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FACEBOOK AS A SOURCE OF POLITICAL INFORMATION IN POLAND*

FACEBOOK JAKO ŹRÓDŁO INFORMACJI POLITYCZNEJ W POLSCE

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— ABSTRACT —

The aim of the paper is to study the role of Facebook as a source of political information for Polish media users. The study combines a survey, a content analysis of Polish-language news items disseminated through Facebook, and computational methods. Findings revealed that Facebook has already gained a position as a crucial agent of political communication across generations in Poland. Most Poles use social media for acquisition of information about politics at least once a day and Facebook is the most popular source among them, what is especially apparent among young people (18–25 years old). Friends and family play also an important role in this process as

— ABSTRAKT —

Celem artykułu jest analiza roli Facebooka jako źródła informacji politycznej w Polsce. W badaniu wykorzystano wyniki ankiety, analizę zawartości polskojęzycznych przekazów medialnych rozpowszechnionych w ramach portalu Facebook oraz metody obliczeniowe. Wyniki badania wykazały, że Facebook stał się ważnym źródłem informacji politycznej dla wszystkich pokoleń Polaków, w szczególności zaś dla najmłodszych dorosłych (18–25 lat). Większość użytkowników korzysta z mediów społecznościowych w celu zdobycia informacji o polityce przynajmniej raz dziennie, a Facebook jest dla nich najpopularniejszym źródłem takich informacji. Dużą rolę odgrywają

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either gatekeepers or opinion leaders. Additionally, our study revealed that topic (politics) and context (elections) matter when it comes to news consumption and news sharing on social media.

Keywords: media use; political information; Facebook; source of information; Poland

w tym procesie znajomi i rodzina, pełniąc funkcję pośredników. Ponadto nasze badanie wykazało znaczenie tematyki informacji (polityka) oraz kontekstu (wybory) dla konsumowania i udostępniania treści w mediach społecznościowych.

Słowa kluczowe: korzystanie z mediów; informacja polityczna; Facebook; źródło informacji; Polska

In the last three decades nothing has changed the media environment as much as digitization and social media (Ahlers, 2006; Van Aelst et al., 2017). In the vast majority of Western liberal democracies, the network is indicated as the main source of information for citizens, also about politics, or at least the role of television and the Internet may be considered as balanced (Newman et al., 2020). The transformation of the media logic into the network logic has changed the flow of information, the way it is selected, and the mutual relations between all types of media (Klinger & Svensson, 2015, 2020).

Central European democracies did not resist these changes, although their pace and dynamics were, for various reasons, slower than in the West due to the lower level of access to the Internet, among other factors (Newman et al., 2020). Poland, as the largest media market in the region, is an emblematic case that, due to its size, catalyzes many problems, processes, and phenomena generated by the dynamics of changes in the media system.

The Polish media system has been currently undergoing transformation, changing from the Hybrid Liberal to the Politicized Model (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2018). The decrease of the democracy index (EIU, 2021), accompanied by a politicization of the public media (Kinowska-Mazaraki, 2021) and a dynamic decline in press freedom rankings – from 19 in 2015 to 64 in 2021 (Reporters Without Borders, 2021), might lead to spotting ‘the safety valve’ in online and social media (by citizens, journalists, and politicians). In such an environment, the online media – with less legal and political control – appears as a forum for a free public debate and an opportunity for empowering citizens and bypassing traditional gatekeepers (Szpunar, 2013).

However, these assumptions were not positively verified, leaving the researcher’s hopes in the realm of unfulfilled myths (Elvestad & Philips, 2018). Negative global trends such as hate speech, fake news, and deep fake, trivialization,

astroturfing, the use of bots for propaganda purposes have affected the process of political communication with the use of Internet tools (see: Jakubowski, 2020).

In Poland, all these trends can be also found, and their intensity partially exceeds their presence in other countries (Bradshaw, Bailey, & Howard, 2021). Although Poland is still regarded as a country with a dominant role of television as the main source of knowledge about politics (Stoll, 2021), one can observe significant changes in the news media consumption in Poland in the last few years. Previous studies clearly showed that social media have been playing a more and more important role in shaping Polish people's media diet (Lakomy, 2014; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Newman et al., 2020; Castro et al., 2022).

