Croatia

Monitoring and analysis of prime time news programmes on HTV and NOVA TV

SATISFACTORY BALANCE OF PRIME TIME NEWS ON PUBLIC SERVICE AND COMMERCIAL TELEVISION, WITH DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO REPORTING

Viktorija Car

Introduction - Television in Croatia

Television is a medium which unquestionably marked the 20th century. Since it appeared in the 1930s, when it entered our living rooms, kitchens, bedrooms, but also waiting rooms, shop windows and coffee bars - it became a part of our daily lives. By bringing to us images of the most isolated parts of Earth, images of the Universe, images of events and lives of people from all continents, world leaders summits, major natural disasters, sports events, cultural and other events, wars - it brought the world closer to us. It has taken us to places and situations which we never experienced and never will. Television has become (and still is) a means of informing the largest part of populations of modern democracies.

With the development of new technologies, especially the Internet and new online global video distribution platforms, which will offer almost indefinite amounts of various video contents, the question of the future of television as a medium is raised. There are intense discussions which predict the fall of TV channels

whose programme schemes and broadcast schedules are predefined. Users (viewers) are given more freedom of choice in terms of content, as well as in terms of the time in which individuals want to expose themselves to the content.

New television formats such as reality TV are pushing out commercially unprofitable formats such as documentaries. So-called "citizen journalism" enables an individual to produce video contents which can then be offered to viewers worldwide, questioning the role of journalists, editors, producers... These kinds of discussions are not harmless, and they remind of the discussions prior to the great turning point in video industry, the moment when silent movies were replaced by talking pictures.

Although we support changes, we must agree on one thing: regardless of the development of technologies and new trends in the entertainment industry, the human need for information and news will always be a foundation for the survival of journalism as a profession.

However, the news changes too, especially television news.

As in most transition countries, television in Croatia went through major changes after the democratic changes in the beginning of the 1990s. The greatest changes affected the news programme.

Until the democratic changes, television in Croatia, as in other republics of then Yugoslavia, was in the hands of the party and was used as a means of political manipulation. In the late 1960s and early 1970s in Yugoslavia, when political power was transferred from the central bodies of the Federation to republics and autonomous regions, the media were also decentralized. *Yugoslav radio-television* (JRT) was a federal institution, the only one in the country that coordinated the television programme and intermediated its exchange.

In the beginning *TV Belgrade* produced television news for all republic centres which broadcast in the Serbo-Croatian language. *TV Zagreb*, for example, was allowed to add to this news also issues from the republic. Then Zagreb started, first on Thursdays and then from October 1, 1968 every night, broadcasting its own TV Dnevnik news programme. However, although television developed within a decentralized model, the state controlled

access to information, filtering and changing it depending on the party interests, and thus using television as an important promoter of the fundamental values of communism. Besides that, the state television had a privileged monopolistic position in the television market which additionally strengthened its position and influence.

In the countries of Western Europe too, television was in the hands of the state until the mid-1980s when the process of liberalization of the television market began. But, as opposed to totalitarian systems, in democratic societies the state did not have access to content prior to broadcasting, censorship was forbidden and access to information was free.

After the first democratic multiparty elections in Croatia, a very complex process of complete social, political and economic transition began. However, the war, which lasted until 1995, made these processes, including the process of democratic transformation of the media, second class. Constitution and defence of the newly founded state were given unanimous advantage over transformation of the political and social order. Political domination and influence of the governing HDZ at the time additionally slowed down the process of complete transition and delayed the beginning of transformation of state television into a public service for 10 years. Croatian Radio-Television (HRT) - the only television with national coverage at the time, was under the direct political influence of the governing party until the parliamentary elections in 2000 when the coalition of six left-wing parties won. The *HRT Act* changed seven times in 13 years. Parallel with political changes, the process of liberalization of the television market began. The first concession for commercial television on national level was assigned to Nova TV which began broadcasting in 1999. With the privatization of the third TV channel of the public service HTV in September of 2003, HTV got the third competitor - RTL Television[1].

As a consequence of these changes in the public service television programme, there were parallel processes of depoliticization of the programme, but also its commercialization, i.e. popularization. While the news programme began moving away from the influence

[1] The owner of Nova TV is Central European Media Enterprises (CME) and the German corporation RTL GROUP owns RTL Television.

of daily politics, the rest of the shows gave more and more room to advertisers' interests, primarily by simplifying contents and choice of shows (entertainment or drama) to the taste of the widest range of audiences. For example, when Nova TV aired the highly viewed show *Story Super Nova* - a singing competition for young anonymous people, HTV responded with the similar, but unsuccessful show *Coca Cola Music Star*, thus commercializing its programme so much that even the name of the show contained the name of the sponsor.

