

THE MEDIA IMAGE OF POLAND'S MUNICIPAL GUARDS

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ABSTRACT

Purpose:

The purpose of the paper is to present the results of studies on the image of municipal police in the Polish daily press. Two research questions were asked: (1) Do the press reports concerning municipal police actually focus on the negative aspects of their functioning? and (2) Does the press provides the society with a false or incorrect information about the tasks that might be performed by the municipal police?

Methods:

Using qualitative content analysis, examined were all the articles about the Polish municipal police, published in 2014 in the four most widely read Polish national dailies (n = 328). Research contained two mainstream national dailies (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Rzeczpospolita*) and two tabloid dailies (*Fakt*, *Super Express*).

Findings:

The studies confirmed the hypothesis that media contributes to the consolidation and development of the negative stereotypes about Polish municipal police. No evidence was found for the media dissemination of false knowledge about the competence of the municipal police. Tabloids demonstrated its disinformation.

Research limitations:

Given that the research was limited only to one year (2014) and to one medium – press the results should be treated with caution. With the key role of the television and increasing role of the new media in creation the social perception of crime and crime fighters (police, municipal police etc.) further studies concerning those media would be needed.

Originality:

This paper shows the results of first studies of this subject in the relations to municipal police.

Keywords: municipal police, news media, media image of police, Poland

I INTRODUCTION

The functions traditionally ascribed to the mass media include the informational function, which is to say, providing information and debate concerning public affairs and the monitoring function, in other words, defending the rights of the individual from infringement by the authorities (Peterson, 1963). In an era marked by the tabloidization of the news media (Allan, 2010), journalists frequently adopt the role of sworn defenders of "ordinary people", exposing the shortcomings of the public institutions responsible for controlling crime and maintaining public order. Reports concerning the doings of those institutions have always enjoyed considerable interest from the mass media, albeit only when they contain a sufficient dose of sensationalism. In the meantime, their daily work and the legal, organisational and financial restrictions related to it rarely have much chance of penetrating the public's awareness. As analyses of the content of news reporting indicate, when presenting items on law enforcement organisations, the media focus primarily on negative stories and demonstrate an inclination for fault-finding (Reiner, 2007). Efforts to attract the public's attention by exposing anything which might be recognised as departing from the norm and breaching routine, such as scandals, irregularities, infringements of the law and so forth, do, after all, play a key role here (Young, 1974).

In this context, Poland's municipal guards would seem to be in a particularly difficult position. Given their jurisdictional limitations and the fact that a great many of the tasks they are charged with are unlikely to win them social acclaim, the activities of their officers do not normally provide positive information which corresponds to the criterion of newsworthiness. A handful of public opinion surveys, particularly those expressed as a single index, show that the municipal guards are not held in overly high regard by citizens in comparison with the police force, for instance, which is gaining increasing trust from society year by year (Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych

i Administracji [Ministry of the Interior and Administration], 2015).¹ One of the potential explanations for this state of affairs is the spuriously less-than-flattering, stereotypical image of the municipal guards which is created by the mass media. It is an explanation also cited by the guards' representatives themselves. The presence of this kind of negative message alongside a lack of balance in the form of proportionally frequent reports with a positive overtone, can lead to the erosion of social trust toward the guards. Although the Guard representatives have given voice to words of criticism concerning media engagement in "black PR"², there is a lack of scholarly evidence confirming the legitimacy of those accusations. The purpose of this article is to reconstruct the media image of Poland's municipal guards as it appears in the daily press. The empirical research, which was carried out using qualitative techniques for the analysis of content, serves to answer the question as to whether media reports pertaining to the municipal guards really do focus, in the main, on the negative aspects of their operations.

The public's critical attitude toward the guards can, of course, be partially accounted for in normative terms. First of all, it should be emphasised that, for local authorities, establishing a municipal guards' unit is not an obligation; it is a right. As such, where there are no guards, their tasks are carried out by the police. This model functions efficiently in many municipalities, which might give rise to doubts amongst local residents as to the sense of establishing and maintaining an additional public institution devoted to preserving order. Despite the aforementioned circumstances and numerous doubts, the number of municipal guard units in Poland has been growing steadily for more than a decade now. In 2014, the country had a total of five hundred and eighty-eight city and municipal guard units (Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji, 2014). In a handful of cases, units were closed down, a decision most frequently driven by the high maintenance costs borne by the municipal authorities and by the guards' low level of efficacy (Dyląg, 2014).