In this paper, we aim to embed the use of social media as a source of political information in the context of a country representing so called 'flawed democracy', with a high level of political parallelism of the traditional media, high political pressure on the public electronic media, and low trust in the media. This study is the first step of research aiming at tracing specific features of dynamic changes occurring in the political information environment in Poland. First, we will present findings of a survey on the social media use patterns across a generation of Poles. Then, we will present findings of the study on Polish-language news items disseminated through Facebook and how they are viewed and shared by Facebook users.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND PREVIOUS STUDIES

The interest in political news consumption is driven by normative models of democracy and their demands upon citizens (Strömbäck, 2005) and observations that a higher level of political knowledge may translate into a greater social activity, more rational decision-making, learning, monitoring, and understanding of the political sphere (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2021).

Over the years, a significant part of research on political news consumption has been focused on the disproportionate 'power structure' in the triangle of political communication (media, politicians, and citizens) (Perloff, 1998). The situation has changed with the development of the Internet (Picone, 2016, 2017). Its strong interactive function increased the potential choice and empowered the recipient as an active information seeker (Pierson, Mante-Meijer, & Loos, 2011). Consequently, more recent concepts of *political information environment* focus on both supply and demand sides, with special attention being paid to citizens'

needs, expectations, interests, and preferences in obtaining political information (Esser et al., 2012; Van Aelst et al., 2017).

On the one hand, social media can be used in order to better inform citizens about politics. They serve as an additional channel of disseminating political information by traditional media outlets and an environment where political information and/or opinion is disseminated by citizens. On the other hand, some studies (Boukes, 2019; Lee & Xenos, 2019; van Erkel & Van Aelst, 2021; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2021) revealed a limited effectiveness of social media in gaining knowledge about politics by citizens, due to either self-selected or algorithmic personalization tendencies, or an information overflow. Also, political news posted and shared on social media by young media users seem to be of low cognitive value, since many of them are just memes about politics and politicians (Jakubowski, 2021).

A complex and interactive nature of social media led to a renaissance of multi-step models of the flow of political information (Weimann, 2017), with a key role of an intermediary agent. In this case, these are persons that are well-known to us, including friends, family members, and colleagues. Previous studies on the role of recommendations in marketing revealed that social media users trust primarily people they know (Turcotte et al., 2015). Also, they value the quality of relations with each other higher than a number of recommendations, which may be explained by the phenomenon of ‘a social proof’ (Hilverda, Kuttschreuter, & Giebels, 2018). Therefore, in order to understand a role of social media in political news consumption it is crucial to recognize *which platforms do citizens use to gain political information* (RQ1) and *who are the main intermediary agents in the process of news dissemination on social media platforms* (RQ2)?

The active role of citizens (media users) in news dissemination on social media has been also reflected in recent developments in studies on news value. While a classic approach (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O’Neill, 2017) was focused on what events are considered by the media as worth covering (*newsworthiness*), the revised version (Trilling, Tolochko, & Burscher, 2017) serves as a framework for the studies on what topics are viewed and shared the most (*shareworthiness*). Previous studies also showed that political engagement on platforms like Facebook or Twitter is more noticeable during the elections than non-elections periods (Lin et al., 2014; Stier et al., 2018; Kim, Jones-Jang, & Kenski, 2021). Against these observations, we aim to examine *to what extent does*

politics as a news topic make Facebook posts worth viewing and sharing compared to non-political news (RQ3) and how does context (elections) affect the viewing and sharing process of political news (RQ4)?

THE STUDY

In order to answer aforementioned research questions, the study combines a survey, a content analysis of news items delivered by media outlets via Facebook, and computational methods. First, to identify the social media platforms serving as sources of political information for the Polish society and main categories of intermediate agents, we relied on the data collected during the first wave of a two-wave panel survey fielded in 17 European countries, including Poland. The questionnaire was designed by scholars from the Network of European Political Communication Scholars (NEPOCS). The fieldwork was conducted by Dynata in December 2019 and quotas were used for age, gender, and metropolitan region. A total of $N = 1696$ respondents completed the online survey in Poland (in wave 1 used for the analyses in this study).

To study viewing and sharing of political and non-political news, the Condor release of the Facebook Privacy-Protected Full URLs Data Set (Messing et al., 2020), as made accessible by Social Science One in collaboration with Facebook, was used. It included URLs shared on Facebook at least 100 times publicly – in public pages or public groups – between January 1, 2017, and July 31, 2019. The process of extracting the data was carried out by the research group SHARE-NEWS: Predicting the Shareworthiness of ‘Real’ and ‘Fake’ News in Europe. Through the manual annotation, the use of natural language processing, and supervised machine learning, the domain, title, blurb, and the aggregate number of URLs views and shares were examined. As a result, a dataset of 184,771 URLs that lead to polish-language current affairs articles – including all soft news, hard news, and general news (Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010) – from 403 news-related domains has formed the basis for the analysis. The methodological details can be found in Trilling et al. (2022).