As a reminder, we would like to stress that while the task of commercial television is to make profit, the model of public, independent and pluralistic television is based on understanding television as a public service which produces programme in the public's interest, which is financed from public funds by virtue of the state, which is under public control and which answers to the public for its work. There are two key tasks of public service television in democracy - to support the democratic system and the rule of law, which is at the same time a guarantee of its independence and freedom, and to provide the public with accurate and comprehensive reporting, as well as an equal and free public forum for discussion on important social topics.

The task of public service television is first of all to accurately, without bias and in a timely fashion, inform the public of all new, important or interesting events, phenomena, laws, government decisions, programmes, ideas, opinions etc. By mediating different information to citizens, preconditions are created for forming a qualified (informed) critical public as the most important factor of any democracy. Furthermore, by creating preconditions for confronting different ideas and for thorough and comprehensive critical public discussion on the public good and public affairs, it is the task of public service television to allow the viewers the knowledge of truth and also a rational choice between different options, which is a fundamental precondition of any social development and advancement. Apart from that, by public exposure of different non-democratic and unlawful actions of the government, legal or judicial bodies or individuals, and pointing to different phenomena and forms of misuse of political power and position, as well as violation of guaranteed human rights and freedoms,

public television awakens the critical public and forms public opinion.

However, after the initial identity crisis, balancing between newly acquired freedom and the fight for viewers in a competitive market, HTV still managed to create a balance by setting the limits below which programme quality could never go again. The fact supporting this is that HTV is still the most viewed television in Croatia. According to data of the independent agency AGB Nielsen, HTV's rating among national TV programmes is around 50% (34% rating of HTV1 and 16% of HTV2), while RTL has an approximately 22% rating and NovaTV has around 18%.

Although RTL is still more watched than Nova TV, in this research we decided to make a comparative analysis of contents of prime time news on HTV1 and Nova TV because the quality of the news programme on RTL is highly unsatisfactory and because the ratings achieved by the entire RTL programme are exclusively thanks to projects such as Big Brother and similar entertaining contents.

Comparative analysis of content of prime time news on HTV and Nova TV

Dnevnik - the prime time news programme on HTV, is the oldest of its kind in Croatia. Research ratings show that it is the most viewed show in general in Croatia. The ratings of the analyzed newscasts in April 2007 ranged between 16.3% and 21.6% AMR (average number of viewers per minute). More watched than Dnevnik is only the hour broadcast prior to it. Proud of this fact, one of the editors and hosts of Dnevnik, Zoran Šprajc, often starts the show by saying: "Good evening, the 30 most watched minutes are starting!"

The broadcast time of Dnevnik at 19.30 hrs has a several decade old tradition. It is a very successful time and proof of this is the fact that the NovaTV Dnevnik changed its broadcast time from the initial 19 hrs to 19.15 hrs. This was an attempt to keep a part of the audience watching its own programme until the end of the show, therefore taking that same part of the audience from

the HTV Dnevnik. This proved to be successful and in the last two years there has been a significant increase in quality of the news programme of NovaTV. Although many resent the news popularization, it has not proven to be a completely negative characteristic. Namely, through popularization and personalization of news, NovaTV managed to attract that part of the audience which found the HTV Dnevnik "too serious", "boring", "just politics". Although perhaps covered in a simpler way, closer to the viewers, NovaTV news still broadcasts important information and therefore contributes to informing that part of the audience which had previously been deprived of it. The ratings of the NovaTV Dnevnik in the analyzed period were between 7% and 10% AMR.

As opposed to NovaTV, which very often in its prime time news dares to try new forms, allows hosts casualness, does not follow blindly the structure of the show set in advance, the HTV Dnevnik always sticks strictly to the form set in advance. The news is most often preceded by four introductions, generally made in the form of statements, almost never in the form of question phrases. There is only one anchor in the studio and it has been a male for quite some time. It is difficult not to resent this fact regarding public service television which is supposed to promote gender equality not only in terms of issues covered in its shows, but also by its own example. Just for comparison, public service television in Sweden, SVT, demonstrates equal representation of ethnic and social minorities in its programme by having those minority members as journalists, anchors or editors of different shows, not only those for minorities. As opposed to HTV, the NovaTV Dnevnik always has a pair of hosts.

