

THE ROLE OF CRIME NEWS DISCOURSE IN SHAPING A CONFLICT PARADIGM DURING POLITICAL CRISES

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Abstract

By combining theoretical and empirical research on crime news discourse in the Serbian press and online portals, the authors examine media representations of crime, particularly during periods of political crises and social divisions. The analysis focuses on reporting on major tragedies, massacres, accidents, murders, criminal acts and other forms of deviant behaviour, as well as on institutions systematically engaged in their prevention and suppression within the social environment. Sensationalist, tabloid-driven, and unethical journalistic practices, through the media criminalisation of the public sphere, generate moral panic and undermine public confidence in the state's capacity to protect its citizens. A corporate and commercialised model of communication constructs a narrative framework grounded in clickstream strategies and metrics of social popularity, failing to acknowledge that the expanded presence of crime news discourse, often shaped by careless and tabloidised reporting patterns, produces a destructive narrative framework with significant and potentially explosive security implications. Although statistical data indicate a decline in crime rates in Serbia, the excessive circulation of media images of violence intensifies ideological instability, polarises society and inevitably manifests in the political sphere.

Key words: crime news discourse, crime, media representations, political crisis, moral panic.

УЛОГА 'ЦРНЕ ХРОНИКЕ' У КРЕИРАЊУ КОНФЛИКТНЕ ПАРАДИГМЕ ТОКОМ ПОЛИТИЧКИХ КРИЗА

Апстракт

Комбинујући теоријско-емпиријска истраживања примене црне хронике у српској штампи и на порталима аутори указују на медијску слику о криминалитету у држави, посебно у периодима политичких криза и подела. У средишту интересовања

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је извештавање о великим трагедијама, масакрима, несрећама, убиствима, злочинима, криминалу и сличним девијантним дешавањима, али и институцијама које се организовано боре да их сузбију или елиминишу из друштвеног окружења. Сензационалистичко-таблоидно и неетично новинарство медијским криминализовањем јавног простора распостире моралну панику и сумње у способност државе да заштити своје становништво. Корпоративно-комерцијализован модел комуникационог деловања гради наративни оквир заснован на стратегији *кликстриминга* и друштвене популарности, не разумејући да шира заступљеност црне хронике често, неопрезним и таблоидно опремљеним обрасцима извештавања формира деструктиван наративни оквир са експлозивним безбедносним потенцијалом. Иако статистички подаци доказују да се криминалитет у Србији смањује, вишак медијских слика о насиљу појачава идеолошку нестабилност заједнице, поларизујући друштво и нужно се рефлектујући и на сферу политике.

Кључне речи: 'црна хроника', криминалитет, медијске слике, политичка криза, морална паника.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary sociologists, communication scholars, conflict theorists, psychologists, educators, criminologists, legal scholars, historians, anthropologists, as well as other researchers of social phenomena, have in recent years increasingly and more intensively warned about the rise in crime, deviant forms of behaviour, and violence, as well as about an ever more manipulative media portrayal of these phenomena. Murders, crimes, fires, collective tragedies, pandemics, natural disasters and catastrophes have become increasingly frequent topics in the news of both digital and traditional media. Consequently, through the selection, framing and presentation of information, journalists play a significant role in shaping the security environment, while reports from the so-called crime section increasingly spread dissatisfaction, fear, anxiety and defeatism.¹ In this way, almost unnoticed, social security has been transferred from the realm of reality into a field of dramatisation through symbols and the explosive dynamics of social networks, which, by virtue of the speed, spectacle and sensationalism of their messages, block rational understanding while arousing emotions and fear. Although facts and media-fabricated images are often misaligned, the persistent focus on deviant behaviour, extreme

¹ Some of the characteristic headlines that could be read on news portals or in the print media, as well as heard and seen on some of the numerous electronic media within the course of a single day (3 January 2026), included the following: "Here Is the Prison Sentence Facing Tihomir for Brutally Stabbing a Woman" (Kurir); "Did You Feel the Tremor? Earthquake in Eastern Serbia" (Alo); "Serb Injured in a Fire in Switzerland: Both Hands Burned, One Thing Saved Him" (Informer); "Gruesome Death of a Serbian OnlyFans Star" (Blic); "'I Bent Down and Felt the Flames on My Face': A Man from Novi Pazar Describes Horrifying Scenes in the Death Bar in Detail..." (Večernje novosti); "Why Was the Fire in Switzerland So Deadly?" (Danas); "At Least 40 Victims of the Bar Fire, 119 Injured" (Politika), etc.

tragedies and brutal violence constructs an atmosphere of moral panic that ultimately shapes the social environment:

A condition, episode, person or group emerges, and is soon defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented by the mass media in a stylized and stereotypical fashion; moral barricades are manned by editors, clergy, politicians, and other right-wing-oriented individuals; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are proposed (and far more often resorted to); the condition then disappears, is submerged or deteriorates and becomes more visible.