The range of duties allocated to the municipal guards, which includes both traffic control by means of photo-radar cameras (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli [NIK], 2013)³ and wheel clamping, is certainly another crucial reason for their low ranking in public opinion. As Widacki one of the authors of the provisions of the "Ustawa o strażach gminnych" [Municipal Guards Act] (1997), pointed out in an interview (2014):

It's understandable that the city guards have any number of enemies. Someone who's parked where they shouldn't and received a fine is bound to be disgruntled and exasperated because they believe there are more important matters, but here are the guards messing around with his car. OK, but the person who's stuck in his garage because someone else has parked their car where they shouldn't won't forget it, either. Who does he call? The city guards. It's a thankless form of service because, in the municipal guards' activities, the 'contact points' between their officers and the general public are really quite extensive and, for the people fined for offences, it's fairly troublesome and tiresome.⁴

As a rule, the public has little inclination to acquiesce to the more serious infringements of the law which are pursued by the police, while the penalties attached to them tend to be more unanimously accepted as both necessary and desirable. Meanwhile, people's willingness to turn a

1 According to the results of other recent studies, a telephone poll carried out on a representative sample of residents in Poland in 2015, 7 % of the country's citizens declared that they definitely trust this institution or that they suppose they trust it. Other representative surveys conducted in 2015 demonstrate that 69 % of Poles have a positive opinion concerning its work (Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej [Public Opinion Research Centre], 2015).

2 The majority of accusations of this kind, together with polemic commentaries on material published in the press, can be found on the Krajowa Rada Komendantów Straży Miejskich i Gminnych [National Council of City and Municipal Guard Commanders] (for example see <http://www.krksmg.pl/zdaniem-rzeczownika,59,kat.html>).

3 In 2013, NIK (the Supreme Audit Office), Poland's most important, constitutional inspectional body, published a report on the municipal guards. It gave a highly critical appraisal of their work in terms of road safety services and called for both a curtailment of their powers as regards controlling traffic speed and for them to be deprived of the right to use mobile speed cameras.

As of 01.01.2016, those demands were partly reflected in the relevant law. "Ustawa o zmianie ustawy – Prawo o ruchu drogowym i ustawy o strażach gminnych" [The Act on changes to the Road Traffic Act and the Municipal Guards Act] (2015) deprived the urban guards of the right to carry out speed checks using mobile speed cameras.

4 See J. Widacki in an interview for: M. F. (2015).

blind eye to the infringements penalised by the municipal guards is most certainly considerably greater. This could spring from several causes, at the very least. First, some of the prohibitions and obligations enforced by the guards enjoy either little or no social acceptance or are quite simply considered to be unnecessary; the ban on consuming alcohol in some public places serves as an example here, as does the obligation to keep dogs on a lead. Second, members of the public tend to evaluate their behaviour both from the perspective of the individual, skipping over the social consequences of mass infringements⁵, and in terms of motives for infringements known only to themselves⁶. This can lead to their making light of the damage their actions can cause. Moreover, people are inconsistent and their opinions concerning the legitimacy of the particular norms enforced by the guards can change depending on the micro- and macro-contexts of their contradictory behaviour.⁷ As a result, it becomes extremely problematic for the guards to perform their duties in a way which will satisfy the general public.

In addition, it seems as if journalistic accounts on the topic of the municipal guards may well leave the reader with the impression that the activities they carry out in the name of public order and safety actually border on the repressive. Meanwhile, the tasks assigned to the guards include not only keeping the peace, maintaining order in public places and supervising road traffic within the bounds set out in the relevant regulations, but also instigating and participating in activities aimed at preventing crime, offences, misdemeanours and criminogenic situations.⁸ Tasks which fall within the area of crime prevention are therefore clearly imposed on the institution by law and a great many guards are highly committed to carrying out ventures of this kind. They undertake numerous educational and prevention activities such as working together with schools and other institutions and organisations involved in educating children and young people⁹, holding workshops and talks for senior citizens (Paralusz, 2015), organising self-defence courses (Straż Miejska Warszawa [Warsaw City Guards], 2014), sports competitions (Dobrowolska, 2015), first-aid training (Łań, 2016) and even campaigns designed to remind local residents about the absolute necessity of cleaning up after their four-legged friends (Siólkowski, 2014). They also instigate and implement a range of other initiatives designed to benefit local residents and communities; examples here include helping to start cars in the winter (B. S., 2016), assisting homeless people to find safe accommodation during that same season (Straż Miejska Kraków [Cracow City Guards], 2009b), saving domestic and wild animals in trouble and rescuing them from oppression,¹⁰ and taking part in local events which actively promote safety, security and order “on their patch” (Siólkowski, 2016). They also check the sobriety of drivers (Straż Miejska Kraków, 2009a). Besides this, Article I, Section I of the Municipal Guards Act (Ustawa o strażach gminnych, 1997) explicitly states that the guards fulfil an ancillary role with regard to the local community and this obliges