The structure of the HTV Dnevnik almost always follows the recipe: a set of domestic news, then either a news item or two on foreign affairs or world news concerning Croatia or crime section news, then a short set of world news and at the end a few social issues or news on culture. NovaTV has a completely different structure and it is based on the non-existence of a firm structure set in advance. The NovaTV Dnevnik usually starts with five introductions, after which the news is arranged according to the criterion of importance and interest.

The total duration of the HTV Dnevnik is from 24 to 28 minutes, and the duration of the NovaTV Dnevnik varies from 27 to 34 minutes. The HTV Dnevnik ends with a closing sequence, before sports news and the weather forecast. Of course, this was done to avoid the legal ban on interruption of news with advertisements. NovaTV has the first set of advertisements after sports news, followed by the weather forecast. However, in order to balance the analysis, it was decided not to include the sports news in the content analysis of the NovaTV Dnevnik, because as a result we would get a significantly larger amount of sports content, which in comparison to the HTV Dnevnik would not be relevant.

The Sunday edition of the HTV Dnevnik is specific; its anchor is Goran Milić who edits it a bit more casually, bringing into it lots of his own personality, with his comments and remarks. The NovaTV Dnevnik is different on Saturday when, before the sports news, they broadcast live from another studio in which a couple of hosts are in charge of a 10-minute set of news and entertainment, mostly on show business, which is called "Scena" (Stage). The Sunday edition of the NovaTV Dnevnik, after the sports news, has "Pregled tjedna" (Week Review), which was not analyzed in this research because it is broadcast after the sports news and repeats the most important and interesting news from the previous week. Also, in every NovaTV Dnevnik they announce "Tema dana" (Topic of the Day), which is broadcast as a separate show after the weather forecast and the second set of advertisements. It is mostly an interview (a guest in the studio or live broadcast from another studio).

News: culture replaced by crime section

Analyzing the contents of both Dnevnik programmes, it was interesting to see the mutual compatibility in the primary selection. Both televisions gave more advantage to domestic political issues (24 and 25) and to world politics (26 and 29). Almost the same is the number of analyzed news items covering issues related to war crimes (10), economy (10 and 8), and sports (5). Still, a difference is seen in secondary areas where HTV can be commended for a larger number of news items on culture (8); in the analyzed

period on NovaTV there were only two, while NovaTV has extremely overrepresented crime section news (18) in comparison with HTV (7).

As for selection of news, as a rule the choice of the first three news items does not correspond on the two TV stations. Only in several shows the first news items corresponded. HTV seriousness can be seen from the selection of the most important news, since the first news item is always about the most important domestic events, while NovaTV often puts among the first three items some crime section news or an interesting social issue.

As already mentioned, the NovaTV Dnevnik is five minutes longer than the HTV Dnevnik so the number of news items covered per day is bigger. A large number of news items (48) are categorized in the section "other", containing, apart from the crime section, news on entertainment, show business, media, gastronomy, etc.

Territorial distribution

The over-representation of Zagreb in relation to other parts of Croatia was expected (33% on HTV, 28% on NovaTV) and is a result of the centralized state administration. Almost every domestic political news item is from Zagreb. After Zagreb, the most news was from Dalmatia, while there was no news from the Varaždin and Međimurje regions and West Slavonia on either television. From the neighbouring countries the majority of news came from Bosnia and Herzegovina, while the total number of news from foreign countries is above one-third of the news broadcast - 37% on HTV and 33% on NovaTV.

Type of news

As already pointed out, the young newsroom of the NovaTV news programme is prone to experimenting with journalistic forms, for example in a live report the journalist announces another story; the host in the studio announces somebody's statement, taken from the previous story to which it referred, etc. This is why it was sometimes difficult to determine to which category certain news or a report belongs. Coverage of daily events was present the most on both televisions (42% HTV, 40% NovaTV).

