sheds light on the issue from the perspective of content management. It correlates with the results of a study conducted in a group of representatives of JOPS (Szyszka, Belik 2018), the results of which unambiguously indicate the lack of information policy or low assessment of the effectiveness of information policy conducted by public organisational units of social welfare and poor experience in the use of media relations tools in their activities. At the same time, the study shows that in the *specific action* frame, we have a much higher saturation of texts that deal with support activities but only those carried out by NGOs, not public entities. For example, the dominant theme in the specific action frame is the general issue of the *homelessness crisis*, while at the same time, the specific category 'lack of help, inadequate or bad help' is only marginal in the media messages against the dominant specific category 'help for the homeless'. This is a clear indication of the effectiveness of the media relations field, which is almost universally applied in non-public welfare entities (Szyszka, Belik 2018); in Poland today, the vast majority of welfare activities for the homeless are carried out using public funds, but through third sector organisations.



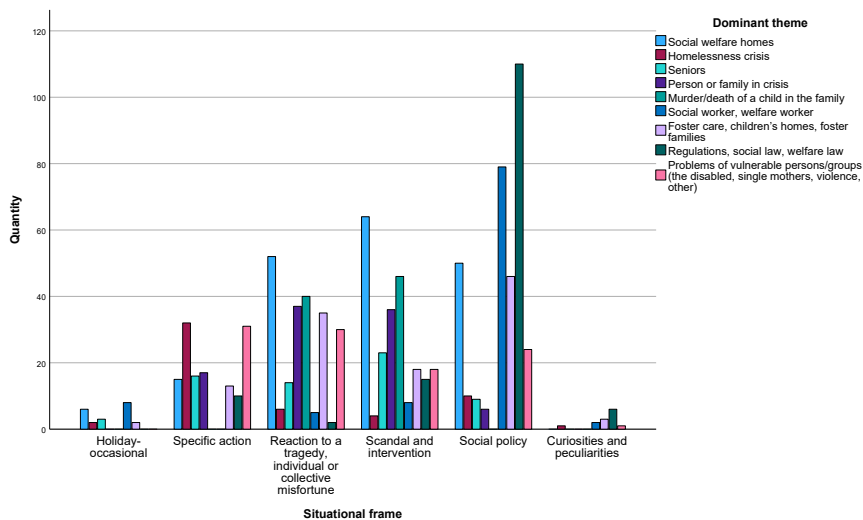
Figure 3. Saturation (quantity) of frames by breakdown of the media surveyed



Source: own work. N = 955.

The analysis of the material in question according to the key of the formal-situational frames clearly shows that the chosen mechanisms for selecting content and immersing it in specific contexts and frameworks in individual publications are tendentious, i.e. repetitive and fixed, and therefore, we can hypothesise a conscious, calculated way of presenting and managing content. We can observe the principle that social welfare, as an institution, as well as support activities, while fulfilling the categories of importance and newsworthiness that are important in journalism, does not at the same time fulfil the key condition of media-worthiness and is therefore practically absent as an autotelic topic. This trend is illustrated in Figure 3: the high saturation of the *social policy* frame is mainly built up by emotionally neutral texts about important issues of social law, the law of social benefits in the context of its interpretation, changes and amendments, and two categories that emerge in crisis situations: professional issues of social workers (the context of problems, deficits and challenges exceeding the capacity of the support and integration system and social welfare homes: here, the decisive context turned out to be the coronavirus pandemic. In summary, it is worth highlighting that as many as two of the three dominant thematic categories are related to crisis situations. Within the frames of *reaction to tragedy* and *scandal and intervention*, the predominant theme groups are, in an obvious way, *abuse and irregularities in social welfare homes, a person or family in crisis* and the *murder or death of a child in the family*. 'Positive' in expression, the frame of *specific action* is, in turn, saturated mainly with materials addressing the issue of helping people in the crisis of homelessness, which, as already signalled, is almost a pattern in media communication about helping (Browarczyk 2008).

Figure 4. Situational framework vs overall dominant theme



Source: own work. N = 955.

### *Emotional tinge*

This tendency towards a specific selection and presentation of welfare issues in the studied media is illustrated by another regularity, i.e. a specific, repetitive emotional tinge of descriptions of welfare activities in individual groups of texts. This tendency is recurrent, and the type of colouring (positive, negative, neutral or ambivalent) depends on the subject matter, frame and, of course, the publisher. The emotional tinge of the text itself was determined in the study on the basis of several variables: the semantic map, which consists of the choice of terms (e.g. adjectives), labels, the evocation of connotations and associations, and the vocabulary used in relation to welfare institutions and their representatives (e.g. social worker vs care worker, workers vs officials). In most cases, what correlates (interacts) with such a 'semantic map' is the way the topic is framed (e.g. subjectification vs objectification), the narrative perspective and reference point of the description, and the substantive evaluation of the welfare activities, expressed implicitly or explicitly in the text.

