

## Hungary

### **Prime time domestic television news of MTV and RTL Klub**

## **DOMINANT COVERAGE OF DOMESTIC POLITICAL ISSUES WITH A NEUTRAL ATTITUDE TO AUTHORITIES**

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### **Research questions and methodology**

This paper offers (1) a brief description of the Hungarian media landscape, (2) a secondary analysis of empirical research data assessing the news coverage of various television channels since the political transformation in 1989–90, (3) a primary analysis of quantitative and qualitative data on two prime time domestic news programs in April 2007, and formulates (4) a policy proposal regarding the performance of news journalists.

As regards the primary research, this paper presents a quantitative and qualitative comparative analysis of two prime time television news programs in an effort to identify potential shortcomings of their news coverage. In particular, it attempts to answer the following questions:

- What is the territorial and topical distribution of the major television channels?
- What form of reporting is dominant in the prime time news?
- How are different contents approached?
- In what length are various topics covered in the prime time news?

In order to answer these questions, the prime time news shows of the first channel (m1) of public service Hungarian Television (Magyar Televízió, MTV) and commercial television RTL Klub were monitored in April 2007, and in particular on April 2 (Monday), April 3 (Tuesday), April 11 (Wednesday), April 12 (Thursday), April 20 (Friday), April 21 (Saturday), April 24 (Tuesday), and April 29 (Sunday).

The objective of this paper is to formulate policy proposals in an attempt to improve journalistic professionalism. It is based on the assumption that the neutral and unbiased information of the public through television is a necessary precondition for citizen's political participation, moreover, a critical journalistic approach to the government-of-the-day's activities a key condition for the transparency of a democratic regime.

### **Background**

Since the political transformation in 1989–90, the media landscape in Hungary has been described as one permeated by a 'media war', i.e., a conflict over who controls the media and what societal values the media should cultivate. This major, yet bloodless, conflict has divided both the political elites and the journalism community along ideological cleavages,

best described as separating the left from the right, the conservative from the liberal, tradition from progression, the secular from the Christian, the rural from the urban, and the national from the European (Farkas, 1990; Ágh, 1992; Lázár, 1992; Sükösd, 1992; Hankiss, 1996; Haraszti, 1999; Bajomi-Lázár, 2001, 2003; Monori, 2005).

In this conflict, also referred to as a ‘Kulturkampf’, or ‘part of the class struggle’, or ‘war of tribes’, the performance of the news media has been in the forefront of debates. Empirical evidence suggests that the prime time news programs of the major television channels, especially ‘Híradó’ and ‘A Hét’ on public service Hungarian Television, have been biased in favor of the government of the day, whether left or right.

For example, a qualitative and quantitative analysis conducted by the Monitor Group of the Openness Club revealed that *in the Antall–Boross era* (i.e., the first freely elected coalition government of a right-wing/conservative stance, headed by Prime Ministers József Antall and Péter Boross, 1990–1994), more specifically in the fall of 1993, ‘Híradó’ and ‘A Hét’, watched by 38 and 42 percent, respectively (Biro, 1994), aired a greater amount of positive news stories than the alternative news resources did, reaching up to 25 percent of all news items. The Sunday evening news magazine ‘A Hét’ especially pursued a strategy of success propaganda as it tended to ignore bad news that other news resources covered extensively (Argejő et al., 1994). Another quantitative and qualitative analysis of the major television news programs conducted in late 1993 and early 1994 confirmed these findings: it revealed that ‘Híradó’ focused on positive phenomena and attributed positive achievements without exception to either the government or the coalition parties (Beck, [1994] 1998). A qualitative analysis of the news coverage of ‘Híradó’ conducted in March 1994 revealed that the editors of the prime time news program covered current affairs in a biased and selective way, and attempted to manipulate viewers by means of presenting opposition parties in an extremely negative context (Terestyéni, [1994] 1998).

Pro-government bias on public service television persisted *in the Horn era* (i.e., the first left-wing/liberal coalition government headed by Prime Minister Gyula Horn, 1994–1998). A quantitative analysis of ‘A Hét’ in 1996 revealed that the politicians of the government and the coalition parties featured in up to 97 percent of the domestic news. This over-represents the government and the coalition parties in terms of both the British and the French standards, the British standard being that the government and the opposition should feature proportionately with their mandates in Parliament; the French standard being one-third of airtime devoted to the government, one-third of it to the coalition parties, and one third of it to the opposition, not counting the President of the Republic (Mádl & Szabó, 1999a). Although pro-government news bias persisted in the Horn era, its intensity diminished. As a series of longitudinal quantitative analyses conducted in March 1994, March 1995 and March 1996 revealed, after the legislative elections in April 1994, ‘Híradó’ attributed success stories to either the new government or the coalition parties (rather than the opposition), although to a lesser extent than before the government change (Beck, [1996] 1998). Another longitudinal comparison of all news programs between 1993 and 1996 confirmed that pro-government bias was more marked under the Antall–Boross government than in the Horn era. In May 1993, government officials and the representatives of the coalition featured in 84 percent of the domestic political news, while the opposition had a 16 percent share. In May 1996, the same figures were 72 and 28 percent, respectively. A combined quantitative and qualitative analysis of the news programs of public service television in the fall of 1996 concluded that while in quantitative terms (i.e., regarding their opportunities to comment on current affairs) the politicians of the coalition government and those of the opposition had an almost equal

