



# Central European Journal of Communication

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# Central European Journal of Communication

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## Editors' Introduction

One of the main challenges for communication scholars is the dynamic change in the media environment. The rapid development of media technology affects the media content suppliers and consumers. At the same time, political and economic contexts provide opportunities and threats to mass communication. The content of the 2023 Fall Issue of the Central European Journal of Communication discusses the diversity of factors that impact media performance.

We are still recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic and communication scholars are now making sense of the role media played in those unusual circumstances. More recently, another crisis, namely the war in Ukraine, harmed the relations between countries and cultures. The Russian invasion of Ukraine led to significant political and social turmoil, which is particularly acute in Europe. These shocks revealed the extent and harmful impact of disinformation and propaganda in the media, however we still lack nuanced reflection on the issues of mass communication malpractices.

Nevertheless, the academic community has captured the significance of digitalization. Despite some pessimistic prognoses, newspapers and magazines remain important segments of the media markets. By adapting social media to attract attention to their content and bond with the audience, many of the traditional media outlets reinvent themselves and reach new groups of readers. Changes in technology and their consequences require the adaptation of legal frameworks at both domestic and international level.

The 2023 Fall Issue of “The Central European Journal of Communication” (CEJC) collects and presents studies on all the aforementioned disputes. Written by scholars representing a broad scope of perspectives – from political communication to media market research and analyses of the legal aspect of the media – papers published in this Issue provide an overview of methods used in the field of communication.

In the first paper, Jaroslava Kaňková and Hajo Boomgaarden discuss the surge in vaccine opposition (anti-vaxxers) during the COVID-19 pandemic that has impeded the establishment of herd (group) immunity. Given the significant role of social media in fostering anti-vaccination communities, it is crucial to vigilantly track the discussions on these platforms to effectively counter anti-vaxxer sentiments and promote vaccination. This research utilizes computational content analysis, specifically employing topic modeling and time series analysis, to observe

anti-vaccination communities related to COVID-19 on Facebook in Czechia. In total, 18 topics were identified, with politics, governance, and international affairs emerging as the most prevalent subjects, while only 5 topics directly addressed COVID-19 issues. Conversations primarily centered around information and its credibility, with community members heavily relying on social media content and conspiracy websites, effectively sidelining scientific sources. The study underscores the necessity for continuous monitoring of anti-vaccination communities on social media and the development of impactful communication strategies to bolster vaccination efforts.

This Issue offers another COVID-19 related article that sought to discern the distinctive attributes of the infodemic phenomenon, using the tsunami of information that accompanied the 2020 COVID-19 epidemic as an illustrative example. Anna Miotk initiates the exploration by referencing the definition formulated by the World Health Organization in 2018, and additionally investigates the earliest scientific studies elucidating this phenomenon. Subsequently, by synthesizing findings from a query encompassing studies and expert opinions pertaining to the COVID-19 infodemic, the author delineates the primary features of the infodemic and their corresponding indicators. As a result of this inquiry, the author opts to introduce four supplementary features to the initial characteristics of the infodemic. This represents a novel approach to the subject, as the existing scientific literature on the matter lacks such comprehensive attributes of the infodemic, primarily concentrating on specific characteristics associated with the phenomenon.

Shifting our attention to the dissemination of (dis)information, the third article, by Davit Kutidze, discusses the ways, in which Russian propaganda exploits notions of freedom of information to disseminate disinformation, aiming to create confusion through the propagation of conspiracy theories and preventing societal consensus on any single issue. This tactic is a well-established method that can be applied in diverse countries and contexts. An examination of statements from Georgian authorities suggests a hypothesis that Russian propaganda methods have infiltrated the rhetoric of Georgia's ruling party, the Georgian Dream. Consequently, this paper focuses on scrutinizing the features of the government of Georgia's public communication through the lens of propaganda and endeavours to determine if its rhetoric mirrors the toolkit employed by Russian propaganda. The study reveals conspicuous parallels between the two aforementioned phenomena. The Georgian government's rhetoric involves vehement accusations against those critical of the authorities, instilling baseless fears among the populace, and shaping a negative agenda.

Zooming out of the political context, the Issue presents an article that maps out the iconography of the Women's press. The authors (Olga Dąbrowska-Cendrowska, Weronika Sałek, and Natalia Walkowiak) have conducted a study on Instagram

profiles belonging to women's magazines published in Poland, France, and the United Kingdom: *Twój Styl*, *Vogue PL*, *Marie Claire*, *Vogue FR*, *Vogue GB*, and *The Stylist*. A total of 464 posts published on these Instagram profiles in April 2022 underwent analysis. The research aims to highlight both similarities and differences in the modes of communication through Instagram profiles. This paper employs a combination of qualitative and quantitative content analysis methodologies, focusing on post types, their functions, and audience reactions to the content posted. The findings revealed that similarities exist among the profiles of magazines operating within specific media markets, with content and communication tailored to the respective countries in which the magazines are active. This study contributes to the academic literature on the integration of traditional media with new media as a response to media convergence.

The last article, by Agnieszka Grzesiok-Horosz, deals with the specificities of the contemporary audiovisual market. The rapid convergence that led to the decision to regulate the content of video-sharing platforms (VSPs) within the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) was prompted by the recognition that such platforms compete for the same viewers and revenue as other audiovisual media services. The need for coordination in legislation at the European level necessitated amendments to Polish law. This article primarily aims to present specific provisions of the AVMSD and Poland's Broadcasting Act regarding VSPs—an area of media policy that had previously remained beyond the scope of institutional intervention and regulatory constraints in the traditional media market. The central inquiry the author seeks to address is whether the measures applied to VSP providers are legitimate, necessary, and proportional. The study delves into the definition of video delivery services, a crucial aspect for imposing obligations on these service types.