Table 1. Theme emotional tinge in the context of the framework

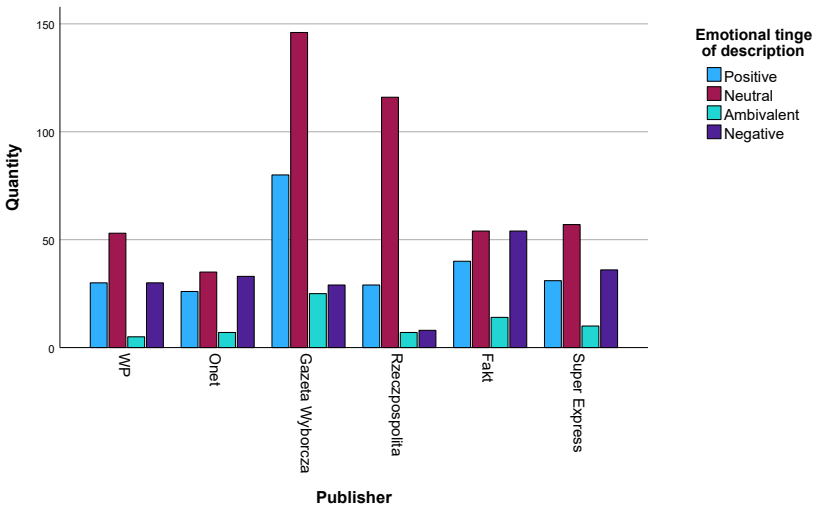
		Emotional tinge of the description				
		Positive	Neutral	Ambivalent	Negative	Overall
Situational frame	Holiday-occasional	16	5	0	0	21
	Specific action	80	53	1	0	134
	Reaction to a tragedy, individual or collective misfortune	36	122	28	35	221
	Scandal and intervention	7	52	22	151	232
	Social policy	95	218	17	4	334
	Curiosities and peculiarities	2	11	0	0	13
	<b>Overall</b>	<b>236</b>	<b>461</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>190</b>	<b>955</b>

Source: own work.

Looking at the distribution of the tendency in question, it is easy to see that for informational texts (*holiday-occasional, specific action, social policy* frames), the dominant tinge is positive or neutral. For *reactions to tragedy*, there is a similar distribution, with the opinion-forming periodicals less often immersed in a negative tinge than the studied tabloids and typical online portals. On the other hand, a negative tinge dominates in texts belonging to the *scandal and intervention* frame, which is very much in keeping with the convention itself. The overall distribution of the emotional tinge of the texts by media is shown in the chart below (No. 5).

ARTICLES

Figure 5. Bar chart emotional tinge of the description vs. type of medium



Source: own work. N = 955.

In the author's opinion, such a clear disproportion between opinion-forming publications and tabloid and online publications clearly indicates that we are dealing with a selected communication (content management) strategy, which is based on the selection of topics adequate to the preferred expectations of the recipient (e.g. scandal in social welfare homes, abuse and inefficiency in the social policy system) and shaping the narrative in line with the reader's potentially negative attitude towards the social welfare system. Obviously, the strategy of presenting the content in a specific way interacts with its selection, hence, e.g. the high saturation of texts in specific categories, such as: social welfare homes: violence/abuse in social welfare homes, Seniors: lack of care/neglect of seniors/poor help; Person or family in crisis: lack of help/poor help, apparent or inadequate help (OPS) and clear injustice to the family – wronged by the OPS; Murder/death of a child in the family: Negligence, indolence of a social worker and Family under the care of a social worker who did not notice/reveal irregularities; Social worker/social support worker: irregularities/abuse committed by the worker; Problems of vulnerable persons/groups (the disabled, single mothers, people experiencing violence, minorities): lack of care/neglect, lack of help/poor help and life problems, challenges.

Admittedly, the study carried out, at least with a sample defined in this way, did not confirm the hypothesis indicated in the introduction that the topic of social assistance in the media is generally based on negative messages in the context of oversights, irregularities, etc. In general, the corpus studied was dominated by texts with a neutral emotional tinge (346), a positive tinge characterised by 256, ambivalent 69, and negative 182. However, an adjustment has to be made. The predominant share of texts with a positive and neutral tinge in this sample is accounted for by the expert and informative articles in the dailies *GW* and *Rzeczpospolita*. In media oriented towards a wider audience (*Onet*, *WP*, *Fakt*, *Super Express*), the proportions of negatively and positively tinged texts are similar (Figure 4). It is not optimistic to conclude that it is these texts that are part of the social discourse on social assistance, which correlates with its generally poor reputation in society, although the issues are, as indicated, much more broadly determined.