- 5 Such as “Oh, really, air pollution’s not going to get worse because I burn a bit of rubbish in my stove!”, for instance, or “Just what dire things will happen if I don’t clean up my dog’s mess?”
- 6 For example, “I parked in a space reserved for handicapped people because I was in a real rush to get to the bank before it closed. I’d only have been there five minutes”.
- 7 For instance, a driver will be infuriated because their car has been towed away. However, in the role of a pedestrian pushing a pram, that same person would very probably start grumbling about the municipal guards if they left a car standing on the same spot and blocking the pavement, rather than towing it away.
- 8 In order for the municipal guards to be able to carry out the tasks they are charged with effectively, provisions were made for a catalogue of their powers. These include the power to issue cautions, call attention, issue warnings or employ other educative measures, the power to check people’s identity under legitimate circumstances, the power to apprehend people who are obviously and directly endangering human life or health or property and to take them to the nearest police unit immediately, the power to impose fines and the power to remove vehicles and immobilise them by clamping the wheels. It is only under exceptional circumstances that a guard will be permitted to carry out a task involving a firearm or incapacitator. As set out in the Act, when employing their powers, the guards are obliged both to respect human dignity and to observe and defend human rights (Ustawa o strażach gminnych, 1997).
- 9 In one Polish town, Gdansk, a secondary-level schools and the city guards entered into an agreement whereby a class with an extended curriculum covering the municipal guards has been established. The provisions of the agreement include at least two hours a week of theory and practice taught by guard officers; see Siólkowski (2015). The guards also hold lessons devoted to particular issues relating to safety, security and order in a great many schools. They cover a range of topics, including first aid and safety rules for pedestrians and cyclists (Straż Miejska Warszawa, 2016).
- 10 Note should also be taken of initiatives where positive mention appeared sporadically in the press analysed during this study. One example here is “Ekopatrol Straży Miejskiej” [City Guards Eco-Patrol], a more or less nationwide venture which has been praised for coming to the aid of animals; another is the agreement entered into in this sphere between the Łódź City Guards and the “Patrol do spraw Ochrony Zwierząt ‘As’” [“As” Animal Defence Patrol] (“Straż Miejska Łódź” [Lodz City Guards], 2016).

them to work together with other institutions and organisations responsible for local safety and security. Cooperative work of this kind is undertaken regularly. However, information on topics of this ilk is not usually something reporters deem worthy of reporting in the media, so it can only be found by visiting the guards' own websites and, even then, it crops up relatively rarely.¹¹

Over the course of more than a decade, the multitude of stereotypes which have clung to the institution have become a source of unending struggle for the municipal guards. Amongst the most frequently mentioned and, at one and the same time, mutually contradictory, stereotypes are those of the municipal guards who "just sit around doing nothing" and who "walk the streets looking for offences". As far as their duties are concerned, a stereotype which is repeated time and again is the one that has them failing to deal with people who represent a genuine threat to order and "only attacking innocent people"; here, the alleged victims are the now proverbial ancient grandmother selling the produce from her back garden on a street corner or "the ordinary person in the street". When it comes to municipal guards themselves, they are said to be rude, poorly educated and lacking in even the slightest ability to communicate in foreign languages; first and foremost, though, they are "the people who couldn't get into the police" (Dobiegała, 2013). A visible outcome of the dissemination of these stereotypes and the worsening opinion on the topic of the guards is the closure of units in a number of cities¹², including those which were shut down as the result of the residents' own decision, taken via the process of a local referendum.

1.1 The Theoretical Premises of the Study

The basis for the empirical research planned for the study was the theory of moderate social constructionism (Dowler, Fleming & Muzzatti, 2006; Potter & Kappeler, 2006; Goode & Ben-Yehuda 2009;

Even if they apply to a significant part of the population, experiences of direct contact with the guards are generally highly fragmentary. As a result, crucial significance also needs to be attributed to the three other aforementioned sources of knowledge about social reality, which create what is known as symbolic reality. What arises from the merging of personal experience and symbolic reality is socially constructed reality, in other words, that which the individual perceives as a true picture of the world. In an instance where one source of symbolic knowledge has a significant influence on the process of forming that picture, it can become established as a dominant social vision. In terms of the topic under study here, this source is usually the media (Colbran, 2014). Embroiled in the process of fighting for their audiences, they filter the information they provide on the activities of the municipal guards, employing the criteria of newsworthiness, which include a satisfactory level of drama, predictability, the possibilities for simplifying, individualising and depicting the news item, the message and references to the actual risk (Jewkes, 2003). News items filtered in this way are conveyed to the audience using simple interpretative formulae which concur with the addressees' method of processing information. When it comes to the topic of an institution with formal control over society, the widespread use of these formulae in conjunction with a sensation-oriented selection process oriented can produce a number of effects, including a dwindling sense of safety and the readiness to support radical, short-term solutions put forward by political decision-makers, such as the regularly recurring demands for the municipal guards to be shut down completely or for tougher penalties (Dowler, 2003; Callanan, 2005; Pfeiffer, Windzio & Kleimann, 2005; Surette, 2014).

2 METHODOLOGICAL PREMISES

The study presented in this article was conducted using a qualitative analysis of the content of media reports. On the basis of comprehensive, in-depth description and thoroughgoing reflection on the dependencies observed, an endeavour was made to identify all the characteristics of the

11 The Krakow City Guards, who are intensively involved in working together with numerous other institutions will serve as an example here. They have, for instance, entered into an agreement with the municipal transport provider with the aim of strengthening their collaboration as regards improving the state of cleanliness and tidiness on the vehicles and in the vicinity of the bus and tram stops. Another agreement, this time between the City Guards and the police, launched Clean Krakow. Stop Graffiti, which, along with the Graffiti Vanquishers community initiative, aims to counter acts of vandalism and illegal graffiti in the city.

