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TELEVISION COMMENTATORS AND EXPERTS IN COVERAGE OF THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION CAMPAIGN: THE CASE OF *WIADOMOŚCI* TVP IN 2015 AND 2019

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the statements of experts and commentators in news items devoted to the parliamentary elections and the election campaign in 2015 and 2019 in one of the most popular news programs, *Wiadomości* broadcasted by the public television TVP1. Content analysis was used for the study. The aim of the study was both to determine the specifics of the experts and commentators presented and the overtone of their opinions on the election committees participating in the parliamentary election. The results of the study show that during the 2019 election campaign, the public broadcaster's news program mostly presented a different type of experts and commentators than in 2015, and the commentaries themselves changed their overtone from being more distanced from the entities participating in the 2015 elections to being strongly engaged and exposing a strong position on the assessment of the main rivals of the 2019 parliamentary election.

Keywords: media experts, media commentators, television news programs, parliamentary elections

Introduction

Media coverage of parliamentary election campaigns and elections in television news programs is still one of the major sources of information for potential voters. Therefore, it is not surprising that researchers of media and politics search for numerous regularities concerning the content of these messages¹. However, experts and commentators appear-

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¹ A.S. Gerber, D. Karlan, D. Bergan, *Does the Media Matter? A Field Experiment Measuring the Effect of Newspapers on Voting Behavior and Political Opinions*, „American Economic Journal: Applied Economics”, 2009, Vol. 1, No 2, pp. 35–52; R. Klepka,

ing in television news services and the content they present are relatively less frequently the subject of research. Meanwhile, from the audience's perspective, their statements in the media can make the transmitted content objective and supported by an independent assessment of a specialist, authority and expert².

The increasing number of commentators and experts in media coverage, particularly in relation to television, is usually explained by the gradual shift from the descriptive role of journalism to an interpretive role. The media are expected not only to provide pure information about what took place, but also to provide commentary explaining why an event happened in a certain way and what consequences it may have³. In this context, the opinions of experts and commentators allow the media to enrich the information message with the content explaining and clarifying the reality. In this context, one can say about the existence of a specific expert culture, which involves the presentation in the media of people who are identified as experts, who are assigned the roles of reporting, explaining what is happening, interpreting, commenting, evaluating, forecasting and instructing⁴.

The election campaign period is associated with increased activity of experts and commentators in the media. The purpose of their appearances is to analyze the electoral programs of the participants of the elections, assess their achievements so far and thus the credibility of their promises⁵. Particularly often experts are expected to make predictions about the outcome of the election, as well as comment on subsequent election polls. Such statements are a relatively low-cost opportunity for the media to attract viewers and create an emotional message, in which the assessment of the chances of winning can be a dramatized subject of discourse or even a dispute between experts appearing in the media.

To date, researchers are not entirely uniform as to who should be assigned the status of an expert, as well as whether the terms expert and

Medialna walka o dobrą zmianę: obraz wyborów parlamentarnych w 2015 roku w wybranych mediach, Cracow 2018; D. Ward, *Conclusion*, [in:] *The Media and Elections: A Handbook and Comparative Study*, eds. B. P. Lange, D. Ward, Mahwah-New Jersey-London 2004, pp. 197–204.

² E. Albæk, *The interaction between experts and journalists in news journalism*, „Journalism”, 2011, Vol. 12, No 3, p. 338.

³ E. Albæk [et al.], *Experts in Election News Coverage*, „Nordicom Review”, 2011, Vol. 32, No. 1, p. 46.

⁴ P. Nosal, *Kultura ekspercka w mediach*, „Teraźniejszość – Człowiek – Edukacja”, 2009, No. 4, pp. 92–95.

⁵ L.W. Nord, *Commentary, Political* [in:] *Encyclopedia of Political Communication*, eds. L.L. Kaid, C. Holtz-Bacha, Los Angeles-London-New Delhi-Singapore 2008, Vol. 1, p. 118.

commentator should be treated as synonymous. On the one hand, there is a view that these two categories of participants in the media discourse should be separated⁶. Commentators speak in a persuasive manner, and although they adopt the point of view of an observer and interpreter, rather than a participant or creator of political reality, they are characterised by subjectivity and unambiguous evaluation. Meanwhile, experts perform informative and educational functions, their arguments are substantive with a high degree of informativeness, they strive to objectivise the formulated assessments, and they are characterised by a scientific perception of phenomena, which manifests itself in noticing their complexity.