This year's Spring Issue presented the nominees for the Karol Jakubowicz's Award of 2023—now in this Fall Issue we introduce the winner, Slavko Splichal. In this Issue we not only report on the Award Ceremony that took place on May 15, 2023, but we also publish an interview with Professor Slavko Splichal and a review of his awarded book titled "Datafication of Public Opinion and the Public Sphere: How Extraction Replaced Expression of Opinion". The publication discusses the contemporary issues of public opinion and publicness. During the interview with Professor Splichal, conducted by Gabriella Szabó, the contemporary dilemma of publicness, social media, opinion mining, and artificial intelligence is discussed.

At the end of the current Issue, we publish three more book reviews. The Issue also reports on three more events. First, Kristýna Kopřivová summarizes the "15 years of DTA" (Discourse Theoretical Analysis) online event which reflected the development and current status quo of Discourse Theory. Then, we report on the CEECOM Conference "The Threats, Challenges and Opportunities in the

Changing Central and Eastern European Media Environments” (Brno, Czechia, June 29–30, 2023) and the ECREA’s Political Communication Section Interim Conference “Navigating The Noise: Effective Communication For Solving Political Problems” (Berlin August 31 – September 1, 2023).

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# Mapping the COVID-19 Anti-Vaccination Communities on Facebook in Czechia

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a rise in opposition to vaccination, hindering herd immunity. As social media play a major role in the formation of anti-vaccination communities, it is critical to monitor the discourse on the platforms to effectively counter the negative sentiment and encourage people to vaccinate. This study employs computational content analysis, specifically topic modeling and time series analysis, to monitor the COVID-19 anti-vaccination communities on Facebook in Czechia. The analysis generated 18 topics with politics, governance, and international affairs being the most discussed, and only five dealt with issues directly related to COVID-19. Discussions about information and its credibility were prevalent, and members of these anti-vaccination communities relied heavily on social media content and conspiracy websites as sources of information, while neglecting scientific resources. The study highlights the need for ongoing monitoring of anti-vaccination communities on social media and the development of effective communication strategies to promote vaccination.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Czechia, anti-vaccination, Facebook, topic modeling

## INTRODUCTION

Although vaccines are considered one of the greatest inventions in history, having saved the lives of countless people, public skepticism toward vaccination has been increasing steadily in recent years, and the COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the process (Benoit & Mauldin, 2021). While vaccine hesitancy has been documented since the very first vaccinations (e.g., Hussain et al., 2018; Kinch, 2019), the internet and particularly social media arguably further exacerbated the problem (Kata, 2010). Since online information can significantly shape

health-related attitudes and behavior (Gray et al., 2005; Vaterlaus et al., 2015; Witteman & Zikmund-Fisher, 2012) there is a need for continuous examination of online vaccine-related narratives. Furthermore, Tomeny and colleagues (2017) argue that monitoring the contemporary vaccination discourse on social media is essential to successfully counter the anti-vaccination sentiment and promote vaccination. This need is further emphasized by the new wave of anti-vaccination sentiment brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study addresses this gap by uncovering the topics discussed by opponents of the COVID-19 vaccination on Facebook in Czechia, using methods of computational content analysis. Czechia has been widely labeled as one of the countries most affected by the pandemic (Kottasová, 2021). With two-thirds of its citizens fully vaccinated against COVID-19, Czechia lies between the Western European countries with high vaccination rates (70-80%) and the Central and Eastern Europe ones with much lower rates ranging from 30% in Bulgaria to a high of 65% in both Czechia and Hungary (ECDC, 2022). The findings of this study can potentially aid public health agencies in the development of effective campaigns endorsing vaccination. Moreover, as this study also tracks the changes in activity of these communities over time, the results could assist agencies in predicting events that cause activity spikes, further aiding in the development of strategies to counter increased anti-vaccination sentiment (Lyu et al., 2021).

## VACCINE HESITANCY

MacDonald (2015) defines *vaccine hesitancy* as a variety of attitudes ranging from a mere delay to upfront refusal of vaccine uptake. Generally, the gravest concerns of people holding these attitudes, often referred to as “anti-vaxxers” (Benoit & Mauldin, 2021), are about safety and possible side-effects (Ali & Celentano, 2017). Although a certain level of reluctance to the act of inoculation has been present since the start of the inoculation programmes (e.g., Hussain et al., 2018; Kinch, 2019), the boom of the modern anti-vaccination movement is often linked to the infamous research by Wakefield et al. (1998), who linked vaccination to autism. Although this claim has now been long disputed and the above cited paper retracted, many anti-vaccination activists still base their arguments on this work (Hussain et al., 2018) and meanwhile the WHO has listed vaccine hesitancy as one of the greatest threats to global health (WHO, 2019). Arguably, the threat has been even more enhanced with the advent of COVID-19 and the associated new wave of vaccine resistance. The number of people who deny receiving the recommended vaccination is constantly increasing, posing a progressively greater threat to public health and safety (Benoit & Mauldin, 2021). The most frequently reported reasons for COVID-19 vaccine refusal are safety concerns,

uncertainty caused by rapid development of the vaccines, and fear of side effects (Dror et al. 2020; Lin et al., 2020).