(Cohen, 1972, p. 2)

The old system of values has disintegrated, along with the security concept that it once shaped. Digitalisation, combined with artificial intelligence, is creating an order with segmented political functions, in which international relations and peace depend on the will of great powers, while dialogue and agreements play an increasingly marginal role. Nietzsche views reality as a 'world of appearances of phenomena' an ordered world that we perceive as real. 'Reality' resides in the constant recurrence of the same, familiar, related things, in their logicalised form... Its opposite is not a 'true world' but a formless world of chaotic perceptions that cannot be formulated: thus, another kind of phenomenal world exists, one that is unknowable to us (Nietzsche, 2022, p. 328). Hence, moral panic "represents a social phenomenon in which certain social groups (the media, politicians or public opinion) exaggerate an apparently alarming event that is perceived as a threat to the moral cohesion of interpersonal relations" (Nedeljković, Semenov, 2025). Authors emphasise that it "relates to the fear of potential social disturbances and the disruption of the social core" noting that "these fears are connected to terrorist, revolutionary or wartime situations" and that "they can create conditions for the emergence of moral panic if social polarization occurs, dividing society into opposing groups - 'us' and 'them'" (Nedeljković, Semenov, 2025, p. 99).

Security challenges are increasing, which means that policymakers must devote even greater attention to crisis management, particularly to mitigating social tensions in cases of media-constructed public alarm. Situations that can easily escalate into political crises include major accidents with numerous casualties, catastrophic disasters, earthquakes, organised crime, emergencies, and states of emergency. Corruption intensifies, individuals and groups are intimidated, societal pressure manifests in visible insecurity, and the range of illegal activities continues to expand. It is also important to recognise that different people, in different social contexts, experience crises in distinct ways: one group may perceive an event as a minor incident, while for others the same event represents a catastrophe or a justification for declaring a state of emergency. The subject of our study

has been marginalised within the academic community, especially in the field of security studies, as well as in political practice, where it has historically carried a pejorative connotation. The 'crime news' section has been a consistent feature throughout the history of the press and society, but with new media it has gained significance, capturing the peak of audience attention. Here we see the influence of the Internet, as digitalisation has clearly transformed the nature of journalism, creating a parallel reality that "increasingly becomes the only reality we know, becoming as pervasive and influential as religion was 500 or 600 years ago" (Brym, Lie, 2007, p. 530).

The scientific approach in our study is grounded in social science methodology. Based on the understanding that research possesses not only ontological but also epistemological aims, our analysis seeks to identify the general and shared elements in crime news content in relation to political reality. Sociology, conflict studies and communication studies, alongside security studies and political science, share in this context the same object of study: society in crisis and the media's security framework. Building on Šuvaković's position that "every science must be based on certain theoretical postulates, which must be tested and grounded in confirmed empirical facts" (Šuvaković, 2011, p. 16), our focus will be on characteristic case studies, examining the interplay between crime news and security in Serbia. The research question is appropriate for a specific case study, a crisis social reality in which organised and targeted media reporting can develop doubts about the state's ability to protect the civilian population, potentially resulting in a loss of reputation for the police and numerous security institutions. At such times, the speed and quality of crisis communication determine the peace and stability of the broader social order, as the subsequent analysis will show. The research design is adapted to a qualitative-quantitative analysis of the thematic representation, role, position, and significance of the 'crime news' section in daily print media and the most widely read news portals, with the aim of identifying a specific communication code that forms, within society, a narrative framework with security implications.

The interdisciplinary nature of the research subject is already becoming apparent: information about crime, fires, offenses, accidents, violence and the like is essential for any democratic community. The real question, however, is whether there exists an ethical measure in reporting practices. How can the community's informational appetite be satisfied without crossing the boundaries into political propaganda? Here, propaganda is understood as "an organized and deliberate activity aimed at spreading opinions, ideas, and sentiments, with the intention that people adopt them and subsequently act in accordance with them" (Đorđević, 1980, p. 121). Will public interest be marginalised under the pressure of the market and click-driven streaming, with the risk that the perception of social security will be altered? Can skilfully presented and manipulatively packaged images of

disasters be exploited in political-ideological conflicts? Are security studies and conflictology adapting their methods and techniques to new propaganda strategies that, through digitalisation, take on global patterns? What is the role of the media in combating organised crime, and to what extent do political actors support it? There are many dilemmas, but our study aims to provide an answer to the fundamental question: does the crime news section serve the citizens, and can it be misused in political struggles for the transformation of the state order?

From the rationale of the research subject, it is evident that in this study we will employ a combined theoretical and empirical investigation of the use of crime news in our print media and online portals, in accordance with the needs of social and political practice and the academic requirement of scientific relevance.