The second position found most often in empirical research assumes that an expert is anyone who is assigned this role in the media, presenting them as having expertise in a given field⁷. Thus, both university professors, researchers, and journalists acting as political commentators are identified as experts⁸. This approach seems to be closer to the viewer's perspective. A viewer of a TV news program, when getting to know the opinion of a person who is not a politician or a journalist working for a given medium on a particular political activity, politician or election committee's offer, is inclined to treat it as a voice of an expert, regardless of whether it comes from a political researcher or a journalist working for another editorial office. Brian McNair, analyzing the functions of journalism in the public sphere, points to a group of journalists-spokesmen, referred to as pundits, whose role is to participate in the public debate as biased commentators openly supporting specific political actions or election committees⁹. However, the British researcher makes it clear that a major exception to the presentation of such commentators should be the public media.

The already mentioned increase in the frequency of the appearance of experts and commentators in the media is confronted by researchers with the results of analyses that prove that experts do not attract the trust of media audiences, mainly due to their belief in the deficit of independence and questionable selflessness in making judgments formulated by the media experts¹⁰. Even the comments of political researchers in the

⁶ E. Szkudlarek-Śmiechowicz, *Telewizyjny dyskurs polityczny*, „Forum Lingwistyczne”, 2016, No. 3, p. 102.

⁷ E. Albæk [et al.], *op.cit.*, p. 50.

⁸ K.A. Cross, *Experts in the News: The Differential Use of Sources in Election Television News*, „Canadian Journal of Communication”, 2010, Vol. 35, No. 3, p. 420.

⁹ B. McNair, *Journalism as Public Sphere*, [in:] *Journalism*, ed. T. P. Vos, Boston, Berlin 2018, p. 156.

¹⁰ T. Boyce, *Journalism and Expertise*, „Journalism Studies”, 2006, Vol. 7, No. 6, p. 890.

media are exposed to the unavoidable presence of valuation in the political science, the inevitable in many cases subjectivity, which combined with the brevity and limited time of the expert's statement, may not inspire confidence in part of the audience¹¹. Subsequent empirical studies prove the limited role and autonomy of experts present in media messages¹². This trend has been most extensively analyzed by Tom Nichols, who in his insightful work, based on case studies and qualitative data, claims that we are witnessing the "death of knowledge" through the fusion of entertainment and news, the proliferation of news outlets and the increasing pace of the news cycle¹³. As a result, program hosts, reporters, and celebrities have become more popular than experts, whose substantive scientific knowledge is constantly being replaced in the media by other content that is considered more entertaining and appealing to audiences.

Taking into account the findings present in the literature, the statements of commentators and experts aired in the news program *Wiadomości* broadcast by Polish Public Television during the parliamentary election campaigns in 2015 and 2019 were analyzed. Media content analysis was used in the empirical research. The subject of the study was the selection of experts and the overtone of their statements about the participants of electoral contests. The aim of the analysis is to determine whether, and if so, how the nature and overtone of the statements of experts appearing in the *Wiadomości* in 2015 and 2019 have changed.

Methodology

In order to analyze the selection of experts and commentators and the overtone of their statements in television news services, *Wiadomości* was chosen from among many news programs broadcast on public and commercial television channels for several reasons. Firstly, experts and commentators appear very frequently in *Wiadomości*. A study of the initial news coverage of the 2015 and 2019 parliamentary election campaigns in the six weeks prior to election day on *Wiadomości* identified 106 statements by experts in 2015 and 161 in 2019. In comparison, in another popular news service *Fakty* broadcast by commercial TVN tele-

¹¹ Z. Kantyka, *Politolog jako medialny komentator polityki*, „Studia Politicae Universitatis Silesiensis”, 2012, Vol. 8, p. 168.

¹² A. Gibbons, *The Loss of Expertise in Campaign Coverage? Political Aficionados and Experts in Policy News*, „Journalism Studies”, 2021, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 137–154.

¹³ T. Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and why it Matters*, New York 2017.

vision, statements of experts in similarly selected news items during the same period were registered 5 times in 2015 and 26 times in 2019. In view of such disproportion, the news service *Wiadomości* is a valuable subject for research and analysis.

Secondly, *Wiadomości* has a very long tradition, being historically the first news program in Poland after the political transformation period, which has been aired on Polish Public Television continuously since 18 November 1989. It is broadcast daily at 19.30, at the same time at which since 1965 the program *Dziennik Telewizyjny* was broadcast. Therefore, regardless of the changes in the political system, Poles are accustomed to the time of broadcasting, for many years the only evening television news program. At the very beginning the audience of *Wiadomości* counted 15–16 million viewers every day, and the program was the main, and for many people the only source of information about the surrounding world¹⁴.