coverage, the editors used some other means of manipulation that were tangible via qualitative methods (such as the camera perspective on the speaker or on the audience of the speaker) that presented government officials and the representatives of the coalition parties in a slightly more positive way than the opposition (Gayer et al., 1997). Furthermore, as a comparative analysis of the television news agendas in late 1993 and late 1997 showed, news programs became more problem-oriented and less ideological. Pseudo-events such as solemn road-openings and other ceremonies showing government politicians in a positive light disappeared from the evening news (Terestyéni, 1998).

The rule of *the Orbán government* (i.e., the second right-wing/conservative coalition government headed by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, 1998–2002) also saw a marked pro-government bias in the broadcast media. After July 1998, the prime time news programs of the then existing six major public service and commercial television channels, namely MTV1, MTV2, Danube Television, RTL Klub, tv2, and Tv3, featured government officials and the representatives of the coalition parties in up to 81 percent of the domestic political news, in most cases in a positive context. The opposition was more frequently subject to negative news coverage (Mádl & Szabó, 1999b). In 1999, the government and the coalition parties featured in 76–84 percent of all domestic political news; on several issues only government politicians were asked to comment, while the opposition did not receive any airtime at all (Mádl & Szabó, 2000). In 2000, the government and the coalition parties remained over-represented, featuring in 73–83 percent of the domestic political news (Mádl & Szabó, 2001); in 2001, in 66–85 percent (Baranyai & Plauschin, 2001). Although the above-described quantitative analyses did not make a distinction between the news programs of the public service and the commercial channels, another study comparing the main public service news program with the most popular commercial news program in the period November 1999 to January 2000 revealed that ‘Híradó’ presented much more good news than ‘Tények’ (Facts), the prime time news show of the then most popular commercial channel tv2. The proportion of positive and negative news items was 22:31 and 7:48 in the two programs, respectively (Nyilas, 2000).

As a quantitative comparative analysis of the major television and radio news programs indicates, the trend above has slightly changed under the *Medgyessy–Gyurcsány government* (i.e., the second and third left-wing/liberal coalition governments headed by Prime Ministers Péter Medgyessy and Ferenc Gyurcsány from 2002 onwards): whereas in 2002 only 23 percent of negative news stories were connected with the then coalition government, in 2003 their ratio reached 38 percent; in October 2003, 56 percent of the critical opinions aired on television and radio focused on the government’s policies; voices from the government and the coalition parties reached 66 percent on average, albeit some broadcasters devoted up to 88 percent of their domestic news to speakers linked with the ruling parties (Plauschin, 2004). In 2004, the politicians of the government and the coalition parties featured in 67 percent of the domestic political news on average, but this ratio was significantly higher on MTV, reaching 82 percent in August (Plauschin, 2005). In the year 2005, the representation of the government and the coalition parties slightly increased, reaching 70 percent on average (and 78 percent on Hungarian Television, cf. ORTT, 2006), then, in 2006, it dropped back to 62 percent on average, and occasionally 55 percent (ORTT, 2007). It needs to be noted that these analyses were purely quantitative, i.e., they did not address the question of whether the government’s policies were covered in a critical or a non-critical way.

Albeit the data above are fragmentary and unfit for a systematic longitudinal comparison, they do allow for the conclusion that a more or less marked pro-government bias persisted in the Hungarian news media in the period 1990–2006. However, the persistence of pro-government