There were as much as 5% more features of NovaTV and precisely these kinds of television stories cover the most interesting issues for the public, about, for example, economy. In two of these stories, we noticed hidden advertising (Coca Cola was mentioned in a story about brands and the other story was a mini report about a family agro-tourist catering facility). The third example is news on the founding of a trust of one of the largest Croatian companies which gave 10 million kunas to charity. Still, by mentioning the company name on both televisions, the company got an excellent advertisement in prime-time minutes, but not in the form of a paid advertisement. Although hidden advertising is forbidden by law in Croatia, because of slow programme supervision bodies and because of non-existence of precise legal regulations, these kinds of examples go unpunished, occasionally with an admonition of the Electronic Media Council - a body in charge of TV programme monitoring.

In the analyzed shows, there was only one case of news being read without image in the NovaTV Dnevnik, while on HTV there were as many as 9 cases (7%). This fact affects the overall impression of image quality. The journalist who reads the news in the frame gives the impression of a serious show, but also diminishes the television quality of news. Television news should primarily speak through image, not through text.

While the HTV Dnevnik had no examples of a survey or interview, in the NovaTV Dnevnik this form was used 7 times (5%). This is also an example which confirms diversity in news forms on NovaTV, giving the impression that it is a priority to keep viewers' attention with interesting and various forms and that emphasis is not primarily on the news content.

News content evaluation - journalistic approach to coverage of news/issues

This part of the research was, of course, the hardest. It concerns analysis of discourse which includes analysis of journalistic text, selected statements and analysis of image. Although we could have supposed that HTV would be more neutral in approach, the results showed otherwise. As much as 83% of the total amount

of news broadcast on NovaTV was marked neutral in the approach to content coverage, and for HTV this figure was 60%. HTV has a significantly larger number of news items with a positive approach, a total of 28%, and NovaTV has only 7%.

These results encourage thinking about the criticism of these two news programmes. With the fact that NovaTV still has more news with negative content (45%, and HTV has 42%), HTV's positive approach in coverage of more than one-fourth of the news is to be commended. Namely, in the overall social context which is negative by itself, starting from the quality of life of the majority of the population to crime section news, the public needs direction towards positive values. This contributes to encouraging towards the positive. Neutrality in coverage is, of course, to be commended. However, we cannot forget its effect of encouraging passivity of the audience. Finally, education of the public with the aim of forming a critical public is the task of the public service and not of commercial television, so we dare to comment on both results as affirmative.

Negative approach in coverage of issues on NovaTV was noted exclusively in news with negative content (mostly in the crime section), while on HTV only one news item was categorized as news with positive content and negative approach in coverage. This news was about a singing arrangement between José Carreras and Toni Cetinski, and the host/editor of the Sunday edition of Dnevnik announced it: "to the horror of tourists". Of course, this is more about editorial style, with distinct provocation, but this could be discussed in research of a different kind.

What does not surprise us is the greater neutrality of Nova TV in coverage of domestic political issues. HTV still occasionally has a positive approach in negative issues related to, for example, war crimes.

Conclusion

Since the end of the war in Croatia the public service television has been a constant target of criticism, from both the national and international, primarily professional public. At the end this turned out to be very useful because, 12 years since the end of

the war, we can say that the public service television in Croatia evolved into a stable public service, both in terms of programme and financially. What it is reproached for is the still incomplete political impartiality, which is not seen at the level of the house policy, but is seen in individual approaches of certain journalists, especially editors. Only a few of them were suspended due to these kinds of excesses, while most of them are still very protected, and the house management tolerates these hidden expressions of their personal political attitudes in their shows. This example confirms lack of professionalism on the part of supervisory bodies, the HRT Programme Council and Electronic Media Council. If these two bodies approached monitoring of television programming more thoroughly and reacted in cases of expressed political or other partiality, the programme quality would most certainly increase. Once again I will mention an example from Sweden where sanctions for any kind of partiality in coverage of content are expressed in the form of an apology which the journalist or editor must read in that same show - apologizing publicly to viewers for oversights or lack of professionalism. This kind of public apology is very unpleasant to both journalists and editors of Swedish television and is noted in their professional biographies.

Testifying to the non-functioning of public supervision in Croatia are three examples of hidden advertising on NovaTV and one on HTV. It is simply inadmissible that such stories are broadcast in prime time news. However, the question is whether insisting on sanctioning these kinds of cases makes sense when at the same time Viviane Reding, European Commission for Information Society and Media, advocates legalization of "product placement" in the directive "Television Without Frontiers".