Thirdly, *Wiadomości* continues to be popular, having been the leader among evening TV news services in 2015, and ranking second in terms of viewers in 2019. Viewership data is provided below (Table 1). Fourthly, the selection and overtone of experts and commentators in the public television news service can be evaluated both in terms of Brian McNair's objection and the assumptions of the Broadcasting Act, which requires the public broadcaster to create content characterised, among other things, by pluralism, impartiality, balance and independence¹⁵.

Tab. 1. Viewership of evening television news programs in September and October 2015 and 2019

News service	September 2015	October 2015	September 2019	October 2019
<i>Wiadomości</i> TVP1 19.30	3 456 150	3 715 672	2 736 280	3 013 149
<i>Fakty</i> TVN 19.00	3 015 144	3 313 605	2 903 377	3 114 296
<i>Wydarzenia</i> Polsat 18.50	2 191 297	2 568 413	1 968 501	2 249 116
<i>Panorama</i> TVP2 18.00	1 302 819	1 491 269	1 261 699	1 572 266

Source: own study based on data from Nielsen Audience Measurement for wirtualnemedia.pl (03.06.2022).

¹⁴ T. Mielczarek, *Monopol, pluralizm, koncentracja: środki komunikowania masowego w Polsce w latach 1989-2006*, Warsaw 2007, p. 288.

¹⁵ Broadcasting Act of December 29, 1992 (Journal of Laws No. 1993 No. 7, item. 34), consolidated text.

Content analysis was used to study media messages. This method is often used in media studies and in the study of political phenomena¹⁶. It is a set of different techniques of systematic study of streams or sets of messages, based on possibly objective, and in practice intersubjectively consistent distinguishing and identifying possibly unambiguously concrete, formal or content elements of the message, and then estimating as precisely as possible the distribution of the occurrence of examined elements¹⁷.

The study covered the period of six weeks preceding the day of the 2015 and 2019 parliamentary elections. The collected research material included all editions of TVP1's *Wiadomości* broadcast from September 13 to October 24, 2015 and from September 1 to October 12, 2019. A total of 84 broadcasts were recorded, 42 editions in each of the two periods under study. A total of 795 individual news items from *Wiadomości* were analyzed, which consisted of 346 news items from 2015 and 449 news items from 2019.

A classification key was constructed for the purpose of this study. Its first part is aimed to identify those news items which in any way related to the upcoming parliamentary elections and the election campaign. Both news entirely devoted to the election, as well as those only slightly referring to it, were admitted to the second part of the study. However, the reference in question had to be direct, so news stories criticizing or praising any of the parties involved in the election without reference to the election or campaign were excluded from the research corpus. Similarly, news items assessing the government in 2015 or in 2019 without a mention that the constituent party or parties will soon compete in an electoral contest were not considered for further study.

The second part of the classification key referred only to the news corpus which, in the course of the analysis of entire broadcasts, was considered to be related in any way to the subject of parliamentary elections or election campaigns. In this group of news experts and commentators were identified. They were operationalized as persons appearing in the news, not being politicians, former politicians, repre-

¹⁶ P. Ścigaj, M. Bukowski, *Zastosowanie analizy zawartości w badaniach politologicznych*, „Athenaeum Polish Political Science Studies”, 2012, Vol. 36, p. 11.

¹⁷ J. Idzik, R. Klepka, *O analizie zawartości, czyli jak badać medialne obrazy świata?*, [in:] *Medialne obrazy świata. Polityka i bezpieczeństwo w relacjach medialnych*, eds. R. Klepka, J. Idzik, Cracow 2019, pp. 11–32; K. Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi 2004; W. Pisarek, *Analiza zawartości prasy*, Cracow 1983; D. Riffe, S. Lacy, F. Fico, *Analyzing Media Messages: Using Quantitative Content Analysis in Research*, Mahwah-New Jersey-London 2005.

sentatives of state institutions, reporters, correspondents, or "ordinary people" asked for their opinions, while at the same time the narration of the news and the way in which the person was introduced indicated that he or she was an expert on the issues. Individuals coded as experts were then assigned to two main groups of commentators, namely academics or practitioners of a particular area of knowledge and journalists or publicists.