FINDINGS (1): A SURVEY

Social media as sources of political information in Poland

As we have already mentioned, Poland is among the countries with the highest share (77%) of people watching TV on a TV set every day or almost every day in the European Union countries in 2019 (Eurobarometer, 2019). Still, findings of the survey conducted in late 2019 showed that around 60% of the Polish respondents declared using social media as a source of political information every day or even several times a day. Only around 10% of the respondents claimed that they never used this kind of media to gather news (see: Table 1). Once we collect those who declare using online media as sources of information at least 5–6 days a week, we may argue that this type of media is frequently used by a majority (66.3%) of the Polish citizens.

Table 1. Frequency of the Social Media Use for Political News

<i>During a typical week, how often do you follow news on social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or WhatsApp)?</i>		
	N	%
Several times a day	495	29.2
Daily	494	29.1
5–6 days a week	136	8.0
3–4 days a week	154	9.1
1–2 days a week	123	7.3
More rarely	129	7.6
Never	165	9.7
TOTAL	1696	100.0

Source: NEPOCS (2019).

Not surprisingly, the youngest media users are those who gather political information from social media most frequently. Around 35% of them follow political news on social media several times a day and 36% of them do that every single day. However, around 30% of each other's age category, including those above 55 years old, are also frequent (daily) social media users. Still, around 20% of the eldest generation of the Polish people do not use this type of source of political information at all, while less than 2% of the youngest adults claim not to follow political news on social media (see: Table 2).

Table 2. Frequency of the Social Media Use for Political News across Age Groups (%)

<i>During a typical week, how often do you follow news on social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or WhatsApp)?</i>				
Age groups	18–25	26–40	41–55	55+
Several times a day	34.6	35.2	26.2	13.9
Daily	36.0	28.4	26.2	29.0
5–6 days a week	9.9	8.0	7.1	7.7
3–4 days a week	9.9	8.7	9.1	9.3
1–2 days a week	5.3	7.0	8.3	8.1
More rarely	2.8	7.4	9.1	10.4
Never	1.4	5.3	14.0	21.6

Source: NEPOCS (2019).

Our findings also showed significant differences in popularity of particular social media platforms among Polish people. Facebook seems to be the undeniable winner, with 89% of the respondents declaring reading political news on this platform (see: Table 3). The second most popular source is YouTube (almost 50% of the respondents claimed that they are watching political news on this platform), while Messenger, Twitter, and Instagram were mentioned by around one quarter of the respondents.

Table 3. Social Media Platforms as Sources of Political News

<i>Which social media, if any, provide political news that you read?</i>	
	%
Facebook	89.1
YouTube	48.6
Messenger	27.6
Twitter	25.9
Instagram	25.7
WhatsApp	12.9
Snapchat	6.6
Reddit	4.5

Source: NEPOCS (2019).

Again, these are the youngest adults who use Facebook as a source of political news most frequently (92.5%), but the other age cohorts also seem to consume political news on this platform. Namely, more than 80% of middle-age (41–55 years old) people and seniors (55+) read or watch political news on Facebook. At the same time, YouTube was mentioned by around half of the respondents between 18 and 40 years old, and by around 40% of the elder groups of respondents (see: Table 4). Instagram and Twitter seem to be less popular among the eldest group than among those who are less than 55 years old, while WhatsApp is less frequently used by the youngest cohort in comparison to others.

Table 4. Social Media Platforms as Sources of Political News across Age Groups (%)

<i>Which social media, if any, provide political news that you read?</i>				
	18–25	26–40	41–55	55+
Facebook	92.5	91.5	86.2	83.3
YouTube	53.0	52.0	44.3	41.1
Instagram	35.1	28.1	20.2	12.8
Twitter	30.1	24.6	27.3	20.7
Messenger	24.7	27.6	28.4	29.6
Snapchat	10.0	7.2	4.6	4.4
WhatsApp	5.7	12.6	14.9	19.7
Reddit	9.3	5.9	1.1	1.0

Source: NEPOCS (2019).

Since the online media serve as a platform of disseminating news by traditional media outlets, we examined a relation between using online tools for gaining information from non-net born media and using social media as a source of political information. The analysis showed a statistically significant correlation between a frequency of watching and reading news on the Internet and a frequency of following news on social media ($r = .216, p < .001$). There is also a significant correlation ($r = -.500, p < .001$) between a frequency of watching and reading news on the Internet and a subjective perception on knowing a lot about political issues – as compared to most people. Finally, there is a statistically significant correlation ($r = -.127, p < .001$) between a declared frequency of

following news on social media, e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or WhatsApp, and a subjective perception on knowing a lot about political issues – as compared to most people. The more often one follows news on social media, to a higher extent one agrees that, compared to others, one knows a lot about political issues.