### *Discussion*

Based on a review of the Anglo-Saxon literature on the subject, Dorota Lepianka notes that media discourse, on the one hand, shapes and, on the other hand, reproduces social perceptions of social problems and issues, which in effect reinforces their power (Lepianka 2013, p. 92). The same applies to the media discourse of social welfare institutions. Media perceptions translate into ways of perceiving social problems, yet they directly affect social workers and representatives of welfare institutions, indirectly influencing their functioning. The social welfare discourse in the media is problematic both qualitatively and quantitatively. It is difficult to precisely determine the percentage share of this issue in the total media production, but Monika Roth (2014) estimates that the issue of poverty alone takes up less

than 0.02% of the volume of the most important mass media, which places it quantitatively on the margins. Based on the conducted analysis, it can be estimated that topics concerning the functioning of social welfare constitute less than 0.5% of the content of the analysed media, and this presence is practically reduced to a few situational frameworks and a dozen or so thematic scripts.

The incidental presence of social welfare topics in mass media is due to a number of factors, including the need to reconcile different interest groups: publishers, journalists, and advertisers (Kanasz 2017, p. 3), but according to the author, audience preferences, expectations and beliefs play a decisive role. On the publishers' side, the commercial function plays an important role, while for the audience, the attractiveness of the topic and message is of great importance. The author rightly interprets this phenomenon with field theory (Bourdieu 2009); a good deal of the work in media production is a field subject to the pressures of other fields, especially the economic field. Three external factors can be identified in this context. The first is the information policy of JOPS, including the weak, not well-established practice of using PR tools to build media relations, as many of the institutions' activities represent a potentially interesting topic for the media, but require appropriate coverage. The second explanatory factor is the low reputation of social welfare, the unfavourable public perception of welfare benefits identified with its functioning, which directly translates into a lack of 'demand' for topics related to it unless they concern irregularities or abuse. In such situations (as confirmed by my study), a perspective of dislike of welfare institutions is presented in the materials, adequate to the expectations of the audience. The last factor relates to one aspect of the mechanics of how modern media operate, which is the orientation towards media-worthiness and the appeal of the topic. The majority of topics related to the functioning of social welfare institutions, without appropriate treatment, do not meet the criterion of media-worthiness. It is worth stopping at this point. In Kent Asp's (2014) concept of *media logic*, what constitutes the criterion for getting on the agenda is not only the nature of the fact/event itself but also the prospect (narrative possibilities) of presenting it in a given medium, i.e. whether it can be presented in a form sufficiently attractive to the 'customer'. Asp divides the standards of news production into principles of craft and principles of form, which is essentially where the perspective on managing messages about welfare activities presented here fits in. According to Herbert Gans (1979), the criteria that material must meet in order to get on the media agenda (constructive principles of craftsmanship) are timeliness, relevance (of the topic and subject matter) and attention-getting potential (the prospect of generating interest). In contrast, in Ida Schultz's (2007) conception, we have five criteria that determine how journalists approach a topic: relevance, identification, sensationalism, topicality and conflict (Miotk 2021, p. 53). It is not difficult to conclude that the classic 'good news' related to social assistance fits only partially into the aforementioned criteria, whereas narratives concerning negligence, inefficiency or scandals in social assistance (i.e. 'bad news') practically fulfil the models cited above. The same goes for Gans's criterion

of relevance: the stories of most interest to the audience are mostly about other people, with the most common being sensational and/or dramatic.

Magdalena Dutkiewicz, addressing the issue of media coverage of the welfare phenomenon, draws attention to three aspects of 'media-worthiness' of the subject matter in this context, which can, from our perspective, be interpreted as filters that matrix the functioning of JOPS in the media. Firstly, something media-worthy is rare, special, or strange rather than that which is typical, common and everyday; as a result, there is a discrepancy between the real and the media-worthy. As a consequence, the image postulated as 'expected' – a well-functioning social welfare institution – intrinsically fails to meet the criterion of media appeal. Secondly, while social support comprises complex and multifaceted processes, with different dynamics and different dimensions of effectiveness, shorthand and schematisation prevail in the communication of support. There is a preference for messages that are short and simple, based on easily associative cognitive schemas and stereotypes, the essence of which is to simplify and make the world comprehensible. The third aspect is negativism. Bad and dramatic information is preferred. The media's focus on providing the viewer with 'thrills' results in news of rare and even marginal events being fed into the services, which deforms the viewer's image of the world, serves to sustain scandal and consequently distances media discourse from reality. One example is the scandal at the social welfare home in Jordanów, which was widely publicised in the media. At the same time, the scale of the abuse and irregularities nationwide could not be found in any of the media releases (there are almost 2,000 social welfare homes in Poland in total, and as a rule, these are safe places). This leads to a situation in which the publicity surrounding an event is more important than the event itself and its scale, and the result is, among other things, the use of tricks to dramatise topics and create panic around phenomena and events that are objectively not very important and not very threatening.