The next step was to analyze the overtone of the expert's statement in the case when his or her assessment concerned one or more electoral committees and was not neutral in nature. If the statement positively evaluated the candidate, it was assessed as "favorable", if it was critical it was categorized as "unfavorable", and if the statement was both positive and negative it was assessed as "ambivalent". In the case when one comment referred to more than one electoral committee, the procedure of evaluating the overtone of the expert's comment was repeated with reference to each of the participants of the electoral competition about which the expert spoke in a non-neutral way. As one of the most important criteria the analysis of language, context and choice of words occurring in expert comments was adopted, according to the recommendations formulated by Michael L. Geis¹⁸. An additional tool used in case of doubts about the overtone of the analyzed statements was the overtone analyzer found in free and open-access CLARIN-PL resources¹⁹.

Selection of commentators and experts

In *Wiadomości* expert statements occurred 106 times in news about the parliamentary election campaign broadcast in 2015, and 161 times in 2019. In 2015, 53 commentators appeared in the analyzed news. Among them the largest group were researchers, mainly professors specializing in political science, sociology, economics and history, besides them there were also economists - practitioners, employed in banks, business organizations, a smaller group of commentators were representatives of civic organizations, foundations and associations, and newspaper journalists. In the numerous group of experts, several repeated themselves more often than others (Table 2). Professor Wawrzyniec Konarski presented his opinions in the news five times, Andrzej Sadowski, economist and

¹⁸ M.L. Geis, *The Language of Politics*, New York-Berlin-Heidelberg-London-Paris-Tokyo 1987.

¹⁹ *Analizator wydźwięku*, CLARIN-PL, <https://ws.clarin-pl.eu> (03.06.2022).

president of the Adam Smith Center, played the role of a commentator the same number of times, Jarosław Flis, Ph.D. (currently with post-doctoral degree, professor at the Jagiellonian University) spoke four times, professors Ryszard Bugaj, Henryk Domański, Michał Kleiber, Radosław Markowski, Małgorzata Starczewska-Krzysztozek, Ph.D., and economist Marek Zuber appeared among experts three times.

Tab. 2. Experts and commentators appearing more than twice in *Wiadomości* in 2015 and the number of appearances in the analyzed editions of the program

Name and surname	The nature of the expert	Number of appearances
Andrzej Sadowski	economist	5
Wawrzyniec Konarski	researcher - politologist	
Jarosław Flis	researcher - sociologist	4
Ryszard Bugaj	researcher - economist	3
Henryk Domański	researcher - sociologist	
Michał Kleiber	researcher - technician	
Radosław Markowski	researcher - politologist	
Małgorzata Starczewska-Krzysztozek	researcher - economist	
Marek Zuber	economist	

Source: own study

The selection of experts and commentators in *Wiadomości* in 2019 has changed (Table 3). The analyzed news encoded 161 statements by experts spoken by 59 commentators. In this group, researchers in economics, politics, sociology or history were found less frequently, while journalists and publicists predominated. The most frequent commentator was Miłosz Manasterski, captioned as the editor-in-chief of the Information Agency. His comments appeared 17 times in the information program of Polish Public Television. Not so many times an expert of *Wiadomości* was Adrian Stankowski from “Gazeta Polska Codziennie” - 13 appearances, Karol Gac from “Do Rzeczy” - 9 appearances, Wojciech Wybranowski from “Do Rzeczy” - 8 appearances, Michał Karnowski from “Sieci” - 7 appearances, and Edyta Hołdyńska from “Sieci” - 3 appearances. Among *Wiadomości* experts commentators were also other journalists representing “Tygodnik Solidarność”, “Sieci”, “Do Rzeczy” and Tysol.pl and wPolityce.pl websites. Researchers were less frequent among commentators, although the comment of professor Norbert Maliszewski was noted 11 times.

Tab. 3. Experts and commentators appearing more than twice in *Wiadomości* in 2019 and the number of appearances in the analyzed editions of the program

Name and surname	The nature of the expert	Number of appearances
Miłosz Manasterski	journalist and publicist	17
Adrian Stankowski	journalist and publicist	13
Norbert Maliszewski	researcher - psychologist	11
Karol Gac	journalist and publicist	9
Wojciech Wybranowski	journalist and publicist	8
Michał Karnowski	journalist and publicist	7
Henryk Domański	researcher - sociologist	5
Jakub Maciejewski	journalist and publicist	5
Artur Wróblewski	academic - master's degree	
Arkadiusz Jabłoński	researcher - sociologist	4
Edyta Hołdyńska	journalist and publicist	
Zbigniew Krysiak	researcher - economist	
Paweł Lisicki	journalist and publicist	3
Maciej Onasz	researcher - politologist	
Samuel Pereira	journalist and publicist	
Michał Rulski	researcher - politologist	
Mieczysław Ryba	researcher - historian	
Tomasz Sakiewicz	journalist and publicist	