Finally, social media provides an opportunity to find and follow political news coming from sources other than media outlets, that are friends, family members, colleagues, and others social media users. Findings of the survey study showed that Polish people claim coming across information on politics posted or shared rather by their closest friends or colleagues more often than post shared by politicians or journalists (see: Table 5).

Table 5. Sources of Information about Politics on the Social Media (%)

<i>When using social media, how often do you come across information about politics POSTED/ SHARED by...?</i>							
	Several times a day	Daily	5–6 days a week	3–4 days a week	1–2 days a week	Less often	Never
Your closest friends	4.7	15.7	10.4	14.5	19.2	23.3	12.1
Your family	1.9	9.6	7.7	11.8	18.5	32.2	18.5
Your colleagues	2.5	12.4	8.0	15.2	22.1	26.1	13.8
Journalist	2.4	11.4	8.7	14.5	18.3	27.6	17.2
Politicians and political parties	2.6	11.4	8.1	14.4	16.6	28.0	18.9
People sharing political information and messages opposed to your views	2.5	12.4	8.0	15.2	22.1	26.1	13.8
People sharing political information and messages in line with your political views	2.7	10.8	8.7	17.3	21.8	23.8	14.9

Source: NEPOCS (2019).

FINDINGS (2): FACEBOOK CONTENT ANALYSIS ENRICHED BY COMPUTATIONAL METHODS

In order to examine the role of Facebook in disseminating political information, a distinction between general categories of articles, that is, (1) devoted to political news, and (2) devoted to non-political news (crimes/disasters, culture, economy, entertainment/lifestyle, science/tech, sports, and others), was necessary. Findings obtained as a result of content analysis and the use of Machine Learning Classifier showed that the amount of political ($n = 82,258$) and non-political ($n = 84,671$) articles was roughly the same (see: Table 6).

Table 6. Number of Political and Non-Political Articles

	N	%
Political articles	82,258	49.3
Non-political articles	84,671	50.7

Source: SHARENEWS (2022).

Furthermore, by examining the median number of shares and views, it was possible to establish that political articles (med = 340) were shared just as often as non-political articles (med = 344) (see: Table 7). However, non-political articles (med = 135,522) were viewed twice as much as political articles (med = 79,428) (see: Table 7). To be more specific, although political articles received fewer shares than non-political articles in absolute numbers, they got relatively more shares considering that they were viewed appreciably less.

Table 7. The Median Number of Shares and Views of Political and Non-Political Articles

	Med
Shares of political articles	340
Shares of non-political articles	344
Views of political articles	79,428
Views of non-political articles	135,522

Source: SHARENEWS (2022).

Estimating separate regression models for each month paves the way to understanding how the viewing and sharing of political news develop over time, especially concerning events such as elections. Viewing of political articles increases steeply over time until the local election and then stays at a similar level: during the election months, a political article could expect to receive around 4000 views less than a non-political article. Furthermore, before the European elections, political articles were not viewed more, but they have already been quite popular: both two months before and two months after the European elections, a political article could expect to have about 1000 views less than a non-political article. Sharing, in contrast, does not seem to be clearly related to elections. On the one hand, the number of shares decreases slightly until the local elections. Nevertheless, during the election months, a political article could expect 10 to 15 shares more than a non-political article. On the other hand, political articles were moderately more shared before the European elections. However, during the election month, a political article could expect only barely 5 shares more than a non-political article. All things considered, in contrast to views where we can find a relatively consistent positive effect of election periods, there are no systematic patterns in the number of shares (see: Figure 1).