The relevance of vaccine hesitancy and the need to address it is further emphasized by the fact that future pandemics comparable to COVID-19 are relatively likely, and the probability of their occurrence is gradually increasing (Marani et al., 2021). While most people would still get recommended vaccinations and can thus be considered supporters of the practice (Burki, 2020), it is still essential to reach certain levels of vaccination rates to create and maintain herd immunity.

## **HEALTH-RELATED MISINFORMATION AND THE ANTI-VACCINATION MOVEMENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

Trust in traditional information sources is declining (Sylvia Chou & Gaysynsky, 2020), leading to an increased reliance on online channels for health information (e.g., Chou et al., 2018; Zhao & Zhang, 2017). However, health-related information found online often lack veracity and quality (Benoit & Mauldin, 2021; Zhao & Zhang, 2017). Social media is particularly problematic with exchanges of information happening in real-time with very little or no supervision (Chou et al., 2018; Witteman & Zikmund-Fisher, 2012). Without a vigilant approach and constant verification, users can easily fall victim to the spread of health misinformation on social media. Many users view the internet as a reliable source of health-related advice, which could lead to various health risks (Cavallo et al., 2014) as online information can shape health-related attitudes and behavior (Gray et al., 2005; Vaterlaus et al., 2015) and the overall health literacy of the population (Benoit & Mauldin, 2021).

Generally, research identifies two main factors contributing to social media's success in polarizing public opinion on vaccination. The first factor is psychological, as individuals tend to seek out and interact with content that aligns with their existing beliefs and attitudes, leading to confirmation and availability biases (Klapper, 1960; Spohr, 2017; Stroud, 2007). Secondly, the personalization algorithms used by social media platforms lead to echo chambers, in which users are surrounded by like-minded individuals and receive, almost exclusively, information that reinforces their views (Pariser, 2011; Rader & Gray, 2015; Spohr, 2017; Witteman & Zikmund-Fisher, 2012).

The spread of false and misleading information is also a major feature of the anti-vaccination movement. Scholars agree that the internet, and social media in particular, provide fertile ground for the anti-vaccination sentiment to spread more widely than previously (Hoffman et al., 2019; Kata, 2012; Smith & Graham, 2019). Social media users prove this expansion by increasingly displaying skepticism towards vaccination (Hamplová, 2021). Notably, most of the vaccine-related

information on social media features negative sentiment towards vaccination (Benoit & Mauldin 2021). Moreover, anti-vaccination content generally receives higher user engagement on social media compared to content in favor of the practice (Basch & MacLean, 2019). Recently, the anti-vaccination pages on social networks have been estimated to have around 58 million followers worldwide (Armitage, 2021), and high social media dependency is considered one of the main predictors of COVID-19 vaccine avoidance (Allington et al., 2021). Despite the prominence of online anti-vaccination communities, their discourses and characteristics are still not well understood (Smith & Graham, 2019). Consequently, there is a critical need to monitor and understand anti-vaccination communities on social media and their discourses, to effectively counter anti-vaccination sentiment and promote vaccination (Smith & Graham, 2019; Tomeny et al., 2017; Witteman & Zikmund-Fisher, 2012). Based on these premises, we posed the first of three research questions (RQ):

**RQ1:** What are the topics discussed in Czech COVID-19 anti-vaccination communities on social media?

Anti-vaccination communities on social media have grown significantly since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Burki, 2020). Experts agree that opponents of vaccination managed to successfully seize the opportunity provided by the pandemic and further undermine the already fragile trust of society in vaccination (Hamplová, 2021). It has been debated that misinformation about COVID-19 vaccination is spread on the Czech internet mostly by websites and online users with connections to Russia (Hamplová, 2021). Recent evidence demonstrates that many of the most prominent Czech COVID-19 anti-vaccination communities shifted their focus to pro-Russian narratives immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Čeští Elfové, 2022b; ČTK, 2022b), which suggests that external events influenced the discourse of these communities. To delve deeper into this phenomenon and uncover the specific events and context that trigger such shifts, we pose the second of three research questions (RQ):

**RQ2:** How did the quantity of published posts and topics discussed in the Czech COVID-19 anti-vaccination communities on social media change over time?

Furthermore, members of anti-vaccination communities rarely use scientific sources to support their claims (Kata, 2012; Yiannakoulias et al., 2019), and a significant portion of online health-related information is often found to lack veracity and quality (Benoit & Mauldin, 2021; Zhao & Zhang, 2017). Generally, webpages promoting anti-vaccination views typically score lower on quality indicators compared to those advocating vaccination (Sak et al., 2015). Moreover, anti-vaccination comments on social media frequently feature conspiracy theories and misinformation, indicating a lack of trust in scientific sources (Klimiuk et al., 2021). Therefore, considering the evident disconnect between

the anti-vaccination discourse and scientific evidence, we argue that a thorough examination of information sources of the anti-vaccination communities is crucial. This approach is essential not only for understanding the persistence and spread of vaccination-related misinformation in these communities but also for developing effective strategies to counteract this trend. Additionally, the information sources of anti-vaccination communities in Czechia have not yet been empirically studied. Consequently, this forms the basis for the third of the three research questions:

**RQ3:** What informational sources are shared among the Czech COVID-19 anti-vaccination communities on social media?

## THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN CZECHIA

Czechia has been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic with more than 42,000 deaths (Komenda et al., n.d.). Despite initial success in managing the spread of the virus, the healthcare system was overwhelmed as hospitalizations surged. As of December 2021, 19% of the Czech population was strongly against, and 6% doubtful of, the COVID-19 vaccines (STEM, 2021). The Czech government previously attempted to mandate COVID-19 vaccinations for citizens older than 60 years, but the decree was later repealed by the new government (Nohl, 2022). As of February 2023, 64.5% of Czechs were fully vaccinated. While since the beginning of 2022, the number of infected, hospitalized and deceased patients has been continuously declining (Our World in Data, n.d.), Skalický (2022) argues the necessity to continue to intensively promote COVID-19 vaccination and persuade the unvaccinated to change their stance.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

To answer the research questions, a large-scale automated content analysis of publicly accessible Facebook posts was performed using the R programming language (R Core Team, 2022). Subsequently, the outputs of the computational content analysis were qualitatively interpreted (Günther & Quandt, 2015).

Facebook was selected as the most used social network in Czechia, with more than 50% of the population using it (StatCounter Global Stats, 2022). Data was accessed via CrowdTangle<sup>1</sup>. The purpose of the study was to analyze the characteristics of the social media communities that are explicitly against COVID-19 vaccination. On Facebook, these communities usually gather

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<sup>1</sup> Meta's tool for analysis of social media data: <https://www.crowdtangle.com/>

in groups, or their members follow specific pages. To identify these communities, a Facebook search for public groups and pages was employed using keywords (in Czech) “*covid vaccination*”, “*COVID-19 vaccination*”, “*anti-vaccination*”, “*unvaccinated*”, “*against vaccination*”. Since anti-vaccination communities on social media are usually heavily interconnected (Smith & Graham, 2019), the snowball sampling method was also used to identify additional communities. The content of the identified communities was cursorily read to verify their resistance to COVID-19 vaccination. The study only selected relatively large groups with 3k minimum of members/followers (See Table 1).

Table 1: Analyzed Anti-vaccination Facebook Pages and Groups

Type of Facebook Account	Name in Czech	Name in English	Number of Followers/ Members (k = 1000)*
Page	Otevřeme Česko	Let's open the Czech Republic	89,7k
Page	Jana Peterková	Jana Peterková	43,8k
Page	Zdravé Fórum	<i>Health Forum</i>	28,7k
Group	Češi, táhněme za jeden provaz	Czechs, let's pull together	34,4k
Group	NEOČKOVANÍ CZ, SK	UNVACCINATED, CZ, SK	23,8k
Group	Na svobodu nám nesahejte! CZ SK jednotně!	Don't interfere with our freedom! CZ SK united	16,2k
Group	Neočkovaní	Unvaccinated	3,4k
Group	NEOČKOVANÍ	UNVACCINATED	3.k

Key: CZ—Czechia; SK—Slovakia; \*As of February 2022

Source: authors' own research

The study collected the textual data of all unique posts (n=433,191) in the selected groups and pages posted between 27.12.2020 and 23.2.2022. The beginning of the time frame corresponds to the day the COVID-19 vaccine was first administered in Czechia (Úřad vlády ČR, 2020).

## TOPIC MODELING

To answer RQ1 topic modeling approach was employed. The data was pre-processed (Günther & Quandt 2015) by removing digits, punctuation, symbols, URLs, stop words, and the most frequent Czech first names<sup>2</sup>. The texts were then tokenized, lemmatized, and underwent relative pruning. The applied pre-processing procedure was supported in the available literature (see Albalawi et al., 2020; Maier et al., 2020; Smith & Graham, 2019).

2 [https://krestnijmeno.prijmeni.cz/oblast/3000-ceska\\_republika/](https://krestnijmeno.prijmeni.cz/oblast/3000-ceska_republika/)

Silge and Robinson (2017) define topic modeling as „a statistical method for identifying words in a corpus of documents that tend to co-occur together and as a result share some sort of semantic relationship” (p. 211). Therefore, the term *topic* in this sense refers to a set of words that are semantically linked based on their co-occurrence in text. The use of topic modeling has been introduced to identify topics „hidden” in large unstructured datasets (Albalawi et al., 2020; Günther & Quandt, 2015).

Roberts et al. (2014) introduced Structural Topic Models (STM) with the corresponding *stm* package (Roberts et al., 2019). STM differs from commonly used Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) (Albalawi et al., 2020; Jockers & Thalken, 2020; Silge & Robinson, 2017) by enabling inclusion of document-level covariates (metadata) in model training, thereby enhancing topic interpretability and inference (Roberts et al., 2019). This approach was selected for its ability to analyze the relationship between topics and time and its effectiveness with non-English social media data (Lucas et al., 2015).

When running an STM model, the number of  $k$  topics is not a priori known, as the algorithm itself cannot infer the number of topics from the presented data (Jockers & Thalken, 2020; Roberts et al., 2019, 2014). Based on recommendations of Silge (2018) and Roberts et al. (2019), models with values for  $k$  ranging from 10 to 50 were trained, and the held-out likelihood, semantic coherence, and residual dispersion were calculated. Results suggested the optimal number of  $k$  topics to be 18 to 19. Semantic coherence and exclusivity were also calculated, with topics 18 to 20 presenting an optimal trade-off between the two measures. Therefore, the *stm* model was fitted with 18 to 19 topics. The goal was to achieve the most meaningful and interpretable results. Junk terms were manually removed during this process, resulting in a final determined number of 18 topics, providing valuable outputs for further interpretation.