Source: own study

Overtone of comments

In 2015, most of the experts' statements referred to political, economic and social aspects of the elections and political programs of the electoral committees, while in general the experts' opinions were of a balanced nature and it was difficult to allocate to them an attitude favoring any of the participants of the electoral competition. The analysis of the overtone of the comments made it possible to code 13 statements or their fragments as favoring one of the electoral committees, which means that almost 90% of the expert opinions were neutral. For every statement of an expert which was not of such nature, its overtone was determined (Figure 1).

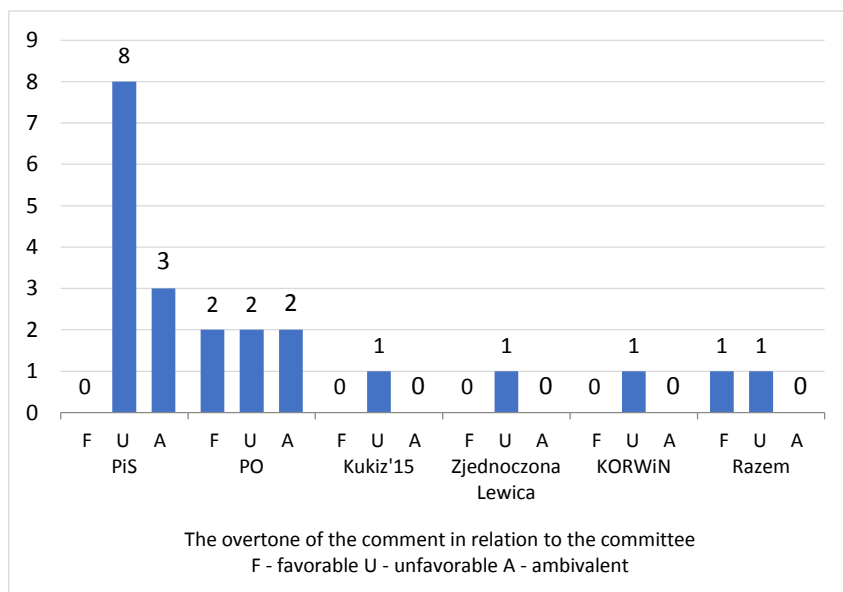


Fig. 1. The overtone of non-neutral expert comments in the analyzed 2015 editions of *Wiadomości*

Source: own study

Some of the comments referred to more than one party, therefore, the total number of indications on the chart does not correspond to the total of non-neutral comments, which amounts to 13. In the group of non-neutral comments made by experts, most of them were negative, and most of them referred to PiS, while unfavorable opinions were also formulated about PO, Razem, KORWiN, Zjednoczona Lewica and Kukiz'15. Experts made positive comments only four times, two about PO and two about the Razem committee. The few ambivalent voices of the experts concerned only PiS and PO.

The overtone of experts' statements in the analyzed news in 2019 allows to speak of a fundamental change in the specifics of experts' comments. Detailed analysis of 161 statements of commentators allowed to identify 129 statements or their fragments evaluating one or several electoral committees (Figure 2). This means that in 2019 less than 20% of experts' comments were neutral in nature, while the overtone of more than 80% of statements was assessed as valorizing either of the electoral committees.

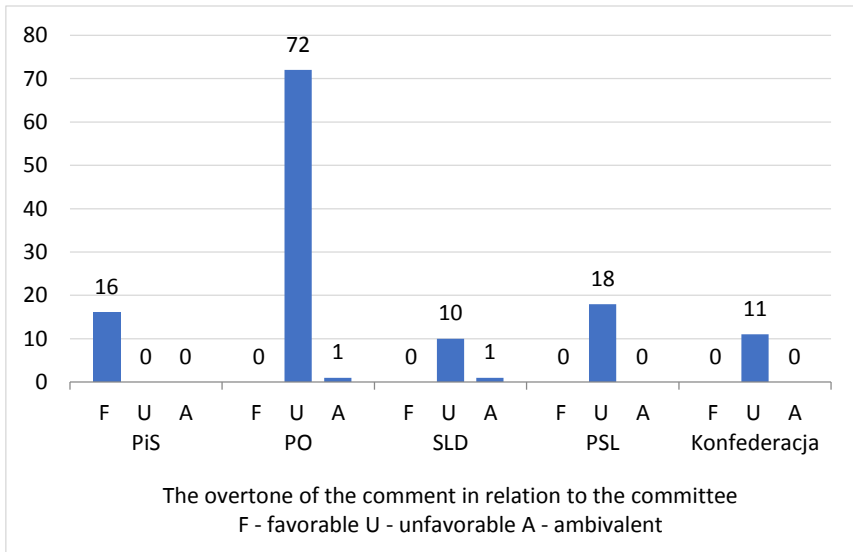


Fig. 2. The overtone of non-neutral expert comments in the analyzed 2019 editions of *Wiadomości*