Preliminary determination of the subject is derived from the current needs of science, the needs of social and political practice, including the requirements of ideology, as well as the influence of interest groups - political, social, and cultural - that stand behind them.

(Milosavljević, Radosavljević, 2006, p. 343)

Respecting the scientific view that no research can encompass a phenomenon in its entirety, in formulating the subject we opt for a gradual and critical examination of the phenomenon and role of crime news in the national public sphere, in order to verify the existence of developmental principles in the field of security.

THE ROLE OF CRIME NEWS IN SHAPING POLITICAL INSTABILITY

In a society shaped by artificial intelligence and digitalisation, the social role of new media is becoming increasingly visible, as they disseminate events from everyday life and expand human interactions “arising from the use of virtual communities and networks, created discussions, and modifications of user-generated content” (Milosavljević, Radosavljević, 2006).

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There are numerous reasons for their rapid popularity, especially among young people. Social networks enable participation of everyone with everyone and the sharing of multimedia messages, which makes them ‘more social’ than traditional media, whose communication flow is exclu-

sively one-way - an aspect that partially justifies the pleonasm² in the term. To simplify: in the era of analogue media, there was a procedure for content control carried out by editorial teams, whereas with the emergence of social networks, this control is lost, meaning that unverified and unreliable information, potentially dangerous to public opinion, can enter the public sphere. Of importance to our study is the observation by theorists that disinformation can take multiple forms: “whether by withholding information, by broadcasting incomplete, biased, carefully distorted, or openly false information, or by diverting or overwhelming public attention with an extraordinary piece of news that causes it to lose all sense and the ability to distinguish what is significant from what is not, and, finally, through ideologically charged commentary” (Volkov, 2002, p. 124–125). Vladimir Volkov particularly emphasises the media’s readiness to copy one another, thereby becoming resonant boxes that unconsciously transmit messages skilfully disseminated by agents seeking to expand their influence. From a security perspective, one must always start from the fact that no media outlet is neutral, which means that, from a content-structural standpoint, any social problem, phenomenon, or event can be presented as part of ongoing political upheavals. The same data can be used to construct at least two diametrically opposed narratives, with hundreds of nuances in between. The essence of Marshall McLuhan’s thinking about media has been unjustifiably overlooked by later researchers. This Canadian media theorist argued that “attention should be paid to the form and structure of communication, not just to the message, as well as to their interrelationship” (McLuhan, 1971, p. 20). Fragmentation, insertion or specialisation as techniques for targeting security frameworks through new media, especially social networks, channel audience energy in a different way, whereby unadapted and uneducated segments of the community can easily become victims of manipulation. Throughout the history of journalism, a tendency toward social deviance has been present from the very beginning, so news containing elements of violence has always attracted public attention. With digitalisation and the acceleration of messaging, interest in such topics has increased, leading most portals and traditional media outlets to systematise them into specialised content. “Crime news is a subcategory of social chronicle that focuses on accidents, murders, vices, crimes, conflicts, criminality, suicides, and similar events and phenomena, as well as on the institutions that are organised to combat them or eliminate violence from the social environment, police, judiciary, fire services and healthcare” (Jevtović, A., 2025, p. 52). In the dissertation, through precise quantitative and qualitative comparisons of the number of committed criminal acts and the number of articles reporting on them, it was observed “that the press, as

² Jan H. Kietzmann, Kristopher Hermkens, Ian McCarthy and Bruno S. Silvestre, „Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media“, *Business Horizons*, Kelley School of Business, Indiana University, Vol.54 (3), 2011, p. 241.

well as other media, unjustifiably creates the impression of a violence epidemic, while certain areas of crime are either not covered at all or are underreported, whereas cases of murder and brutality ‘bombard’ public opinion. Online portals are particularly skilled in this regard, illuminating actual crimes from all angles and perspectives in order to surpass their competition in click numbers” (Jevtović, A., 2025, p. 21). Here, we start from the assumption that commercially oriented media with higher ratings more frequently violate professional codes, particularly compromising the privacy of individuals involved in conflict events.

Media instability can have a direct impact on community security, which is achievable through the continuous and deliberate amplification of information about violence. In communication studies, George Gerbner’s cultivation theory, developed in the late 1960s, is used, known for the thesis that television portrays far more violence than exists in real life. While working on a project concerning the ‘cultivation of perception’ this American researcher concluded that the process aligns with the prevailing ideology, thereby becoming a significant element of ideological and social control. In the analysis of the functioning of the system, the emphasis is placed on the processes of newspaper production, editorial policy, and content creation. He was the first to observe that the power of the screen “is based on the continuous repetition of content that constructs reality, offering a pattern common to all genres and types of content. Cultivation theory rests on three pillars: analysis of the institutional system, analysis of the message system, and analysis of cultivation” (Gerbner et al., 2002). In the public sphere, the perception spreads that such events could happen to anyone, leading the audience to adjust their behaviour in accordance with a pre-cultivated awareness of reality, unprepared for the understanding that media reality and actual reality often differ. When traditional media, portals, and similar platforms report daily on violence, political corruption, and immorality, ordinary people tend to withdraw from any form of social engagement.