In the case of Croatia, we have to have in mind that it is a young democracy where, after the war ended, priorities in the field of media were very much uncoordinated with priorities of developed Western European democracies. In comparison with public service televisions in other transition countries, such as Hungary, Croatia can be more than satisfied. The programme of the public service television HTV is not only the most viewed in the country; it is also very viewed in neighbouring Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. To be more precise, HTV achieves its high ratings thanks to its news programme, which is a very rare case. The content of Dnevnik is the best example of how HTV subtly

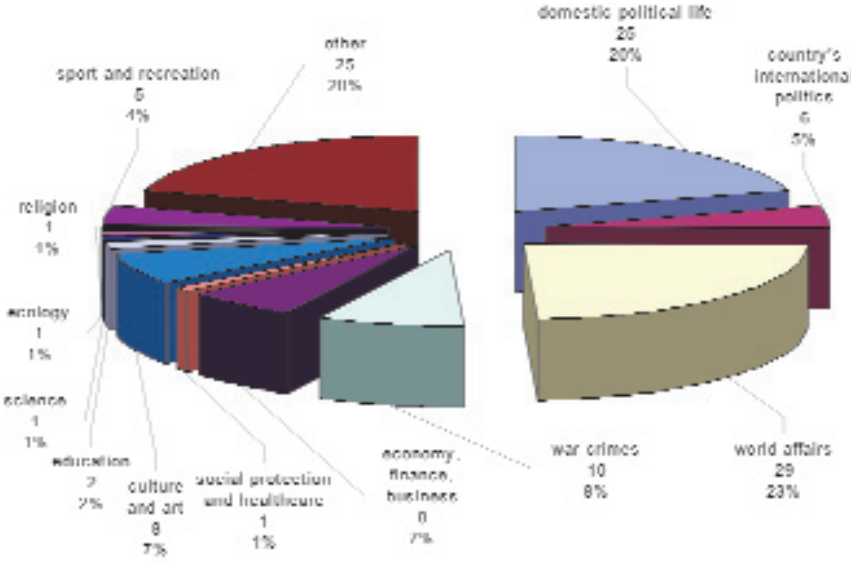
created and imposed on the viewers the concept of top professionalism, which puts it among the most viewed public televisions in Europe.

Comparing prime time news on HTV and Nova TV, we can conclude that they have very competitive, but also very different approaches to reporting. We can commend this difference, which confirms editorial professionalism. Having in mind the principles of public service television, HTV Dnevnik maintains a more serious, we would say more conservative form, which leans on a long tradition that guarantees credibility. The NovaTV Dnevnik is aware of the audience it addresses; it popularizes domestic and foreign news and personalizes politics to the limits acceptable to the majority of the public. These are forms which often border on infotainment. But, since it is a commercial television and its most important argument in the programme policy is the market, I would compliment the editorial policy of the NovaTV Dnevnik, which has found a model in which it did not give up the primary task of informing, not only entertaining the audience. The number of daily news shows and their total duration, which is significantly longer than on the HTV Dnevnik, points to the significance which NovaTV attaches to the news programme, fighting to attract the audience of the public service HTV, rather than RTL viewers who would be easier to win over with versions of entertainment shows, TV serials and soap operas. This way NovaTV demonstrates a trend in its editorial policy which is not characteristic of transition countries and which can be seen, for example, in Scandinavian countries.

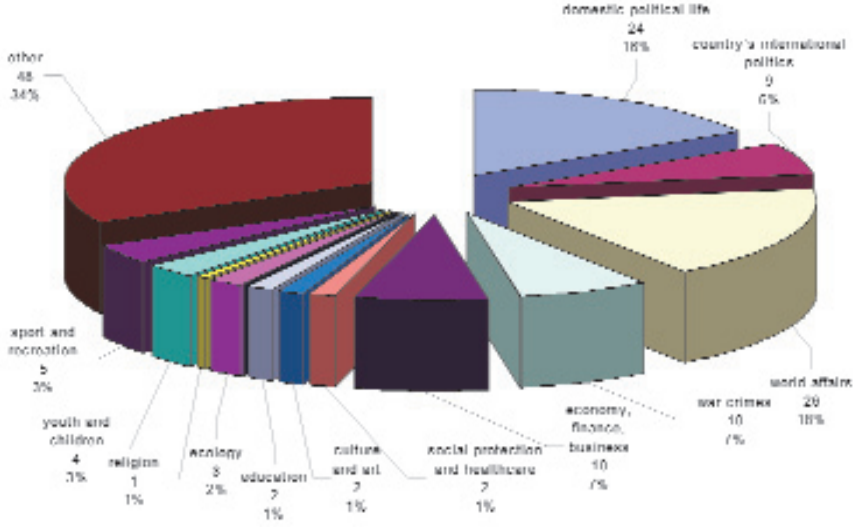
The results of this research pointed to a satisfactory balance of prime time news of the public service and the commercial television in Croatia. And while we must commend every positive trend in the news programme of the commercial television as a rare exception which stands out from the principles dictated by the market, it is necessary to constantly criticise the public service and force it to constantly improve its programme to the benefit of the entire public. To advocate for a public media service means to advocate for the possibility of an open space of information and communication to which all citizens, regardless of their material possibilities or communication capabilities, must have access, as well as the possibility of influencing programme contents. The cultural and social importance of the public service has to be above its market value and individual political interests.