12 The city of Zielona Góra and the towns of Żory and Wolomin serve as examples here.

phenomena in question, phenomena which are inevitably simplified by quantitative analysis. In addition, qualitative analyses make it possible to take the context of the phenomena in question into consideration. They also afford the opportunity of seeking indications of an internal cohesion amongst apparently random events, of focusing on the hidden meanings of words, of determining formulae and of exposing contradictions (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2013). Their primary purpose here was to facilitate the identification of the arguments used in the reports and the rhetorical measures serving the media in building a defined, discursive vision of the world.

In respect of the main research question as to whether media reports on the municipal guards focus on the negative aspects of their operations and create a negative image of their representatives, the indicators formulated for the purpose bear out the occurrence of the phenomena under study. Expressions of criticism were noted as regards: (1) the scope and quality of the tasks performed by the municipal guards; (2) the personal characteristics of guards; (3) both the law regulating the functioning of the municipal guards; and (4) the use of stereotypes about that institution. In addition, consideration was given to (5) the manner in which true and false knowledge on the topic of the municipal guards is constructed. A list of all the indicators can be found in Table 6, together with the symbol for the codes used in the analysis.¹³ Additional, quantitative measurements were also taken in order to establish both the extent of the phenomena in question, as part of the sampling, and their force. The type of newspaper, in the form of individual titles, was taken as an independent variable here, as was the nature of the publication as either tabloid or non-tabloid. Besides this, the researcher's general impression after reading an article, together with the headline, lead and crossheads, was also taken into consideration; the author's attitude to the guards or guards' officers was evaluated, with 0 indicating neutrality, -1, -2 and -3 representing increasing degrees of negative prejudice and 1, 2 and 3 indicating rising degrees of positive bias.

The study only covered the news media. Given the difficulties in gaining access to research materials, the decision was taken to restrict it to the daily press, which does, however, perform a significant role in shaping the content of other media, in other words, television, radio and web portals, as analyses carried out in other countries have demonstrated (Moore, 2014). The articles used in the study were published between 1st January and 31st December 2014 in four of the most popular national dailies. In view of both the tendency to scandalise which is ascribed to the tabloids and the potentially major impact they can thus have on negative opinions of the guards, two of the newspapers selected represent the 'gutter press'; *Fakt* (Fact) and *Super Express*. The other two are broadsheets in terms of content and style; *Rzeczpospolita* (The Republic) and *Gazeta Wyborcza* (The Electoral Gazette).¹⁴ The endeavour was made to carry out a full sampling for the period in question, in other words, to assemble all the material on the topic which had appeared over that time and subject it to thorough analysis.¹⁵ Taking into consideration the fact that, as an institution, the municipal Guard is established within the structures of the local authorities, the local supplements published for Warsaw¹⁶ were also included under the premise that they might contain news on the subject. A total of three hundred and eighty-two articles were analysed, ninety-six of them from the tabloids and two hundred and thirty-two from the non-tabloids (see Table 1).

13 The texts were encoded using the QDA Miner 4.1 qualitative analysis software tool.

14 According to data from the "Związek Kontroli Dystrybucji Prasy" [Press Circulation Audit Union] circulation figures for the four titles during the first three quarters of 2015 were: *Fakt*, 309,758; *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 158,620; *Super Express*, 145,174; and *Rzeczpospolita*, 56,152 (Kurdupski, 2015).

15 The material originating from *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita* was collected via those newspapers' electronic archives. The publishers of the other two dailies do not make their archived copies available online. For this reason, the material from *Fakt* and *Super Express* was gathered traditionally, in other words, by looking through every number and compiling photographic documentation of the relevant content.

16 The decision to include local supplements for Warsaw was made on account of the accessibility of the research material in library holdings.

Table 1: Number and percentage of articles analysed in the study

TITLE	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
<i>Fakt</i>	75	23%
<i>Gazeta Wyborcza</i>	114	35%
<i>Rzeczpospolita</i>	118	36%
<i>Super Express</i>	21	6%
TOTAL	328	100%

Within that total, one hundred and nineteen articles were devoted directly to the municipal guards, sixty dealt with other issues but the problem of the municipal guards was widely discussed and one hundred and forty-nine only contained a short mention of the guards (see Table 2).

Table 2: Types of article analysed in the study

	<i>Fakt</i>	<i>Gazeta Wyborcza</i>	<i>Rzeczpospolita</i>	<i>Super Express</i>	TOTAL
Brief, marginal mention	10	61	70	8	149
Articles addressing a different topic but referring widely to the municipal guards	9	30	21	0	60
Articles on the topic of the municipal guards	56	23	27	13	119

3 THE IMAGE OF THE INSTITUTION OF THE MUNICIPAL GUARDS AND OF ITS OFFICERS IN THE DAILY PRESS

The study demonstrated that the media's attitude toward the municipal guards is normally either neutral, at 48 % or negative, at 42 %. Articles presenting a positive image of the institution constituted only 10% of all those analysed. At the same time, they were instances where the overtones were evaluated as merely "more positive than not" (see Table 3).