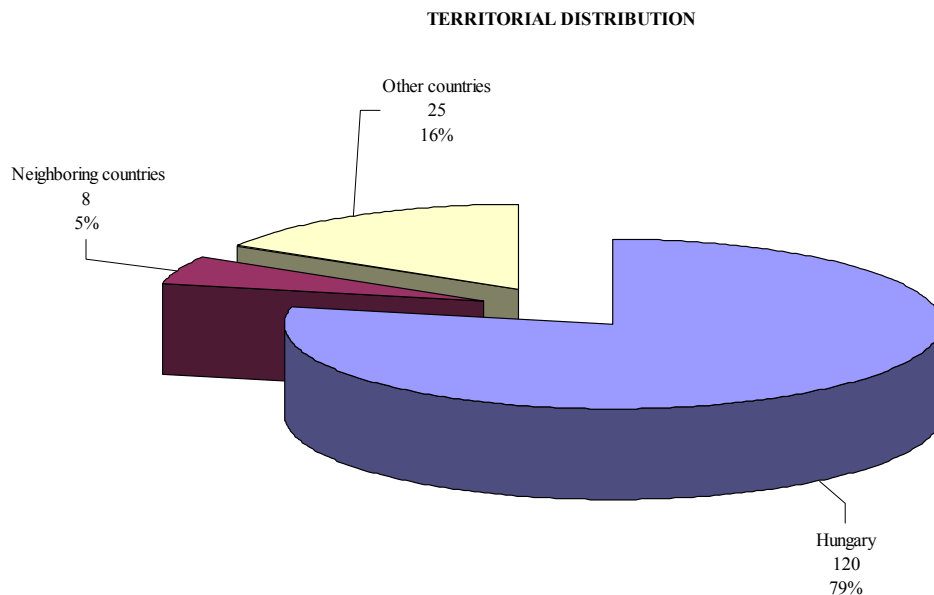
bias in the public service media does not necessary imply that the public automatically adopted pro-government views. In a longitudinal survey, Gábor Tóka and Marina Popescu studied the impact of pro-government bias on public television, and found that biased news coverage did not ordinarily improve the government's popularity. In fact, they concluded that pro-government bias may have had a 'boomerang' effect, i.e., it could even have worsened the government's chances to get re-elected (Tóka & Popescu, 2002). It needs to be added that, since the early 1990s, the number of media outlets has exponentially grown in Hungary: while at the beginning of that decade, the state broadcasters Hungarian Television and Hungarian Radio had a de jure and de facto monopoly of information, today a wide range of public and private broadcasters offer news on a regular basis. The most important commercial channels include HírTV, Magyar ATV, Lánchíd Radio and Klubradio; it needs to be noted that, despite the provisions of the 1996 Broadcasting Act, amended in 2002, these outlets are clearly, but not institutionally, associated with the various political parties.

### Territorial and topical distribution

In the studied period, the prime time news program aired on Hungarian Television included a total of 153 news items, the territorial and topical distribution of which is detailed in chart 1 below.

Chart 1

Territorial and topical distribution of news items on MTV, April 2–29, 2007 (eight days)



TOPIC

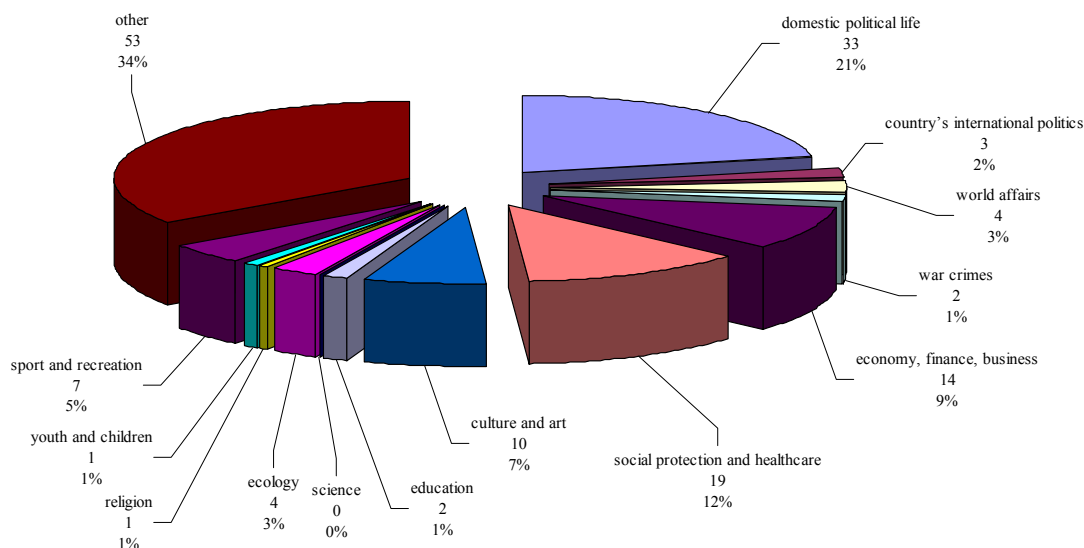


Chart 1 reveals that homeland news stories dominate the news agenda of the public service television channel with 120 items. As for foreign news, global politics rule (25 items), while – despite Hungary’s significant national diaspora there – the neighboring countries are hardly covered at all (8 items).