Once the model was fitted, the top terms for each topic based on their probability of appearing within the topic were investigated (per-topic-per-word probabilities *beta*). Additionally, *gamma* probabilities, indicating the per-document-per-topic probability (Silge and Robinson 2017), were generated, and the messages with the highest probability for each topic were checked. Based on the outputs of these steps, each topic was qualitatively labeled. The resulting labels for each topic are shown in Table 2.

The applied STM model included a topical prevalence parameter, which indicates to what extent a topic contributes to a document (Roberts et al., 2019). In this case the date an analyzed Facebook post was shared was selected as covariate, and the relationship between topics and metadata was visualized.

In addition, changes in the number of published posts were analyzed and visualized using the *dplyr* (Wickham et al., 2022) and *ggplot2* packages (Wickham, 2016), with dates of high activity examined in news media archives for context.

**Table 2: Topic Labels**

Topic Number	Topic Title
1	Patriotism and the fight for truth
2	Legislature and government measures
3	COVID-19 testing
4	Society and media
5	Contemporary world affairs
6	Compulsory vaccination
7	Demonstrations for freedom
8	Distrust in politicians and their plan to instill fear in people
9	Protection of children: face masks and testing at school
10	The virus: numbers of infected, hospitalized and deceased patients
11	Sharing (medical) information
12	Junk topic
13	Knowing the truth
14	Safety and efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccines
15	Czech Republic as a state, international politics
16	Choosing what to believe
17	Finding answers and evidence
18	Recommending sources of information and highlighting the need to act

Source: authors' own research

## SHARED LINKS

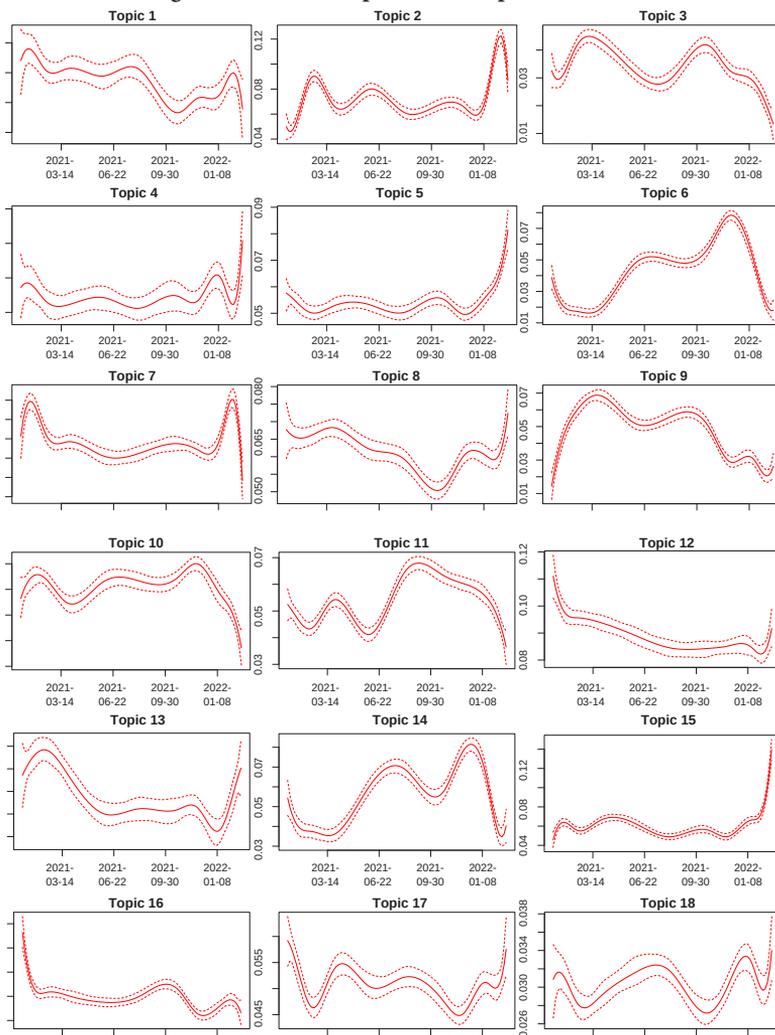
In the specified time frame, 143,896 unique URLs were shared 307,060 times. The URLs were manually assigned a website name and the overall sum of shares per website was calculated. Given the large data volume, only the names of the 327 most frequently shared pages were manually determined. The website names were obtained from the page source code, and the type of website was determined based on classification of the Foundation for Independent Journalism (Nadační fond nezávislé žurnalistiky, 2022) or self-description.

## RESULTS

### DISCUSSED TOPICS AND THEIR DEVELOPMENT OVER TIME

Each generated topic and its prevalence in the examined time period is discussed below (see Figure 1 for over time plots).

Figure 1: Relationship between Topics and Time



Source: authors' own research

### **TOPIC 1: PATRIOTISM AND THE FIGHT FOR TRUTH**

The topic includes terms like “truth“, “to fight“, “power“, but also the Czech and Slovak flag emojis. Moreover, the Czech populist party Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), characterized by far-right nationalism, anti-establishment rhetoric, euroscepticism, and xenophobia (Kubát & Hartlínski, 2019), is mentioned. Support of the party has been associated with increased vulnerability to belief in COVID-19-related misinformation (Akademie věd České republiky, 2022). Discussion of this topic decreased steadily until the beginning of October 2021, which coincided with the Czech Parliamentary elections. The topic’s prevalence has been increasing since then, with a peak in February 2022 followed by a sharp decline.