Table 3: Article overtones (N=328)

Author's attitude	Number	Percent
-3	33	10%
-2	43	13%
-1	63	19%
0	158	48%
1	26	8%
2	3	1%
3	2	1%
TOTAL	328	100%

However, if a closer look is taken at the articles devoted directly to the municipal guards (n=119), the situation proves to be even less favourable towards them, with no less than 72 % featuring the author's negative attitude toward the institution and 14 % being neutral or positive (see Table 4).

Table 4: Overtones in articles devoted directly to the municipal guards (N=119)

Author's attitude	Number	Percent
-3	17	14%
-2	33	29%
-1	35	29%
0	17	14%
1	10	8%
2	5	4%
3	2	2%
TOTAL	119	100%

The media's attitude to the municipal guards is also differentiated in terms of the type-of-press variable. In the broadsheets, it was usually neutral, although this applies to *Rzeczpospolita* to a significantly greater extent than to *Gazeta Wyborcza*, at 74 % and 43 %, respectively. Meanwhile, the tabloids featured considerably more critical attitudes toward the guards on the part of the authors. This applies primarily to *Fakt*, where no less than 71 % of the articles published on the topic are negative in overtone (see Table 5).

Table 5: Article overtones in each newspaper (n=328)

	-3		-2		-1		0		1		2		3	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Fakt	32	43	13	17	8	11	13	16	5	7	2	3	2	3
Gazeta Wyborcza	0	0	17	15	34	30	49	43	13	11	1	1	0	0
Rzeczpospolita	0	0	8	7	19	16	87	74	4	3	0	0	0	0
Super Express	1	5	5	24	2	10	9	43	4	19	0	0	0	0

Table 6 provides information on the breakdown of the various indicators. They relate to negative content on the scope and quality of the tasks performed by the municipal guards, the personal characteristic of guards' officers and the repetition of stereotypes concerning the institution.

Table 6: Breakdown of the indicators

Code	Description	Number of articles containing the indicator	Percentage of articles containing the indicator
1.1a	Dealing with trivial matters, pointlessness.	12	10%
1.1b	Poor priorities; not dealing with what they should be dealing with.	23	19%
1.1c	Harassing members of the public	45	38%
1.1d	Inadvertent negligence, such as tardiness and ineptitude.	16	13%
1.1e	Intentional negligence, such as abuse and malfeasance	43	36%
1.1f	Accusations of indifference to the suffering of victims.	4	3%
1.1g	Accusations of a lack of respect for social demands for public order and safety	8	7%
1.1h	References to leaving a helpless community or victim and/or those closest to them to cope by themselves.	9	8%

Code	Description	Number of articles containing the indicator	Percentage of articles containing the indicator
1.1i	References to the public's mistrust and negative opinion of the institution opinion.	8	7%
1.1j	Undermining the institution's authority and trust in it; for instance, by accusations of lying.	14	12%
1.1k	Other	4	3%
1.2	Neutral mention of an informational nature concerning the activities of the municipal guards.	25	21%
1.3	Expressing approval and/or recognition of the institution/ the scope of its tasks/the activities of the municipal guards.	11	9%
2.1	Undermining the guards' abilities/professional training.	2	2%
2.2	The guards' attitude to performing their duties; for instance, laziness, drunkenness.	12	10%
2.3	Manners and personal standards; for instance, using vulgar language and/or gestures, clothes.	6	5%
2.4	Ethics; for instance, corruption, criminal activities, aggression.	11	9%
2.5	Other.	3	3%
4.1	The municipal guards' main job is manning the photo radars.	10	8%
4.2	The municipal guards are idle layabouts.	18	17%
4.3	The municipal guards deal with trivialities.	8	7%
4.4	The municipal guards main job is dealing with traffic offences; this refers not to photo radars but to matters such as parking fines, towing vehicles away and clamping wheels.	19	16%

Direct reference to adverse stereotypes of the guards is the domain of the tabloids and, in particular, of *Fakt* (4.1–4.4). They do appear in the broadsheets, as well, albeit it to a much lesser degree; as a rule, they crop up where readers, commentators or other people are being quoted. On the basis of the analysis of all the articles, it can be stated that the most frequent references were to commonly-held beliefs concerning the fact that the Guard officers' activities are limited to pursuing traffic offences. Comments along the lines of "It has long been known that drivers are the municipal guards' favourite scapegoats" and "hiding in the bushes and catching drivers on their photo radars, (...) harassing people with parking fines; this is what the municipal guards mainly do" can be found in almost one in four of the articles in question. It should be noted that this stereotype was also upheld by the very choice of topic; in the majority of cases, the articles were, in fact, devoted to the guards' activities in the area of road traffic control. Other stereotypes were repeated slightly less often. Emphasising the triviality of the tasks the guards are charged with by means of commentary such as "if the guards are supposed to hunt down ancient grannies selling their back-garden produce on street corners, then we are better off without them at all" was noted in 7 % of the articles. Accusations of laziness (see below) occurred in 17 % of the articles.