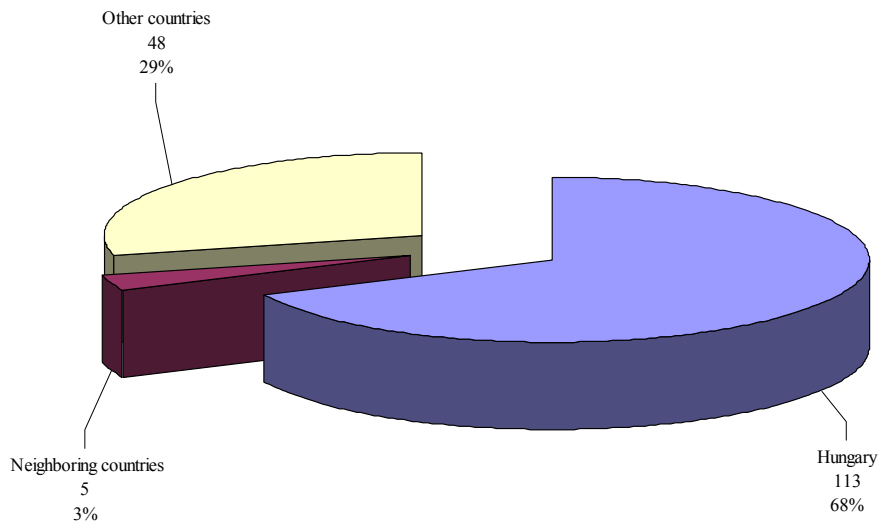
As for the topical distribution of homeland news on MTV, chart 1 shows that parliamentary and party politics (marked in the table as ‘domestic political life’) and social protection/health care were the main issues in April 2007, the latter issue being largely over-politicized with the ongoing reform of the entire health care system. It is noteworthy that one third of the homeland news stories (i.e., 40 items out of 120) can be described as ‘other’, i.e., crime, scandals, catastrophes, stars, etc., that is, predominantly tabloid news.

In the studied period, the prime time news program on RTL Klub included a total of 166 news items, the territorial and topical distribution of which is detailed in table 2 below.

Chart 2

Territorial and topical distribution of news items on RTL Klub, April 2–29, 2007 (eight days)

### TERRITORIAL DISTRIBUTION



### TOPIC

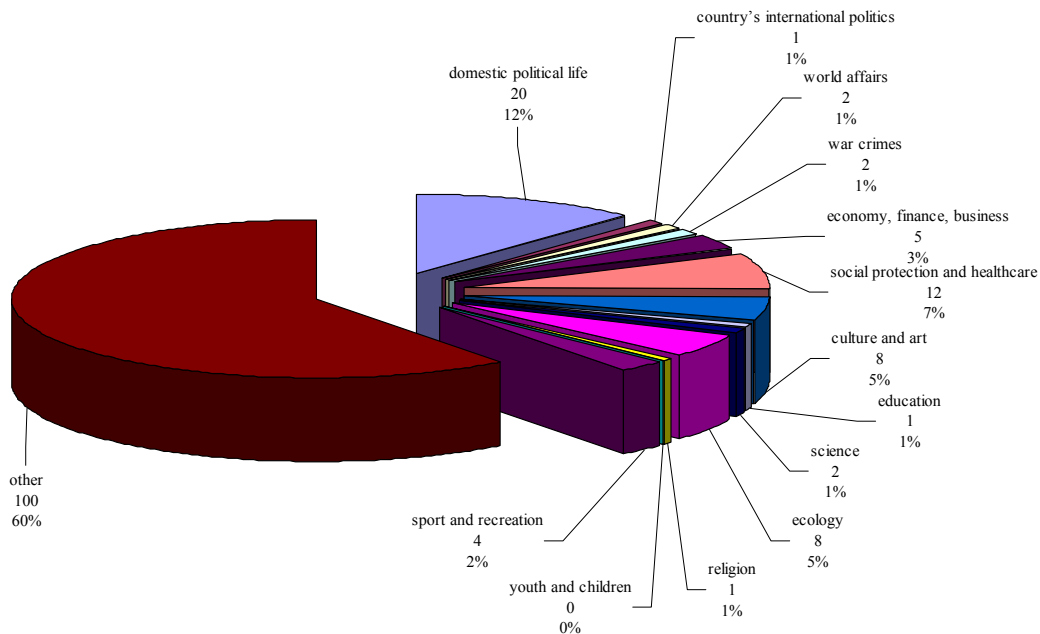


Chart 2 reveals that homeland news stories dominate the news agenda of the main commercial television channel with 113 items. As for foreign news, global politics rule (48 items), whereas the neighboring countries are hardly covered at all (5 items).

As for the topical distribution of homeland news on RTL Klub, table 2 shows that – in sharp contrast to the public service channel – parliamentary and party politics (marked as ‘domestic political life’ in the table) are practically ignored, with the exception of the reform of the health care system that has been relatively widely covered. By contrast, tabloid news is a main focus of the commercial broadcaster: some two thirds of the homeland news stories (i.e., 73 items out of 113) can be described as ‘other’.

## Form of news

The form of news in the period April 2–29 on Hungarian Television is detailed in chart 3 below.