### *Conclusion*

Social welfare, and especially its institutionalised dimension, belongs to a discursive framework that is problematic: it concerns phenomena that, although common, are neither desirable nor positively characterised. As a topic in its own right, social welfare has a niche character in contemporary mainstream media coverage. It does appear as a natural context in materials about social policy, benefits, old age, social problems and issues, and poverty, but these, too, are not media-worthy and are not explored, except in specific situations such as emergencies. Moreover, social welfare as an institution is part of the local government administration system, which locates it in the clerical-administrative dimension and constitutes a kind of polarising filter in media narratives. Ultimately, it is not an indifferent phenomenon and evokes different, sometimes extreme emotions.

The functioning of welfare themes, as demonstrated by the example of the section of media reality under study, is subject to the principles of message shaping:

content management oriented towards specific scripts (patterns) of coverage and presentation, conditioned by the mechanisms of mediatisation: most likely specific audience preferences and expectations. This process is multidimensional, but the presented study showed that the catalogue of thematic contexts is severely limited and practically reduced to a dozen or so themes and a few situational frameworks (typical situations that initiate the publication of a text and determine its nature). These 'conventions' matrix the choice of means of expression, terms, and stylistic procedures, which ultimately shape, usually unambiguously, a specific emotional tinge of the message (e.g. the repeatedly used archaic term *opieka społeczna* – 'social care'). This results in a high level of schematisation and homogenisation of texts about social welfare, obviously within the framework of specific types of media and conventions. The second universal rule, which was confirmed in the study, is the 'cause' for addressing welfare issues in the media, as noted by M. Dudkiewicz. Apart from neutral frameworks centred around problems, challenges or changes in the institution of welfare itself as a sub-system of state policy, the most common reason for the presence of this theme is primarily its 'inverse' or 'negative', a web of oppositions involving the lack of help, insufficient, inefficient or inappropriate help (Dudkiewicz 2013, p. 105). Media discourse on social welfare is, therefore, not only a practice of representing or describing reality but of shaping information, of managing a message oriented towards signifying, interpreting, and constructing its meanings. It is constructed in a media space, but in an explicit referential system whose subjects are social expectations, preferences, beliefs and views.

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## STRESZCZENIE

### **„Ważne, niegodne mediów” – temat pomocy społecznej w wybranych mediach z perspektywy zarządzania przekazem**

W artykule prezentuję wyniki przeprowadzonej analizy zawartości, poszerzonej o elementy analizy dyskursu, która objęła artykuły powiązane tematycznie z pomocą społeczną w trzech grupach mediów (*Rzeczpospolita*, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Fakt*, *Super Express*; Onet, WP), opublikowane w latach 2019–2022. Analiza medialnych narracji budowanych wokół instytucji pomocy i integracji społecznej oraz pracowników socjalnych stanowi obecnie istotną lukę badawczą, zwłaszcza że w dyskursie naukowym polityki społecznej oraz dyskursie zawodowym praktyków (pracowników) systemu pomocy społecznej niemal od dwóch dekad dominuje przekonanie o negatywnym, niekorzystnym, niewłaściwym lub/i niesprawiedliwym obrazie medialnym instytucji pomocowych. Postanowiłem zweryfikować tę „hipotezę” w oparciu o systematyczną analizę. Badanie umożliwiło jednocześnie określenie głównych kontekstów tematycznych i sytuacyjnych, schematów narracyjnych oraz ilościowych proporcji poszczególnych „motywów pomocowych” w takich ramach sytuacyjnych, jak *informowanie*, *reakcja na indywidualną lub zbiorową tragedię* lub *skandal i interwencja*. Analiza potwierdziła tezę o wysokim poziomie schematyczności tekstów medialnych podejmujących tematykę pomocy społecznej oraz szczególnego rodzaju zjawisko zarządzania treścią przekazu, zorientowanego na preferencje i oczekiwania odbiorców poszczególnych mediów. Uwidacznia się również tendencja mocnego powiązania sposobów ujęcia tematyki, w tym wyrazu emocjonalnego tekstów i doboru strategii narracji, adekwatnie do ramy i podjętej konwencji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** pomoc społeczna w mediach, analiza zawartości, wizerunek medialny pomocy społecznej, zarządzanie przekazem w mediach, informowanie o pomocy, ramy sytuacyjne