Thus, one can speak of the media criminalization of the entire public space - a life in which there is little room for those sensitive to criticism, but ample room for those who are indifferent to criticism regarding the gravest scandals and corruption.

(Ćirić, 2013, pp. 64–76)

Whereas just a decade ago a single murder or tragedy might have been covered in a few reports over several days, today that number is measured in hundreds or even thousands, creating the impression that the society in which we live is criminalised to the extent that its very survival is in question. Through the cohesion and thematisation of crime news, a dominant narrative (leading paradigm) emerges, encompassing a model of mental filtering that conceptually defines the current event, phenomenon, or

process, determining the conflictological potential of the report. Media imagery relies on the exploitation of various forms of violence, whose sensationalist treatment targets the emotions of the audience and provokes hasty reactions, particularly during political crises. Minors constitute a particularly vulnerable group, as their visualisation and the publication of personal data deliberately violate professional codes, while also inflaming feelings of personal and social insecurity, the dysfunctionality of the state, and the inadequacy of competent security services, thereby spreading fear and defeatism. In crisis situations, the leading media paradigm generates rebellion, anger and militarism by homogenising the energy of resistance, which then manifests in street protests aimed at broader insurrection, the collapse of authority, and the promotion of alternative centres of power. From a conflictological perspective, it is important to note the anonymity and homogeneity in the speed of communication on new media platforms, which thereby create a chain of mutually coordinated message channels that serve as new information sources, often unreliable and woven from rumours, disinformation, spin and lies. This is particularly significant because, in practice, stopping a single communication chain does not collapse the system; it continues to function, while security measures are intensified for the remaining actors.

The corporate-commercialised media structure is designed to suppress the doubts of every individual through interaction, presenting itself as the only reliable, professional and accurate channel of communication. At the same time, social networks, through miniaturisation and spatial fragmentation, strive to ensure that no one remains beyond their reach. This means that new media should not be stifled or 'broken' through any form of censorship; rather, it is necessary to quickly understand that "the Internet and digital media are not the cause of the stress and pressures of modern life" but rather part of the solution, revealing possible pathways out of crisis (Čejko, 2019). Mary Chayko, speaking about technological changes, also points to the need for human adaptation:

In technologically rich societies, rules and values are constantly changing. Sometimes they are completely disrupted - undergoing such a profound and rapid transformation that what existed before no longer matters at all.

(Čejko, 2019, p. 221)

The content of media should be analysed within the current context of power, ideology, tradition, and culture. In times of crisis, this constitutes a virtual space with all the characteristics of social space, inextricably linked to political reality. For our study, this means that portals and information platforms in conflict situations are interpreted as social institutions, which cannot be reduced solely to technological determinants, but rather understood as "part of a much larger social, technological, and cultural

landscape of change; in short, as part of a new technoculture” (Lister et al., 2009, p. 11). Editors of crime news rely on citizens’ interest in community security, knowing that their understanding of the prevalence of crime is emotionally generated, primarily through fear of criminality, “predominantly indirectly and vicariously, through various transmitters, and least directly and experientially” (Surette, 2007, p. 34). Under the influence of cultivation theory, the audience identifies with the threatened social group, particularly with victims whom they perceive as having something in common with themselves, and then transfers the event into something that could potentially happen to them tomorrow.

PRIVACY AND VIOLENCE IN CRISIS SITUATIONS

Digital societies are woven from marketing tactics that, within the political architecture, aim to separate Humans from their own will, while the illusion of choice conceals that the outcomes are consequences of media influence. The flow of massive amounts of data renders numerous political-propaganda activities invisible, including new concepts of message framing relevant to the psychology of the masses, which is of extraordinary importance for communication in crisis situations. Robert Entman asserts that frames “introduce or increase the salience of certain ideas; they are framing schemes that encourage the target audience to think, feel, and decide in a particular way” (Entman, 2007, p. 165). The dominant paradigm is created by multiplying and shaping information that lies within the sphere of interest of the hidden organisers of crisis actions, while social networks become mass distributors of disinformation that hinder the state’s ability to respond. Conflictologists emphasise that managing crisis communication during major disasters and civilian casualties is a matter of social system stability, because the essence of any crisis is that “a decision must be made, but it has not yet been made” (Milašinović, Kešetović, 2011, p. 8). The influence of media on public opinion today is more visible than ever, largely due to the high level of youth activism. In practice, this means that media, particularly social networks and news portals, play a significant role in shaping the public’s perception of events and the actions of the police and security services. The goal is to create a critical mass of like-minded individuals who will use crime news as a motivational element necessary for generating civil disobedience.