The accusation of harassing the public (1.1c) was levelled against the municipal guards with particular frequency. An important role is played in this area by linguistic labels. The municipal guards were described using designations which included "swindlers legally exempt from punishment", "con artists", "clods" and "brigands". It was indicated that they "are above the law", that they "throw their weight around like the sheriffs in the old Wild West" and that

they are “wily, sharp and cunning”, “boors”, “arrogant” and “exceptionally insolent”. The press descriptions of the institution’s activities often diverged markedly from the model provided in Article 1 Section 2 of the Municipal Guards Act, according to which, the guards fulfil “an ancillary role with regard to the local community, performing their tasks with respect for the public’s dignity and rights”. Amongst the other descriptions referring to the guards’ operations, we have “harass”, “oppress”, “fleece people, first and foremost” and “knock old people about”, to name but a few. The description of an activity was often linked to base motives, the most dominant of which were “zeroing in on drivers”, “creating chances for daylight robbery” and “lining the city’s pockets”. In this respect, the guards were dubbed “a town hall money-making machine” and “a money supplier for the budget”. The press also set out to provide evidence of this lack of scruples by citing examples of interventions where the guards availed themselves of offenders in difficult situations; for instance, “Did the city guards really have to tow a disabled woman’s car away (...)?” and “The guards lurk around the hospital with premeditation, because they’ll always find a driver there who didn’t have anywhere to park and left their car on a “No parking’ spot”.

The municipal-guards-cum-enemy juxtaposed with decent people who, by chance, as it were, undeservingly become the victims of a soulless institution; “the city guards persecute ordinary people, and ruthlessly, at that”, “drivers are the municipal guards’ favourite scapegoats” and “thousands of drivers in Poland become victims”. The use of a treatment known as “amplification” (Olczyk, 2009)¹⁷ normally plays down the significance of the fact that the aforementioned law-abiding citizens did actually commit the offence for which they were penalised and that a request for intervention often came from other law-abiding citizens who were subject to disturbance or nuisance as a result of the offender’s actions.

The media pointed out the guards’ failure to select appropriate priorities (1.1b). A triple accusation appeared repeatedly in this area. First, the city guards do not serve “ordinary” members of the public but are used to sort out particular interests for “the people in power”; for instance, “instead of keeping order on the streets, they keep an eye on... the boss’ private car”. Second, they waste time and official property on whims and fancies; for instance, “the city guards bought a new car, but instead of keeping order in the city, they ride off to the shop to pick up... some doughnuts”. Third, the city guards do anything and everything except what the local residents expect of them; for instance, “instead of imposing fines on the vandals and dossers who make ordinary people’s lives a misery, they slap them on drivers who park where they shouldn’t” and “it would be better if the city guards or police penalised people for littering, rather than for having a drink in the open air”. The examples illustrating the first two types of accusation are predominantly a more or less far-fetched attempt at causing a sensation. The final ones, on the other hand, clearly demonstrate an issue mentioned earlier, namely, the struggle the guards have with the variability of the public’s opinions. Of course a public institution should take public opinion into account to a sensible extent during the process of applying the law, though naturally, only in cases where the law allows them to waive the penalty and doing so will not endanger the essential good defended by the service enforcing the norms. However, given the competing or, quite simply, the conflicting opinions, this might present crucial difficulties in practice.

Once of the features typical of the contemporary news media is the pursuit of scandal. Although this characteristic is usually associated with the “gutter press”, it is also affecting other media to a steadily increasing extent. As Tumber and Waisbord (2004: 1143-1152) point out:

Tabloidization, a favourite punch-bag of many critics, fuels scandal news by pushing news organizations to chase titillating stories of corruption, full of drama but devoid of substance. To its critics, tabloidization signals the erosion of journalistic standards: rumour replaces rigor, sensationalism replaces substance, voyeurism replaces veracity.

Scandal offers the news media an opportunity for adversarial reporting, giving voice to their opposition or, quite simply, their enmity toward the authorities and their institutions. A frequently employed strategy for strengthening the bonds between publisher and reader involves the constant repetition of declarations of “watching the authorities’ hands’ and exposing their representatives’ offences. Besides, their audiences not only perceive the accomplishment of the monitoring function in these denouncement-oriented activities, but also see them as first-rate

¹⁷ Amplification means adapting the properties of the elements of reality being presented with the intention of dislocating their actual proportions. The effect is achieved by emphasising one aspect of the event in question and playing down others.

entertainment. The primary object of pejorative commentary was the municipal guards as an institution.¹⁸ In general, the handful of broadsheet articles on the topics of abuse and malfeasance (1.1e) and negligence (1.1d) were restrained. In the meantime, the reports in the tabloid press and, above all, in *Fakt*, featured a definite misuse of the expressive function of language. As Hans Mathias Kepplinger has remarked, in situations built on scandal, the truth is usually easily perceived and insufficiently spectacular, but “it is lost, crushed by a mode of presentation which is a wave of overstatement or utter inadequacy” (Kepplinger, 2008).