### **TOPIC 2: LEGISLATURE AND GOVERNMENT MEASURES**

This topic included terms related to the legislature, civic rights, anti-pandemic measures taken by the government, the Ministry of Health or the Chamber of Deputies. It is evident that two major peaks in salience occurred. First, the topic was discussed more than usual in February 2021 and then the highest peak can be seen in late January/early February 2022, which coincides with the Chamber of Deputies’ passage of a new pandemic law. The law faced strong opposition, with arguments centered around citizen freedom and rights restrictions (Pika & ČTK, 2022).

### **TOPIC 3: COVID-19 TESTING**

This topic focused on COVID-19 tests, featuring terms like „test“, „virus“, „positive“, „PCR“, and „infected“. The prevalence of this topic over time features two peaks in March and November 2021. The first peak was during the strictest lockdown when regular COVID-19 tests were mandated for all employees and entrepreneurs (ČT, 2021). The second peak coincided with the introduction of measures that restricted access to certain public spaces for unvaccinated citizens (ČTK, 2021b).

### **TOPIC 4: SOCIETY AND MEDIA**

This topic featured mostly terms that seemed to relate to the media and its effects on society, such as „society“, „system“, „message“, „medium“, „source“, or „problem“. The prevalence of this topic remained constant, except for a sharp rise at the end. The increased discussion of media and its effects on society occurred in February 2022, when the pandemic law was a topic of widespread discussion in the Czech media.

### **TOPIC 5: CONTEMPORARY WORLD AFFAIRS**

This topic contained terms like „war”, „money”, „state”, „change”, and „world”. Labelling was challenging due to its context-dependent nature and was thus informed by reports of the civic movement Čeští Elfové. This topic was discussed minimally during the observation period, except for January and February 2022. During this time, attention shifted away from COVID-19 to the situation in Ukraine. The monitored groups were supportive of Russia and critical of the Western response (Čeští Elfové, 2022a, 2022c).

### **TOPIC 6: COMPULSORY VACCINATION**

This topic focused on terms related to compulsory vaccination, possibly in relation to one’s job, featuring words like „vaccination”, „compulsory”, „to refuse”, „employee”, and „work”. Regular discussions on this topic began in spring 2021 and peaked in November/December 2021, when the Czech government announced its plan to mandate COVID-19 vaccination for citizens over 60 years and certain key infrastructure professions (ČTK, 2021a). However, this regulation was later repealed in January 2022 by the new government (Nohl, 2022).

### **TOPIC 7: DEMONSTRATIONS FOR FREEDOM**

This topic featured terms like „freedom”, „demonstration”, „police”, „support”, „event” or „fight”. Members of the analyzed communities probably not only discussed these events, but also promoted them, as the featured terms include names of places („Prague”, „square”, „town/city”) as well as time indicators („hour”). During the COVID-19 pandemic in Czechia, demonstrations and protests became frequent occurrences. That was also demonstrated by the prevalence of the topic in the analyzed time during which the demonstrations were highly debated. The first peak occurred in January 2021, with numerous protests held across the country against COVID-19 vaccination, anti-epidemic measures, and alleged restrictions on human rights and freedoms (ČRo, 2022). The second peak was in early February 2022, when protests were held against the adoption of the pandemic law (Pika & ČTK, 2022).

### **TOPIC 8: DISTRUST IN POLITICIANS AND THEIR PLAN TO INSTILL FEAR IN PEOPLE**

This topic featured words related to governance and politics such as „government” or „politician” but also terms that suggest an alleged plan of these entities to instill fear in people, for example „fear”, „need”, „plan”, „to believe” or „mankind”. The (offensive) term „sheep” is also present among the highest probability terms, used to label people who comply with COVID-19 measures and vaccination as blindly following without questioning. This topic’s prevalence

steadily declined from spring 2021 to its lowest point in October 2021, but has since been increasingly discussed again.

### **TOPIC 9: PROTECTION OF CHILDREN: FACE MASKS AND TESTING AT SCHOOLS**

This topic focuses on mandatory face masks and COVID-19 testing for children at schools. The community expressed displeasure with the implemented rules, and terms like „to protect”, „to defend”, and „health” were present. The topic was heavily discussed in April 2021 when children returned to school with regular testing and respiratory protection (ČRo, 2021b). The discussion slightly declined but peaked again in September 2021 with the new school year.

### **TOPIC 10: THE VIRUS: NUMBERS OF INFECTED, HOSPITALIZED AND DECEASED PATIENTS**

This topic featured terms like „covid”, „disease”, „hospital”, „case”, „patient” or „death”. The word „fraud” was also featured amongst the terms with high probability of appearing within the topic, arguably suggesting distrust in the officially reported COVID-19 statistics, and perhaps even in the existence of the virus or its severity. This topic remained prevalent throughout the analyzed period except for a slight decline in April 2021 possibly due to the government’s relaxation of anti-epidemic measures (ČT, 2021). A sharp decline occurred towards the end of 2021, possibly due to waning interest in COVID-19 and the emergence of other issues (e.g., the rising tensions between Russia and Ukraine) (Čeští Elfové, 2022c, 2022a).