Chart 3

Form of news on MTV, April 2–29, 2007 (eight days)

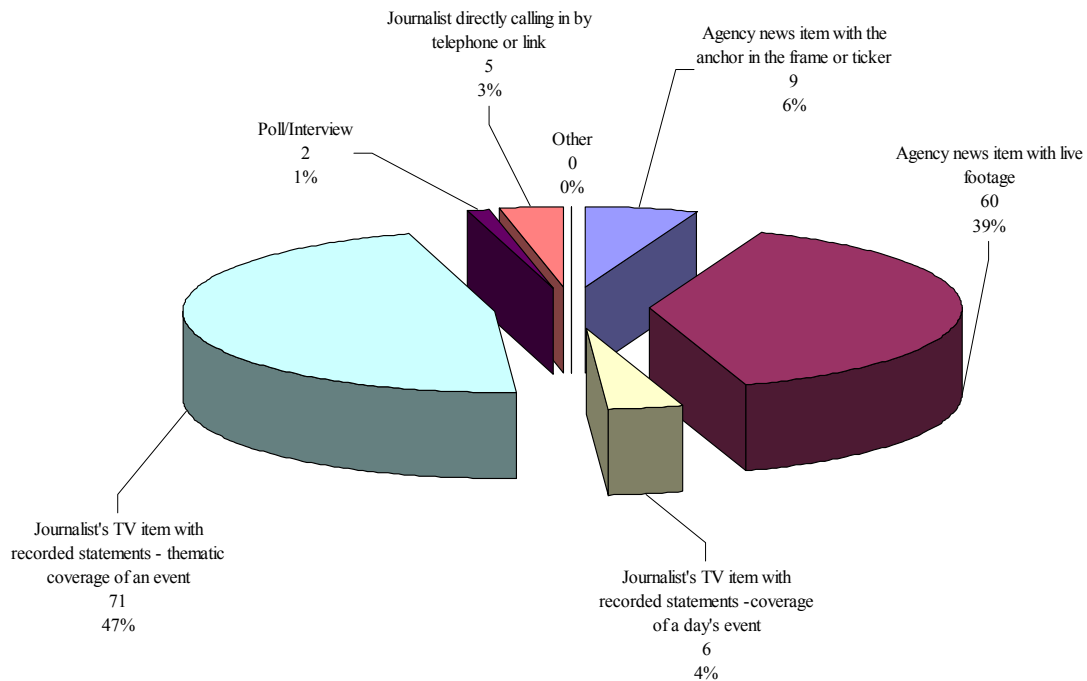


Chart 3 shows that 'journalist's TV item with recorded statements – thematic coverage of an event' is the major form of news on the public service channel, amounting to nearly 50 percent of all news stories (71 news items out of 153). This is a sign that many of the news stories covered are discussed in detail.

The form of news in the period April 2–29 on RTL Klub is detailed in chart 4.

Chart 4

Form of news on RTL Klub, April 2–29, 2007 (eight days)