Statistics

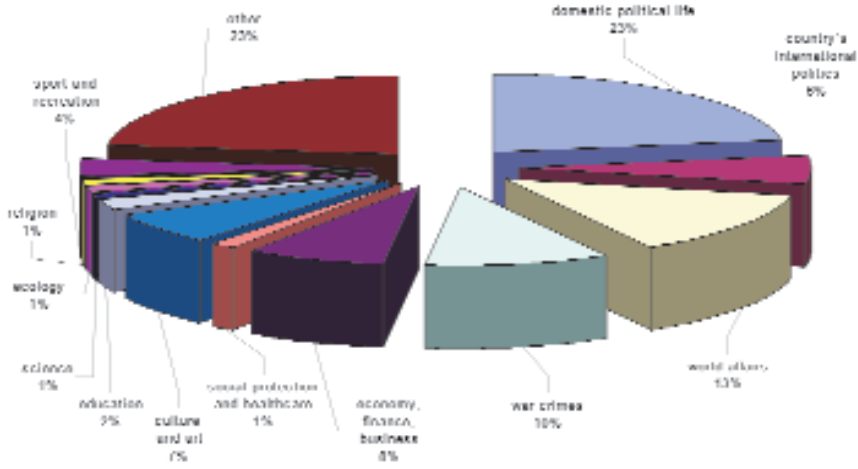
HTV - TOPIC



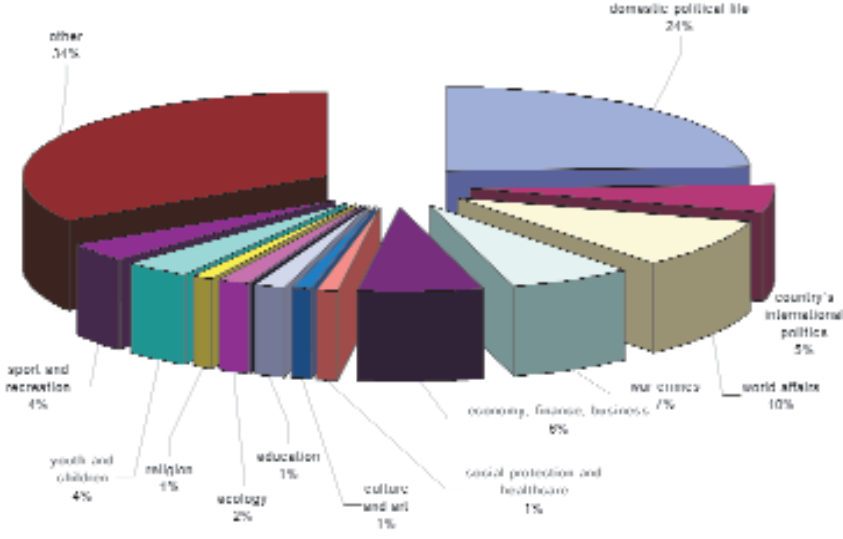
Nova TV - TOPIC



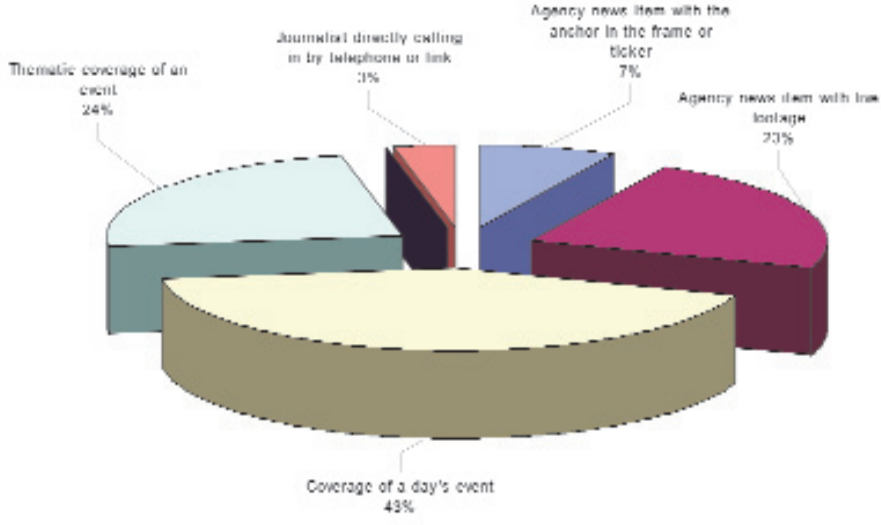
HTV - LENGHT OF ITEM CONTENT