### **TOPIC 11: SHARING MEDICAL INFORMATION**

This topic featured terms related to sharing medical information, such as „doctor”, „expert”, „pandemic”, „medical”, „to share” or „to spread”. Users were likely discussing and sharing videos or interviews of medical professionals. The topic peaked in April 2021 before declining in May. This period correlates with the so-called “hard lockdown” (ČT, 2021). It started to escalate again in late August and early September 2021 and has been slowly declining since then.

### **TOPIC 12: JUNK TOPIC**

This topic was determined to be a junk topic as it fulfilled the conditions stated by Nikolenko et al. (2016).

### **TOPIC 13: KNOWING THE TRUTH**

This topic features terms like „to know”, „to see”, „fact”, „really”, or „clear”, indicating discussions about knowing and realizing what is true or what is not. The discussion of this topic was the highest in February/March 2021 when the vaccination of the elderly and medical staff took place and was followed by the

hard lockdown (MZČR, n.d.). Thereafter, the topic became less and less discussed reaching its lowest prevalence point at the end of the year, followed by a sharp increase in January 2022. This again correlates with the anti-vaccination communities turning their attention to the rising tensions between Russia and Ukraine.

#### **TOPIC 14: SAFETY AND EFFICACY OF THE COVID-19 VACCINES**

This topic focused on COVID-19 vaccines' safety and efficacy, indicated by terms like „vaccine”, „immunity”, „safety”, „effect”, and „Pfizer”. Discussions peaked during summer 2021 as vaccination became available to different age groups, arguably leading to perceived pressure to vaccinate. However, the topic was most discussed in November/December 2021 after the government announced new measures to prevent unvaccinated individuals from accessing restaurants and other public spaces (ČTK, 2021b).

#### **TOPIC 15: CZECH REPUBLIC AS A STATE, INTERNATIONAL POLITICS**

This topic focused on the Czech Republic as a state and international politics, with keywords including „state”, „Czech”, „citizen”, and „EU”, „USA”, „Russia”. The topic gained attention in February 2022 when the anti-vaccination communities shifted their focus from COVID-19 to international affairs, particularly the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

#### **TOPIC 16: CHOOSING WHAT TO BELIEVE**

This topic featured keywords such as „group”, „to think”, „choice”, „to vote/to choose”, „opinion”, „choice” or „attention/beware”, possibly relating to the discussion about choosing what to believe. The topic was most frequently discussed at the beginning of 2021 and remained constant for the rest of the observed period, except for a drop in November/December 2021, when a steep increase in prevalence was detected for other topics leading to the neglect of this one.

#### **TOPIC 17: FINDING ANSWERS AND EVIDENCE**

This topic included terms such as „time”, „question”, „to exist”, „to find”, „to prove”, „answer” or „proof/evidence”. The phrase stating that time will tell where the truth lies was common. In terms of the prevalence of the topic, fluctuations occurred all throughout the observed period. There were two substantial drops, in February/March 2021 and then in November of the same year, while the topic was the most prevalent in December 2021 and February 2022.

## TOPIC 18: RECOMMENDING SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND HIGHLIGHTING THE NEED TO ACT

The final topic included terms such as „information”, „need”, „link”, „to recommend”, „page”, „necessary”, or „to act”. As for the previous topic, fluctuations in the prevalence were relatively frequent. The first major drop occurred in February/March 2021, when the strictest lockdown took place in Czechia (MZČR, n.d.). Hence, other topics were the focus of discussions of anti-vaccination communities. The topic was then heavily discussed over the summer 2021 until dropping again in October when the elections to the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic 2021 were held (ČSÚ, 2021).

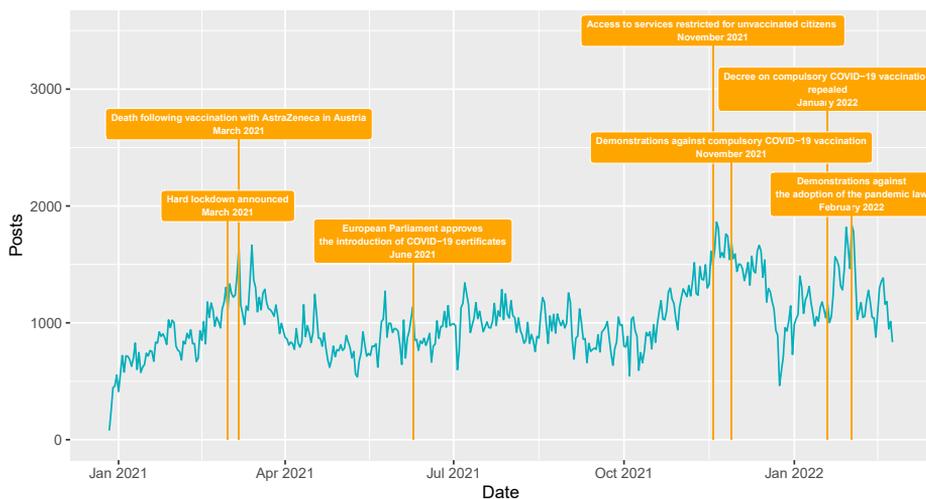
The identified topics fall into thematic clusters. The first cluster revolves around government and health policies, covering legislative measures, compulsory vaccination, and protection of children. These discussions highlight the tension between public health policies and perceived infringement on personal freedoms. The second cluster focuses on public perception and societal responses, including media influence, freedom demonstrations, and distrust in politicians, reflecting skepticism towards official narratives. These topics' prevalence fluctuates with key events like elections, legislative changes, or international events, showing a reactive, evolving discourse. The third cluster centers on information dissemination and truth-seeking, involving topics on sharing medical information and seeking alternative explanations and evidence, indicating a community questioning mainstream narratives and seeking alternative explanations.