The primary object of criticism was the “over-zealous” penalising of minor infringements, which was described as “unthinking adherence to idiotic regulations” or “signing off on a host of interventions that should never have happened at all”. At the same time, petty offences on the part of the guards and usually, quite simply, their routine activities, were presented as major violations of legal norms or professional ethics; “harassing street traders” and “oppressing the weak”. Minor errors or controversial decisions were listed in the same breath as violations, which triggered graphic impressions. For example, one edition of *Fakt* published a story about four “victims” allegedly abused by the guards. Each of them appeared under a dramatic headline; *Street Trader Attacked; They twisted his arm and threw him onto the pavement. Street Stall Raided; Stallholder beaten up and choked. Pensioner Persecuted; Fine slapped on him for his Min-Pin. Battle with a Street Guitarist; Musician defends crowd.* Juxtaposing cases like this means that trivial incidents such as fining a musician or dog owner gain in significance as further examples of ruthless officials who, “intoxicated with power, happily abuse their authority”. This effect was also achieved by means of a technique employing what we might call ‘the labels of horror’, which is to say, using an explicit style and extreme notions to describe events, as well as the technique of visual exaggeration, in other words, illustrating the story with photos and graphics which intensify the drama of the message (Kepplinger, 2008).

Attempts to discredit the guards were also made by exposing occurrences of officers’ allegedly displaying “arrogance” and a sense of “being above the law” when forcefully enforcing the law. To this end, alongside the “labels of horror” and visual exaggeration, the technique reached for first and foremost was that of heaping up the offences. This involves presenting separate instances of minor oversight, infringement and negligence as elements of an entire series of irregularities, which gives the impression that they are flagrant and habitual occurrences. This was the case with an exposé run in *Fakt* and an allegedly mass problem involving municipal guards breaking the traffic regulations. Examples of similar infringements are cited; “the guards in Warsaw are hampering traffic”, “they don’t give a fig for the regulations and park on ‘No parking’ spots,” “the guards park where they like”, “they parked in a space reserved for the disabled” and, every time, it is emphasised as a manifestation of inequality and of officers availing themselves of their position of authority. The last-mentioned treatment was also used to present the guards alleged negligence and ineptitude. With the aim of proving the tardiness and inefficacy of the guards’ operations, endeavours were made to demonstrate that the occurrence of the incidents described, which were usually trivial, is widespread while the idleness of the guards is exposing society to serious or onerous problems.

However, the editors at *Fakt* did not stop at describing highly exaggerated or pseudo problems and simulated scandals involving the municipal guards. They set up several entrapments with the intention of exposing errors and perversions of justice in the guards’ operations. For example, a reporter posing as a high-ranking official requested their intervention in a matter of public disturbance and, on another occasion, a reporter posed as a businessman and demanded that the guards kept an eye on his private car while it was parked (Kucharzewski, 2014). Although the first intervention was carried out efficiently and effectively and, in the second instance, the pseudo businessman was politely informed, firstly, that his expectations could not be met and, secondly, where he could find secure parking facilities in the vicinity, the newspaper still described the situation in a way which was designed to discredit the guards (Wojciechowski & Kucharzewski, 2014). Readers were also given the chance of taking an active part in the discreditation process when the paper announced its *Fakt Combats Lawlessness* campaign, offering cash prizes and urging

18 On the other hand, the personal characteristics of the guards (2.1-2.5) were very rarely attacked, but just as rarely praised. Their attitude to performing their duties was sporadically criticised; for instance, “he neither wants to work nor use his brains” and “they don’t give a toss about the residents”. Criticism of their manners also appeared sporadically; for instance, “the city guards often intervene rudely and boorishly”.

Poles to send in photos or films showing offences committed by guard officers.¹⁹ If we take the aforementioned examples of the tabloid's activities and then add the fact that the people holding senior positions in the guards are under constant surveillance by photojournalists on the lookout for even the very slightest of infringements, then the enormous effort invested in diminishing the image of the institution is clear to see.

There can be no doubt that a great many of the examples of negligence or abuse which have been discussed here do occur in practice and too often, perhaps, in some cases. No public institution is completely free of dysfunctions and these should be revealed by the mass media. The point here is that, in the case of the municipal guards, the media, and *Fakt* in particular, have endowed these dysfunctions with the status of "norms", writing about "flagrant abuses", "widespread lawbreaking" and officers "frequently forgetting their duties and obligations", as well as other offences, of which "the examples are innumerable". The impression of tainted institution in a state of utter disarray and incompetence is also intensified by references to society, helpless and left to cope by itself (I.1h); for instance, "is there really nobody who's capable of keeping pedestrians safe?", "what kind of a country is this, where an illegally parked car can't be towed away?" and "the ordinary Poles can't really count on the help of the officers". By the same token, winning society's trust can only be hampered by assertions, rarely supported by evidence, as to the public's widespread distrust and aversion to the guards (I.1i); for instance, "a great many people say that the municipal guards should be closed down and the money that would save should be given to the police.