Two tragedies shook Serbia on May 3 and 4, 2023, when two mass murders occurred, unprecedented in the country’s recent history. In the two massacres (at the Vladislav Ribnikar Elementary School and in Dubona and Malo Orašje), 19 people lost their lives, including nine children under the age of 14, while another eighteen were injured. Sensationalist reporting, manipulative and selective presentation of information, speculation and tendentious descriptions of the horrific acts further unsettled public opin-

ion, while media laws and the Serbian Journalists' Code were completely marginalised during these days. Protection of privacy, particularly important as most victims were children, was entirely absent, and in the race for clicks, disturbing, brutal, and frightening footage of the crimes 'flooded' the media, especially social networks and tabloids.

During the investigated period from May 4 to June 3, 2023, nine print media outlets in Serbia (Alo, Blic, Danas, Informer, Kurir, Nova, Politika, Srpski Telegraf and Večernje novosti) published a total of 2,111 pages of content explaining these events. The intensity and volume of coverage were roughly proportional: Alo – 215 pages, Blic – 251, Danas – 281, Informer – 263, Kurir – 273, Nova – 180, Politika – 212, Srpski Telegraf – 237, and Večernje novosti – 199 pages. In the first ten days, content on the two mass murders appeared predominantly on front-page news sections in most media, whereas in the last ten days of the investigated period, it was mostly placed in the middle of the papers, usually as a separate 'crime news' section. Since most portals reproduce similar content, their informational impact multiplies; to gain an edge over competitors, additional details are added that give the appearance of editorial strength. The volume of unreliable conjecture and speculation increases, introducing mysticism and tragedy into the audience's perception - inevitable companions of crime reporting. Neven Obradović highlighted the constructive power of social media in shaping perceptions of reality, noting that they "create so-called 'echo chambers' through their algorithms" (Obradović, 2025, p. 42). In crisis situations, by using subtly hidden algorithms, most media, including social platforms, offer similar or identical headlines, news articles, photographs, and videos, which gives the impression that the presented content is authentic.

From the very moment the crime occurred, a lack of editorial selection became evident, as journalists contributed to spreading panic by interviewing terrified and traumatised children who had fled the school, as well as parents waiting outside in a state of shock, indescribable grief, and deep trauma. The exploitation of minors and adults is incompatible with sensitive and professional journalism. In the race for higher ratings, on May 4, the front pages of daily newspapers published the victims' names; the full name and photograph of the perpetrator; footage of the arrest; photographs of shocked parents and children; along with headlines that clearly violated the Serbian Journalists' Code. Public emotional tension was further intensified by publishing alleged statements of the perpetrator on front pages: "Without a trace of excitement, he told them: I am a psychopath" (Alo), "Kosta K. (13): I killed them all because I'm a psychopath" (Informer), "Boy monster: I don't regret it, they deserved it!" (Srpski Telegraf). Everything was orchestrated to provoke curiosity and emotional reactions from the audience, with the frequency of certain words designed to prolong the time individuals spent reading the remainder of the article. The three prin-

ciples of the news portal - informing, persuading and connecting - are also reflected in the field of shaping information that is created in accordance with the metrics of receiving clicks, which often means ignoring the facts. (Jevtović, Marić, 2022, p. 816). Audience interaction was expected, as illustrated by the fact that more than 120,000 comments were written and nearly 400,000 'likes' were registered.

Due to the limited scope of this work, we have focused on BIRN's analysis of published texts from seven online media outlets that are representative, as according to data from the Gemius Audience service, they rank among the ten most visited portals in Serbia (Nova, Informer, Kurir, Blic, Novosti, Telegraf, and Alo). This is significant because these media also have print editions, which amplifies their influence on public opinion, especially as some of them also broadcast television programs. Content analysis revealed that between May 3 and May 7, these portals published nearly 2,800 articles about the murders in Ribnikar, Dubona and Malo Orašje, meaning that on average more than six hundred texts were published each day, symbolically 'narcotising' the public. Vladimir Volkov uses the synonym 'intoxication of the public' implying that the media, by their function, are predisposed to propagating certain ideas and values. The 'black chronicle' is particularly powerful here, as it uses images to convince the audience that it is conveying an indisputable truth.

The brain is inherently distrustful; the heart and gut are naturally stirred, and the truth is that the emotional charge of an image, especially in color, and even more so if it is moving, is stronger than the corresponding verbal expression. When you read 'the girl is covered in blood' or when you see a girl covered in blood, you are not overcome by the same level of excitement.