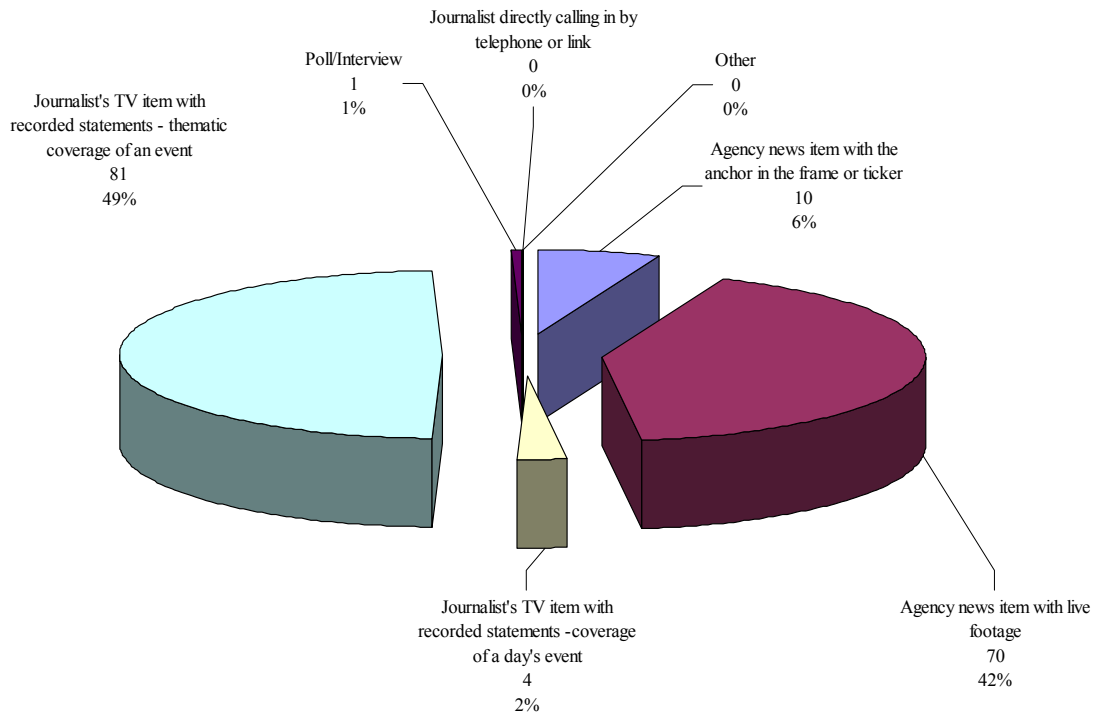


Chart 4 shows that ‘journalist’s TV item with recorded statements – thematic coverage of an event’ is the major form of news on the commercial channel, amounting to nearly 50 percent of all news stories (81 news items out of 166). Again, this is a sign that many of the news stories covered are discussed in detail. In this respect, little difference is found between the public service and the commercial broadcaster. It is noteworthy, however, that MTV elaborates on a wide range of topics, while RTL Klub primarily on ‘other’ topics, i.e., human interest stories.

**Length of item content**

Chart 5 below displays the length of item content on Hungarian Television in the period April 2–29 on eight selected days.

Chart 5  
Length of item content on MTV April 2–29, 2007.

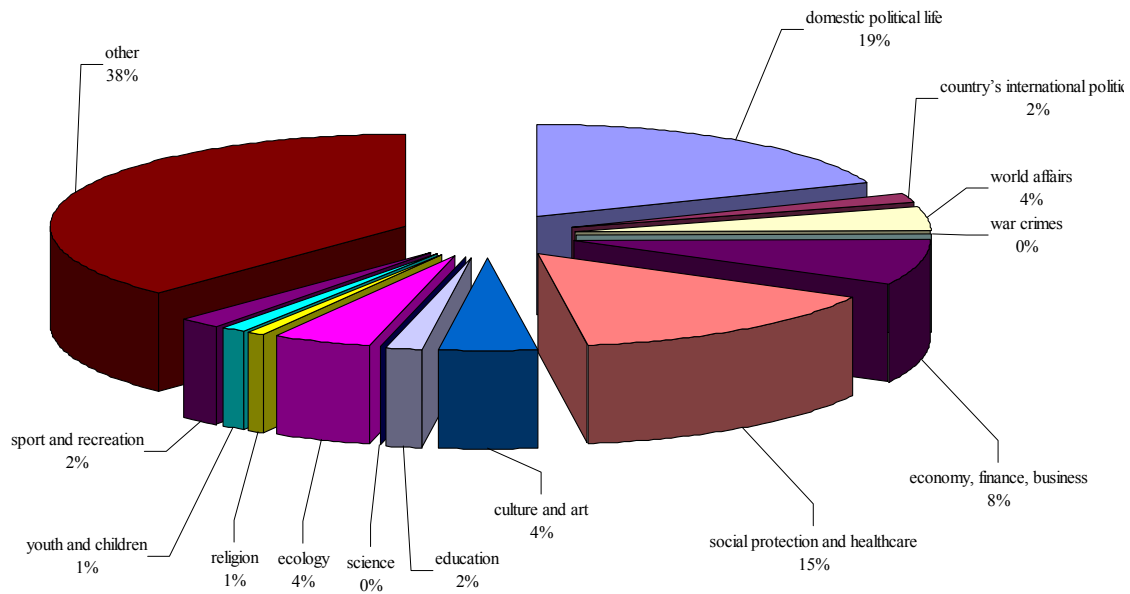


Chart 5 shows that the prime time news program on MTV devotes over two thirds of its airtime (4,468 seconds out of 11,810) to 'other' news, and only about one sixth of it (2,216 seconds out of 11,810) to parliamentary and party politics (i.e., 'domestic political life'). However, with the airtime devoted to the reform of the health care system added to that devoted to parliamentary and party politics, over one third of the news program's total airtime is taken by hard news or public interest stories.

Chart 5 displays the length of item content on RTL Klub in the period April 2–29 on eight selected days.

Chart 6

Length of item content on RTL Klub, April 2–29, 2007.