4 CONCLUSION

The arguments set out above permit the confirmation of the hypothesis regarding the media's contribution both to upholding the negative stereotypes concerning the municipal guards and to building a negative image of the institution and its officers. A definite majority of the articles dealing directly with the activities were negative and this holds true for all four of the daily newspapers in question. At least some of the shortcomings, if not to say vices, attributed to the municipal guards might thus well be a consequence of the journalistic pursuit of sensation. The analysis demonstrated that the entire spectrum of scandalisation techniques identified in the literature can be found in the tabloid reports devoted to abuse on the part of the guards. This applies, in particular, to *Fakt*, where the articles can, in general, be judged as critical in the extreme. Its editors did not limit themselves to selecting news items on the basis of bias, blowing reality up out of all proportion in the case of infringements, or portraying problems superficially. *Fakt's* reporters themselves set up situations which were designed to entrap the municipal guards and show them in a poor light. Regardless of the actual course of events, the reports were constructed in a fashion which would prove the institution's uselessness, pointlessness and degeneration, while the interpretations imposed on those events were far removed from journalistic objectivity. The impression that this was an organised operation, carried out after due consideration and channelled toward discreditation is difficult to refute. Bearing in mind the intense frequency of the attacks, as well as their maliciously aggressive tone and the active part played by the reporters in creating the situations they then went on to write about, this operation could, without much exaggeration, be described as a smear campaign – which provides a lot of readers, hungry for sensation.

Meanwhile, news items covering positive aspects of the municipal guards' daily work, such as keeping order in the immediate vicinity, for instance, or preventative and educational activities, are more or less non-existent in the mass media. The same is true of their successful interventions. The handful of exceptions to this rule include Ekopatrol Straży Gminnej [Municipal Guards Eco-Patrol], which received praise on several occasions for coming to the aid of domestic or wild animals. It is interesting to note that there were also times when the guards were given a pat on the back for activities which were normally the target of censorious or mocking commentary.²⁰ The extent of this disproportion between unfavourable content and content with positive overtones makes the task of nurturing the guards' image an extraordinarily difficult one, since it turns out that they are usually either written about in a poor, or quite simply, a highly negative, light or

19 The campaign was published in *Fakt* on 18.03.2014, No. 64, p. 6.

20 This related primarily to traffic control using photo radars or interventions involving animals.

they are written about neutrally. At the same time, the latter characteristic mainly applies to brief, information-based references in news items devoted to a different topic. On this account, they most certainly do not play a crucial role in shaping social notions about the municipal guards, unlike the articles devoted point-blank to that institution, which are predominantly unflattering, maliciously aggressive or derisive.²¹

Of course, it would be difficult not to note that the problems the guards have with their image are partly their own doing. Instances of aggression, rudeness and boorishness on their part do occur, as do cases of their own infringement of the law in force, including the regulations they themselves enforce. There also undoubtedly municipalities where the guards do abuse their right to impose fines for breaking the road traffic regulations, whilst neglecting other duties and obligations. In terms of some of them, it would, quite frankly, be possible to gain the impression that the guards were founded solely in order to man the photo radars. The existence of obsessive instances in the last-mentioned area was confirmed by the previously mentioned report issued by the Supreme Audit Office.²² Therefore journalists cannot be rebuked for exposing similar practices; however, respect for the rule of truthfulness, honesty and objectivity is a condition for the reliable and diligent exercise of the 'leashed-dog' function by the media in respect of public institutions (McQuail, 2010). A great many of the examples of journalistic activity cited earlier in this article would seem to depart significantly from those standards.

In the face of the image issues discussed here, greater professionalisation of the relationship between the guards and the media would be desirable. Given the decentralised nature of the municipal guards as an institution operating within lowest level unit of administrative division, it would be difficult to implement a clear and methodical information policy which would produce the successes we have observed over the past few years in respect of the police force. However, the National Council of City and Municipal Guard Commanders could compile some guidelines or collect examples of good practice in this area. The only remedy as regards improving the guards' image is undertaking proactive measures of the marketing and opinion-forming kind. One step which might well prove to be a good start would be systematically and persistently providing the media with press releases covering both the efficacy of the guards' operations and their work in the field of prevention. Activities of this type undertaken by the guards in the larger cities seem to have brought a degree of success, despite media inclinations toward sensational and negative content. As the most recent studies carried out abroad have shown, in the face of the spreading prevalence of what is known as "lazy journalism" (Moore, 2014: 21), which leads to reporters publishing content compiled by other organisations, institutions responsible for public safety and order can influence the substance of what appears in the traditional media and can do so on a scale which is not only unprecedented, but is also increasing steadily (Lee & McGovern, 2014; see also Mayr & Machin, 2012; Moore, 2014). Just as vital is to meet the potential and needs connected with the development of new media head-on. Running an interactive and constantly supplemented website, updating profiles on popular social portals and local newsletters and so forth are no longer manifestations of over-zealousness or novelty, but a prerequisite for public institutions which operate efficiently, effectively and are open to citizens' demands. At the same time, they represent a tremendous opportunity for those institutions to overcome the dominant role played by the traditional media in shaping their image.

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21 For instance, "They managed to issue a speeding fine to the driver of a stationary car. How on earth...? The owner of the car received a photo in the post and, sure enough, there was his car. The only thing is... it was on the back of a car carrier"; see Absurd z Pomorza (Z. W., 2014).

22 This was used in the findings of the report as an argument in favour of removing the guards' right to run photo radars. The amended regulations in this area came into force on 1st January 2016 Ustawa o zmianie ustawy - Prawo o ruchu drogowym i ustawy o strażach gminnych, 2015).

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