(Volkov, 2002, p. 173)

The way the media report is socially significant, as it can influence whether something similar ever happens again. A detailed analysis of 350 media contents that received the most intense user interaction on social networks showed that in almost 70 percent of cases the right to privacy was violated. On average, the media infringed on the privacy of victims or suspects 47 times per day, driven by a clickability logic that supports financial sustainability. In the report "Invasion of Privacy – An Analysis of Media Reporting," Tanja Maksić and the BIRN research team (January 2024) observe that crisis situations lead to more frequent violations of the privacy rights of both perpetrators and victims. The network's buzz-filled environment conceals numerous political and propaganda activities, including new concepts of message framing relevant to mass psychology, which are of unusual importance for communication in crisis situations. Robert Entman argues regarding frames that "they introduce or increase the salience of certain ideas; they are framing schemes that prompt the target audience to

think, feel, and decide in a particular way” (Entman, 2007, p. 165). Unlike information fixed in traditional newspapers, news portals can continuously update content and enhance it through multimedia, including audio-video recordings, images from Instagram or Facebook, YouTube clips, and more. By skilfully creating the appearance of utilising a wide spectrum of detailed field information and contextualising it with selected ‘experts’ creators of crime reporting position the cause of a crisis, highlight common features with similar cases worldwide, and present internal dynamics that can be further directed through multiple interpretations. Field reporters instrumentalise public dissatisfaction by particularising lapses in the chain of events, thereby generalising a perception of state ineffectiveness. In crisis events of vital national interest, group communication on social networks intensifies, as it is symbolically organised as a new social territory that establishes its own rules and relations and can be regulated internally and externally according to its own security criteria. Social networks such as Facebook or X can, in this context, be understood as mechanisms of identity re-territorialisation, transforming the anonymous space of the Internet into a close and open environment - but only for members of this ‘large brotherhood’ - while the exteriorisation of messages through media images generates a specific propaganda capital.

The generation and dissemination of news that categorically belongs to the crime reporting genre contribute to creating an atmosphere of anger, suspicion, distrust, resentment, and partisan polarisation, so that street protests and calls for the overthrow of the system are promoted as part of the perceived solution.³ American criminologist Gregg Barak, in the work “Media, Process and the Social Construction of Crime - Studies in the Criminology of News Production,” examines in detail the problem of the synthetic interweaving of media and criminality. He claims that the process of creating news about crimes and controlling criminality is related to the tradition and culture of the community, that is, it reflects its social, political and psychological traits. He graphically constructs a model of concentric circles representing the global political economy, culture, media and the state, intersected along an imagined axis by three separate circles symbolising offenders, victims and criminal justice authorities. Barak believes that, as part of a broader criminological analysis, studying the mechanisms of news production includes three dynamic and interdependent processes of news construction: 1) media reflection, cultural diversity, and crime news novelty; 2) mass media, public order, and symbolic deviance; and 3) social control, media news, and political changes (Barak, 1994, p. 8). If we were to make a model in our society, we could note that the Serbian press (including portals) is rich in violent content, deliberately selected and

³ On the instrumentalisation of crime reporting in the sphere of political change, see: Jevtović, A. “Political Communication and the Power of Social Networks in National Crises Associated with Color Revolutions”, National Interest, IPS, Belgrade, 2025.

narratively simplified, which does not contribute to reducing crime rates. Although the judiciary initiates proceedings and applies measures against suspects in a significant number of cases, tabloid writing and sensationalism further encourage fear of crime and feelings of insecurity. Statistical data from the Republic Statistical Office for the period 2015–2024 indicate a trend of decreasing criminal offenses, but the paradox is that, at the same time, the number of crime news articles on portals and in the press is increasing, with indicators suggesting that this will continue in the coming period.⁴ The indicators from our analysis clearly point to a tendency in contemporary Serbian print and online media for crime news narratives to occupy an increasing amount of space, which aligns with similar research conducted internationally. The problem we highlight is that in Serbia, interpretations are far more liberal, ideologically coloured, and often presented without citing concrete sources or with an excess of unnecessary details whose sole purpose is to provoke emotions. An unselective approach alters the observer's perspective, shifting focus more onto the perpetrators of violence than the victims. This is dangerous, as it can produce a phenomenon of 'imitators' in the audience, who, in the desire to become 'famous' replicate the crime. Global researchers argue that in this way, "through the media's presentation of events and facts outside reality, the audience is provided with only certain pieces of information, which can often be stereotypes and prejudices" (Wykes, 2001, p. 56).

What is particularly concerning in crises is the invisible matrix that emerges in tragic cases, precisely when society is most vulnerable and politically divided. Conflict-driven passions are transmitted most rapidly and with minimal control through social media, accompanied by numerous noise factors - rumours, disinformation, gossip and even fabricated news. The crisis situation is further intensified by frequently republishing previously released content, now coloured with new details, testimonies and claims that have no basis in actual practice. So-called intensifiers are used, designed to stimulate the emotional level of communication, where words like 'monster' 'bloodthirsty' or 'boy killer' serve as 'bait' to prolong engagement with the reader or viewer.