Nova TV - LENGHT OF ITEM CONTENT



HTV - FORM



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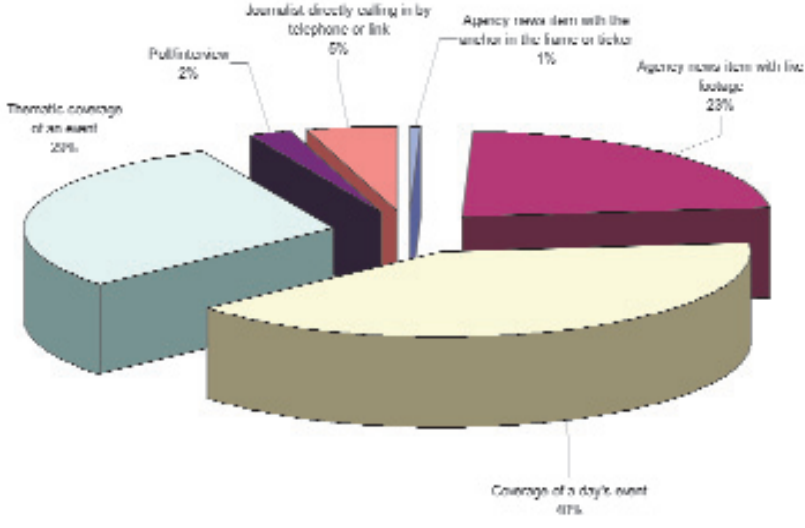
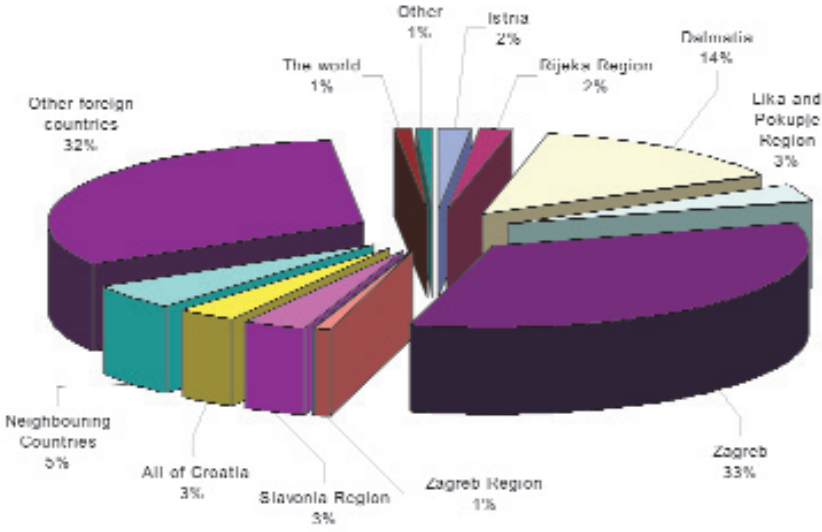
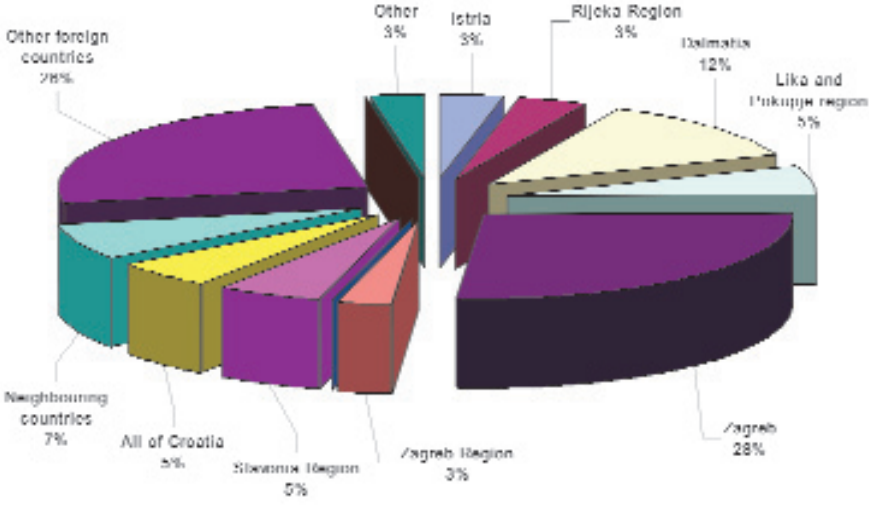