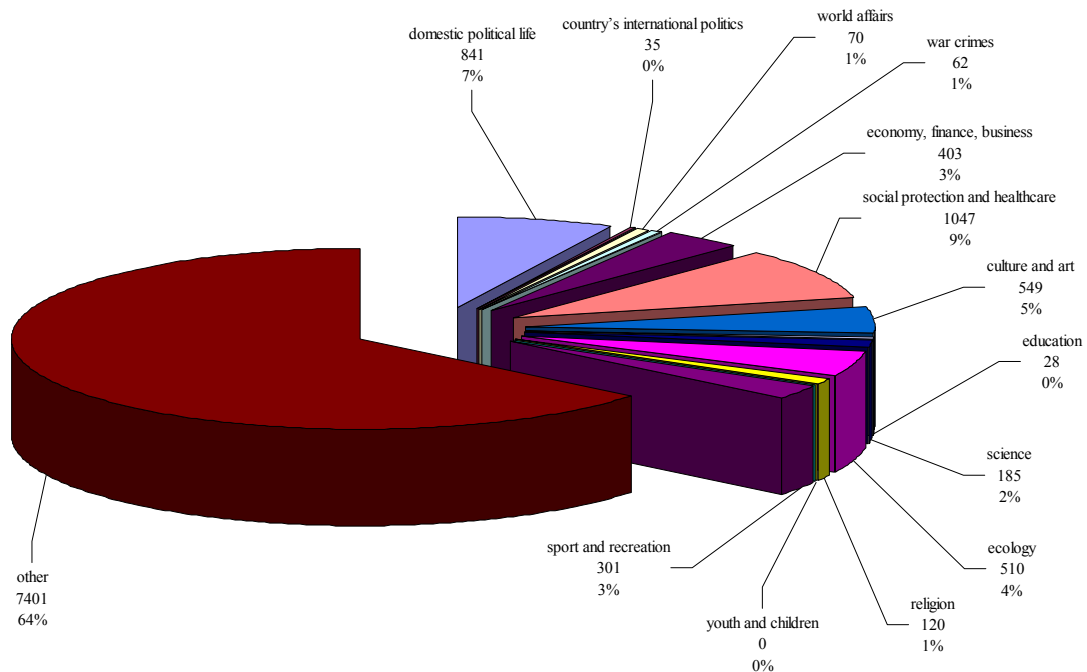


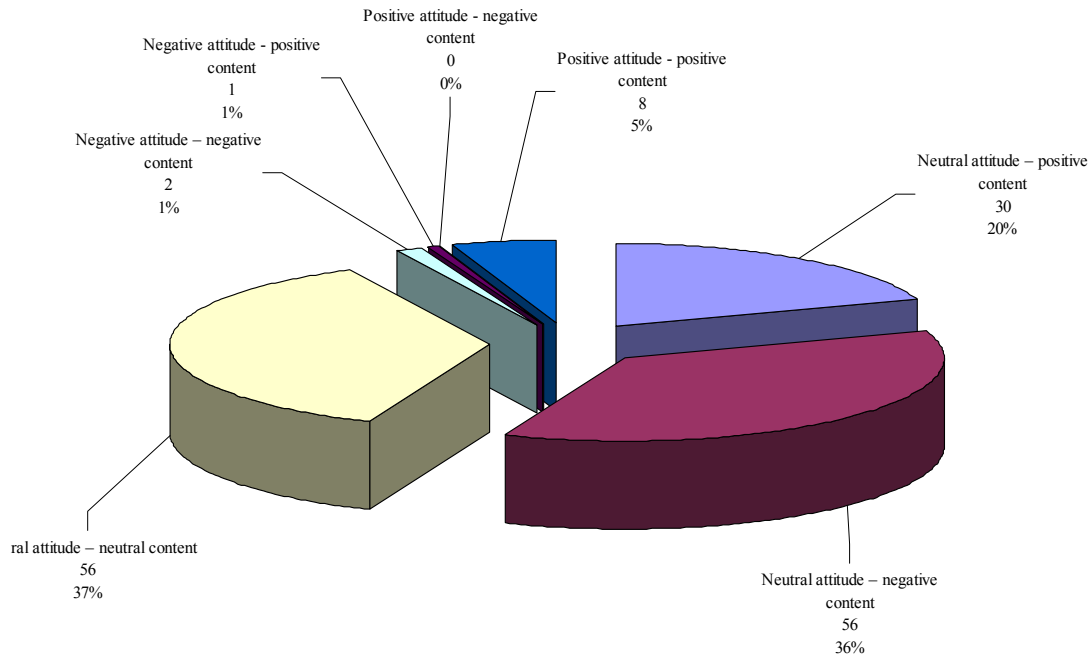
Chart 6 shows that the prime time news program on RTL Klub devotes some two thirds of its airtime (7,401 seconds out of 11,552) to ‘other’ news, and only about one tenth of it to parliamentary and party politics *and* the reform of the health care system (1,888 seconds out of 11,552). In other words, in contrast to public service television, human interest stories dominate the programming of the commercial television channel, whereas public interest stories are largely ignored in terms of the airtime (see also the chapter on ‘Territorial and topical distribution’).

### Orientation to the subject

Chart 7 below details how the prime time news program on Hungarian Television treats the issues it covers, i.e., whether it takes a neutral, a negative, or a positive attitude toward the various (i.e., neutral, negative, or positive) contents.

Chart 7

Orientation to the subject on MTV, April 2–29, 2007.