Domestic researchers have already observed that "selective media presentation of crime is based on certain criteria that guide the choice of events to be presented as news." (Papić, 2021, p. 129). Greater tragedy ensures that content accompanied by photographs is placed on the front page or in the first minute of television news broadcasts. The more deaths, the deeper the societal crisis, and in situations of polarisation, the potential for internal conflict grows. "As a result, there is an excessive and, in relation to official crime statistics, inadequate representation of violent crime in the

⁴ Adult Offenders of Criminal Acts in the Republic of Serbia, 2024 – Reports, Indictments, and Convictions, prepared by Dragana Nikolić and Sandra Gagić, Belgrade.

media. The media's oversaturation with violent crime affects the media construction of criminality in such a way that this phenomenon is presented and perceived as predominantly violent" (Kesić, Dželetović, Tomić, 2020, p. 1424). The significance of crime news is not the same in all countries, but the greater the political crisis, the more potentially conflictual its images become. A protest arising from socio-economic reasons, due to only a few days of inadequate government response, "can escalate into a political one, with recognizable indicators of a colored revolution" (Parezanović, 2024, p. 351).

CONCLUSION

Analysis of the case study, as well as the available literature, indicates that contemporary media, when reporting on crime news (particularly during political crises), tend to adopt one of two diametrically opposed approaches. The first is a traditional and more professional approach, in which media, representing the public interest, convey accurate and verified information, actively assisting in mitigating the consequences of criminal activities or accidents as quickly as possible. By acting to stabilise the situation in their environment, they recognise the security risks to the community and strive to maintain an atmosphere of peace and general stability in the public sphere. The second approach involves exploiting a tragic event, phenomenon, process or accident through sensationalist reporting to attract a larger audience, thereby altering the political balance within society and deepening the crisis with unpredictable consequences. The impacts of the misfortune become alarming, public anxiety escalates to the point of mass destabilisation, and journalists, in effect, become indirect actors in the social crisis.

The research design quickly revealed a tabloid-popular narrative framework, which, through strategies of click-streaming and audience appeal, targets the sensationalist promotion of the role, place and significance of the crime news' section in our daily press and most widely read portals. The corporately commercialised model of communicative activity, through careless and media-unprepared reporting patterns within society, forms a narrative framework with explosive security potential. In a networked society, the crime news' section evolves into a multidimensional and strategically significant instrument for influencing public opinion, structured and synchronised to provoke dissatisfaction across the broader environment. Đorić argues that the generation of a new type of society occurs based on various networked contents, which later interconnect and operate collectively. "All of them are hierarchically linked, controlled and synchronised depending on the needs of the network leaders..." the author concludes, while also emphasising that censorship or the removal of inappropriate content merely shifts it to alternative networks (Đorić, 2021, p. 152).

Through the analysis of characteristic genre elements, we have demonstrated that the contents of crime reporting, as well as the relationships and beliefs of actors in the security sector, are observable through the specific language of photographs and texts, indicating the social significance, secondary victimisation and ethical dimension of this type of reporting.

An analysis of the daily press and online portals covering the tragedy in “Ribnikar,” Dubona, and Malo Orašje, as well as the crime section throughout the year, articulated an unexpected communication paradox: while the presence of crime-related topics is sensationalist, tabloid and frequent, the style and visual apparatus of the content revealed the porousness of security procedures. At the same time, official statistics for the past five years show a declining rate of criminal reports, consistent with the findings of similar research (Vulić, Soković, 2019, p. 305). The actual number of injuries, murders, accidents, fatalities and various violent acts is small and disproportionate to the media representations of a criminalised society. This analysis is further supported by the observed disproportionate growth of social networks and digital media, which, by intensifying mutual competition, promote the intensity and visibility of crime-related topics.

The internal world of the digitalised individual is highly simplified; emotions are fragile and explosive because, unlike the era of deep reading of books and curated content in analogue media, the new audience forms conclusions based on fleeting, visual information, often trapped in stereotypes and prejudices filled with empty yet promising words and meanings. Crime reporting, supported by the mosaic values of social networks and news portals, shapes the agenda of consumer media, which readily adopt their content, further intensifying crises. New technologies have exploited the slowness and inadequate training of crisis teams to impose content that reshapes identities and behavioural patterns, so that violence transforms our social and psychological values.

The era of political democracy as we knew it before the internet is irrevocably over. The idea of the public as an unlimited collection of discrete individuals has now been transformed into a digital polis in which diversity is encouraged, but only within the bounds of ideological proximity. This means that in the sphere of security, old values are rejected, and during crises, actions are taken in accordance with the new architecture of media literacy, where information is designed in line with political goals and programs.