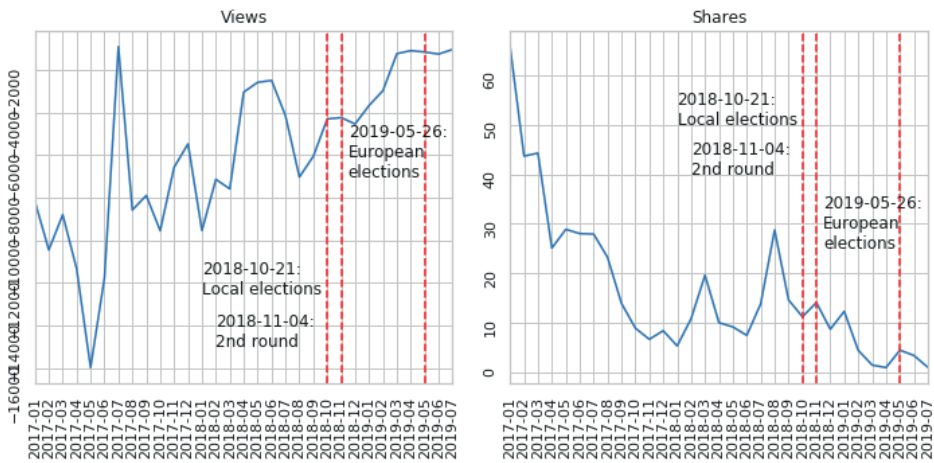


Figure 1. Views and Shares of Political Articles Over Time (Unstandardized Regression Coefficients for the Effect of Political Content)

Source: SHARENEWS (2022).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our findings showed that a majority of the respondents across age groups declared following information about politics on social media once a day or several times a day. One of the reasons of such a high amount of political news consumption online is technological development and a high number of mobile devices in Poland. Namely, 74.8% of Poles have a smartphone (Urząd Komunikacji Elektronicznej, 2019), 97% of them also use social media via mobile devices, and 96.2% of mobile device owners use Facebook, of which 49.3% use it only via smartphone (*Digital 2020: Poland*, 2020). With such technological support, Polish people indeed may get access to political information on a daily basis anywhere they are. Consequently, their patterns of political news consumption could be shifted from a limited (by place and time schedule) access to the news disseminated by traditional media to permanent access to political information (limited only by the access to devices and Internet connection).

Findings also showed that Facebook is an undisputed leader among social media platforms across all generations in terms of providing political information. Such a strong position of this channel might be due to its general popularity among the Polish society (14 million Facebook users in mid-2021; see: Internet World Stats, 2021) and a diversity of purposes one can use Facebook for. While other services are mainly used by Poles for direct communication (messaging apps) or following lifestyle matters (Instagram), Facebook remains a multi-themed channel. Its exceptional popularity among Poles also prompts politicians themselves to disseminate information which contributes to the increase in the supply of political content on Facebook.

Our study showed that in most age groups, friends and colleagues are those who are able to induce other Facebook users to consume political information. Therefore, we can argue that social media offer a hybrid political information environment with news on public affairs being filtered by personal networks. This observation goes alongside studies on the role of recommendations in marketing that revealed that social media users trust primarily people they know (Turcotte et al., 2015).

An observation on the predominant role of non-political actors in a process of disseminating political information leads us to a conclusion that one may observe a phenomenon of universalization of certain principles in the functioning of social media. Also, they make the category of 'friends on Facebook' an important link in the flow of political information (Weimann, 2017).

Interestingly, people sharing political information and messages opposed to one's views also play an important role in this process, being a daily/long-term source of information for other users of Facebook. This observation prompts researchers to question the filter-bubble concept, which raises more and more doubts in the area of political communication (Haim, Graefe, & Brosius, 2018).

The ambiguity of the results for viewing and sharing political and non-political news does not allow us to provide a straightforward picture of Poles' behavior on Facebook. Our findings showed that whether a piece of news is political or not plays a minor role within the context of the number of views. However, once political article is viewed, it is more likely to get shared than a non-political one. This might be surprising due to a strong reluctance of Poles to signature certain opinions with their own names and to declare their political preferences publicly: discussing politics with strangers is still perceived by many Poles as a taboo (Rogodzińska & Obrębska, 2018). Also, Polish people, in comparison to the social media users in other countries, are less eager to share information (*Digital 2020...*, 2020). Still, young social media users may be more willing to openly share their opinions on Facebook since they are more familiar with this media environment, and they feel more comfortable there. Finally, regardless of user age, it may be presumed that the pre-election period will intensify the process of viewing political news, which may be encouraging in the context of citizens' political engagement; however, it is impossible to determine how it will affect the sharing aspect.

The aforementioned findings lead us to a conclusion that Facebook has gained a position of an autonomous element of the Polish media system and a crucial agent of political communication. On the one hand, Facebook offers space and opportunity to gain and share political information in an interactive (intermediate) mode, with other people as agents of trust. On the other hand, features of this platform such as sorting, and reach algorithms can turn Facebook into a dangerous tool for manipulating public opinion. Therefore, some argue that changes in the area of legislation are necessary, preceded by in-depth research on the demand and supply side of information controlled by the private sector of the media and technology companies.

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