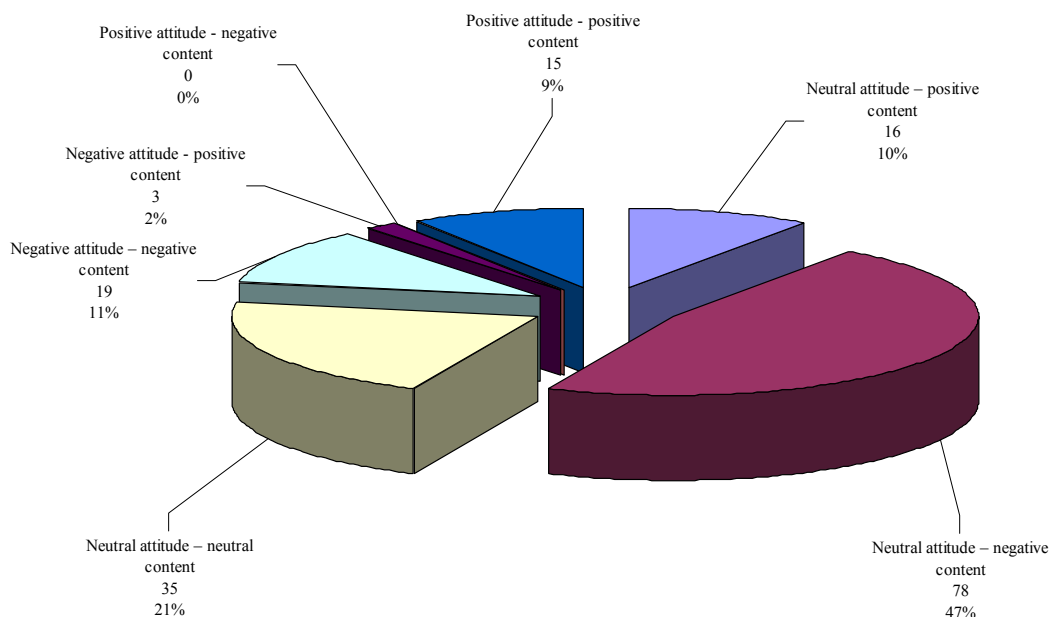


As for the *attitude*, chart 7 shows, quite surprisingly in the light of former research findings on the political orientation of public service television, that the broadcaster has taken an overwhelmingly neutral stance: 142 news items out of 153 display a neutral attitude. It needs to be noted, however, that the rest of the news items were predominantly positive (eight items out of 11 being such). The low number of items, however, does not allow one to argue that the public service broadcaster would be engaged in any kind of a success propaganda, i.e., be biased in favor of the incumbent government (all the more so as the table includes domestic as well as foreign news).

As for the *content*, chart 7 shows that there are a total of 56 neutral content items, 39 positive content items, and 58 negative content items. This confirms the finding above, namely that this news program does not attempt to shed a positive light on the current state of affairs.

Chart 8 details how the prime time news program on RTL Klub treats the issues it covers.

Chart 8  
Orientation to the subject on RTL Klub, April 2–29, 2007



As for the *attitude*, chart 8 shows that the commercial broadcaster has taken an overwhelmingly neutral stance: 129 news items out of 166 display a neutral attitude. In contrast to the public service broadcaster, the rest of the news items were predominantly negative (22 items out of 37 being such), i.e., arguably, RTL Klub has taken a slightly more critical stance than MTV.

As for the *content*, chart 8 shows that there are a total of 35 neutral content items, 34 positive content items, and 97 negative content items. This confirms the finding above, namely that the commercial broadcaster offers a more critical perspective than its public service counterpart.

### Summary and conclusions

The findings above show three major trends in contemporary television news. Firstly, Hungarian broadcasters pay little attention to foreign news, especially to what happens in neighboring countries. Secondly, there is a clear-cut division of labor between the major public service and the major commercial broadcaster: whereas the former treats public interest stories in detail, the latter focuses on human interest stories (this is also reflected in the fact, not tangible via quantitative methods, that the headlines and the leading news items on MTV are hard news, while those on RTL Klub are soft news). And thirdly, neither of the two is biased in any significant way. (It may be added to this that some minor private television channels in Hungary, whose programs are distributed via satellite and cable, such as HírTV, EchoTV, or Magyar ATV, are arguably more biased on domestic political matters.) This latter trend is a sign of a significant change in comparison with former years' widespread practice of biased news coverage, as indicated by various empirical studies (cited in the chapter on 'Background').

To this it may be added that, in the studied period, no extreme, or even minor, deviation from ethical and professional norms was observed in the television news.

## Policy proposal

The findings above allow for the conclusion that foreign news is largely ignored in the prime time news which, in light of the current trends of globalization and europeanization, may raise concerns. In particular, it raises the question whether the news as it is allows viewers to put information into an adequate context. Arguably, television journalists and editors should consider covering neighboring and other countries more frequently.

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