Digitalisation has opened up the public sphere, while a fragmented and dispersed audience congregates on social networks in specifically organised niches, using technological potential for self-organisation and connectivity. Ideology, transcending conventional boundaries of space and time, exploits images of pathological violence for political confrontations with opponents, seeking to draw responsible agencies into a conflictual vortex. When aligned with a propagandistic media matrix, it can adopt a

value-neutral or negative approach (reflecting ‘distorted consciousness’), yet there is no doubt about its purpose and intent to alter reality. An increased number of images depicting violence amplifies the ideological instability of the community, inevitably reflecting upon the political sphere. The dissemination of crisis information is increasingly becoming a strategy of informational conflict, based on appropriating the positions and opinions of others, whereby dehumanisation and demonization of the targeted party facilitate metapropaganda and societal polarisation. Our study has shown that actors threatening the constitutional order skilfully exploit crime reporting for subversive purposes, aiming to influence the audience as destructively as possible. What emerges is the need for higher-quality collaboration among the media, the police, and security agencies to enhance prevention, control and the reduction of crime rates.

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УЛОГА 'ЦРНЕ ХРОНИКЕ' У КРЕИРАЊУ КОНФЛИКТНЕ ПАРАДИГМЕ ТОКОМ ПОЛИТИЧКИХ КРИЗА

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Резиме

Дигитализација и вештачка интелигенција мењају природу новинарства, креирајући паралелну стварност која може бити окидач кризних ситуација, посебно у политичкој сфери. Истражујући феномен 'црне хронике', уз анализу карактеристичних студија случаја – аутори полазе од става да ниједан медиј није неутралан, што значи да се са садржајно-структурне стране сваки друштвени проблем, појава или чин из сфере криминала може приказати као део актуелних политичких превирања. Фрагментовање, инсертовање или специјализација као технике циљања безбедносних оквира са новим медијима, посебно дигиталним платформама и порталима на другачији начин каналишу енергију аудиторијума, при чему неприлагођени и необразовани делови заједнице лако постају жртве манипулације.

Аутори полазе од претпоставке како комерцијално оријентисани медији са већим рејтинзима чешће крше кодексе професије, посебно угрожавајући приват-

ност актера конфликтних дешавања, али и стварајући атмосферу моралне панике, страха и политичке нестабилности. Са конфликтолошког аспекта важно је уочити анонимност и хомогеност у брзини комуникације на новим медијима, који на тај начин граде ланац међусобно координисаних порука који симулирају нове изворе информација. То је важно запазити јер у пракси заустављањем једног комуникационог ланца систем не доживљава слом, већ функционише и даље, уз појачан безбедоносни приступ преосталих актера. Савремена корпоративно-комерцијализована медијска структура направљена је да интеракцијом гуши сумњу сваког појединца, представљајући себе као једино поуздан, професионалан и тачан канал комуникације

Анализирајући медијско извештавање о две трагедије које су потресле Србију 3. и 4. маја 2023, када је у два одвојена масакра (у основној школи „Владислав Рибникар“ и Дубони и Малом Орашју) животе изгубило 19 лица, истражујемо и modele креирања кризних ситуација. Сензационалистичко извештавање, манипулативно и селективно изношење података, спекулације и тенденциозни описи стравичног чина додатно су узнемирили јавно мњење, док су медијски закони и Кодекс новинара Србије у првим данима потпуно маргинализовани. У интервалу од 4. маја до 3. јуна 2023. године девет штампаних медија објавили су укупно 2.111 страна текстова који су садржајем појашњавали ове догађаје. Слични су и резултати извештавања репрезентативних онлајн медија (Нова, Информер, Курир, Блиц, Новости, Телеграф, Ало) који су у интервалу од 3. до 7. маја објавили 2.800 текстова, што значи да је свакога дана просечно публиковано више од шест стотина вести и сличних садржаја сне хронике. Теоретичари користе појам интоксикација пубlike, подразумевајући тренутак када медији прелазе функцију информисања и прелазе у пропаганду одређених идеја и вредности. Црна хроника је ту посебно моћна јер коришћењем емоционалних слика уверава аудиторијум како говори непобитну истину. Начин на који медији извештавају је друштвено битан, јер може утицати да се нешто слично никада не понови.

Индикатори наше анализе јасно указују на тенденцију да у савременој српској штампи и на порталима све више простора добијају наративи црне хронике, што је у складу са сличним истраживања у свету. Проблем на који указујемо је у чињеници да су код нас интерпретације много слободније, идеолошки обојеније и без навођења конкретних извора или са вишком непотребних детаља чији је циљ само распламсавање емоција. Неселективан приступ мења диоптрију посматрача, па се фокус више усмерава на починиоце насиља него на жртве. То је опасно јер у публици може произвести феномен 'имитатора' који у жељи да постану 'познати' понављају злочин. Значај црне хронике није исти у свим земљама, али што је политичка криза већа то су и њене слике потенцијално конфликтније.