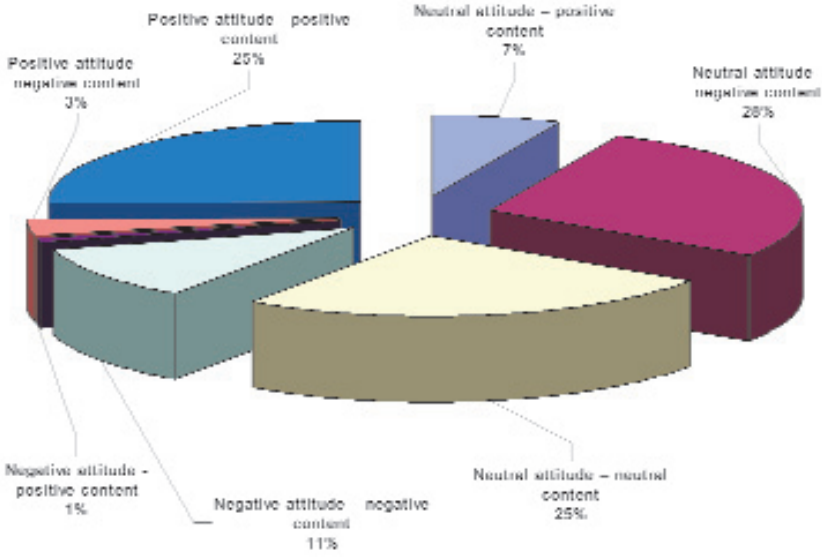
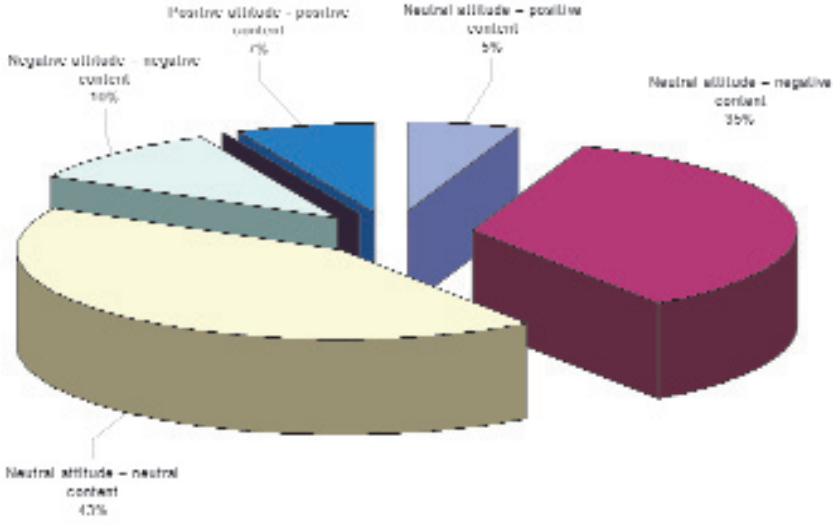
HTV - TERRITORIAL DISTRIBUTION



Nova TV - TERRITORIAL DISTRIBUTION



HTV - EVALUATION OF CONTENT - ORIENTATION TO THE SUBJECT



Nova TV - EVALUATION OF CONTENT - ORIENTATION TO THE SUBJECT