Source: own study

The vast majority of expert statements in the analyzed 2019 editions of the *Wiadomości* were opinions about one of the participants in the election. The comments overwhelmingly criticized KO, were far less frequent in their unfavorable character towards the other parties, while in 16 cases they were favorable towards PiS. It remains characteristic that in none of the expert statements was it possible to identify even the least articulated opinion negatively valuing the ruling party in 2019.

Numerous of the commentators' statements did not actually make reference to the topic of the news or the addressed issue, but could be perceived as a clear voice evaluating a particular party, as eloquently exemplified by Miłosz Manasterski's short comment in the *Wiadomości* on September 8, 2019: "If PiS promises after the elections, then it will be done". The specifics of the commentators' statements in the 2019 *Wiadomości* are well illustrated by their comments in the October 2, 2019 news item on the KO program on senior citizen policy. The already mentioned Miłosz Manasterski stated: "Looking at the achievements of the Civic Platform (PO) towards seniors so far, it is most realistic that out of the whole package only euthanasia will be implemented", followed by a second expert in the program, Karol Gac who referred to the previous commentator's statement more than to the

KO program in the words: "The introduction of euthanasia would not cost the state much, but the introduction of specific positive proposals for seniors certainly would".

Conclusions

The presented research results allow not only to illustrate the change that occurred in the selection and overtone of commentators between the *Wiadomości* coverage of the election campaign in 2015 and 2019, but also the change in the place and role of experts in the media. In 2015, the news service of public television paid attention to the diversity of experts, professionals and researchers predominated, and commentaries exposed the complex context of the parliamentary election in a distanced way, rarely evaluating any of the electoral committees. In 2019, *Wiadomości* repeatedly reached for the same experts, and their statements were generally biased, exposing support for the ruling party and ruthless criticism of opposition committees, especially the ruling party's biggest rival.

The presented analysis allows us to formulate conclusions regarding both the strong bias of public television news programming in 2019 and broader reflections on experts in the media. Contrary to Brian McNair's postulate, public media reached for experts from among journalists and columnists whose comments were persuasive in nature, avoiding attempts to objectify or provide a scientific perspective on the analysis of the election campaign. It seems that the selection of experts and the strong bias of their statements is one of the factors influencing the decrease of the audience's trust in the voices of experts presented in the media. The proposed research on the selection of experts and the nature of their comments is worth continuing also in non-election periods, studying and comparing news programs broadcast by both public and private broadcasters. The results of such empirical analyses would advance the knowledge about the role of experts in the media and the tasks that the media themselves set for them.

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Telewizyjni komentatorzy i eksperci w relacjonowaniu parlamentarnej kampanii wyborczej: przypadek *Wiadomości* TVP w 2015 i 2019 roku

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest analiza wypowiedzi ekspertów i komentatorów w newsach poświęconych wyborom parlamentarnym i kampanii wyborczej w 2015 i 2019 roku w jednym z najpopularniejszych programów informacyjnych, *Wiadomościach* nadawa-

nych przez telewizję publiczną TVP1. Do badania wykorzystano analizę zawartości. Celem badania było zarówno określenie specyfiki prezentowanych ekspertów i komentatorów, jak i wydźwięku ich opinii dotyczących komitetów wyborczych biorących udział w elekcji parlamentarnej. Wyniki badania dowodzą, że w czasie kampanii wyborczej w 2019 roku program informacyjny publicznego nadawcy prezentował najczęściej inny typ ekspertów i komentatorów niż w 2015 roku, a same komentarze zmieniły swój wydźwięk z bardziej zdystansowanego wobec podmiotów uczestniczących w wyborach w 2015 do silnie zaangażowanego i eksponującego zdecydowane stanowisko co do oceny głównych rywali parlamentarnej elekcji w 2019 roku.

Słowa kluczowe: eksperci medialni, komentatorzy medialni, telewizyjne programy informacyjne, wybory parlamentarne