## DEVELOPMENT OF FACEBOOK ACTIVITY OVER TIME

The number of posts in the Facebook communities over time are shown in Figure 2.

The graph indicates that peaks in activity can be linked to specific pandemic-related events in Czechia. Two time periods stood out. The first occurred in March 2021 when the strictest lockdown of the pandemic began in Czechia and health complications associated with the AstraZeneca vaccine were reported (ČRo, 2021a). The second was in autumn 2021 when the government announced restrictions for unvaccinated citizens, regular testing for unvaccinated employees, and prepared a law on compulsory COVID-19 vaccination (ČTK, 2021a, 2021b). A sharp drop occurred in December 2021, followed by a peak in February 2022 when the government's amendment of the pandemic law was debated by the Chamber of Deputies, accompanied by large demonstrations (Pika & ČTK, 2022).

Figure 2: Relationship between Number of Published Posts and Time



Source: authors' own research

## SHARED SOURCES OF INFORMATION

To address RQ3, we identified the 20 most shared websites, their types, and share proportions (see Table 3). The majority of shared links (72.089%) featured the Facebook domain, followed by YouTube at 4.222%. Eight of the top 20 shared websites were classified as news websites and another eight as conspiracy or anti-system servers. One of these, Aeronet, appeared on the list of misinformation websites, to which access was blocked in February 2022 following governmental recommendation due to concerns about its potential impact on Czech national security amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine (ČTK, 2022a).

Table 3: The 20 Most Shared Websites in the Analyzed Communities

Website Name	Website Type	N	%
Facebook	Social media	221357	72.089%
YouTube	Social media/Video platform	12965	4.222%
Novinky.cz	News	4607	1.500%
Parlamentní listy	News	3894	1.268%
Seznam Zprávy	News	3485	1.135%
CNN Prima News	News	3060	.997%
CZ24.NEWS	Conspiracy/antisystem	2448	.797%
Otevři svou mysl	Conspiracy/antisystem	2418	.787%
Aeronet	Conspiracy/antisystem	2177	.709%

Website Name	Website Type	N	%
iDNES.cz	News	2133	.695%
Rumble	Social media/Video platform	1463	.476%
Aktuálně.cz	News	1235	.402%
Inadhled	Conspiracy/antisystem	1121	.365%
Echo24	News	1109	.361%
Badatel.net	Conspiracy/antisystem	1105	.360%
AC24	Conspiracy/antisystem	1003	.327%
Odysee	Social media/Video platform	803	.262%
TN.cz	News	799	.260%
tadesco.org	Conspiracy/antisystem	778	.253%
Volný Blok	Political party	750	.244%

Source: website type assigned based on Nadační fond nezávislé žurnalistiky (2022)

## DISCUSSION

This study investigated Facebook communities opposing COVID-19 vaccination in Czechia, focusing on discussed topics and frequently shared information sources over time.

In total, 18 topics were identified of which five related to information and its credibility (Topics 11, 13, 16, 17, 18). To some degree, these topics can be considered overlapping. Previous research suggests that questioning information credibility is the most common argument of both anti- and pro-vaccination communities in social media discussions (Jenkins & Moreno, 2020). Moreover, users' difficulty in assessing source credibility contributes to the widespread anti-vaccination sentiment on social media (Puri et al., 2020; Salmon et al., 2005). Surprisingly, only five topics dealt with issues directly related to COVID-19 as a disease, including testing, vaccination, health measures and infection rates (Topics 3, 6, 9, 10, 14). Many topics were related to politics, governance, and international affairs (Topics 1, 2, 5, 7, 8, 15), covering discussions on patriotism, citizenship, legislation, demonstrations, and international issues.

As for the development of the prevalence of the topics over time, most fluctuations can be explained by the contemporary context. Interestingly, despite the study's timeframe not covering Russia's invasion of Ukraine, discussions related to tensions between the countries were prominent from early 2022, with COVID-19 anti-vaccination communities turning their attentions away from vaccination and focusing on support of Russia (Čeští Elfové, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; ČTK, 2022b)

Furthermore, this study showed that Facebook and, to a lesser extent, YouTube content was frequently shared in the COVID-19 anti-vaccination communities, echoing Chiou and Tucker's (2018) findings on childhood vaccine opponents. Relying on social media content as an information source was a concern due to the prevalence of unlabeled and unremoved misinformation (Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2020). Other common sources were news or conspiracy and anti-system websites, aligning with research indicating prominence of misinformation and conspiracy thinking in the anti-vaccination communities on social media (e.g., Kata, 2010; Smith & Graham, 2019). Additionally, our findings support existing research that online anti-vaccination content often lacks scientific backing, relying on anecdotal narratives instead (e.g., Kata, 2012; Yiannakoulias et al., 2019).

This study is not without limitations. First, the methodology only explores topics, not the specific arguments against vaccination. Moreover, although the terms within topics indicate the tonality in which the topic is discussed; it is not possible to reliably determine the attitudes of the discussants. Also, while computer-assisted text analysis is efficient and reliable, it has limitations, and results' validity can be questioned (Zamith & Lewis, 2015). The results of topic modeling were interpreted by a single researcher, which could introduce subjectivity. Despite these limitations, this study represents an important step in understanding social media's role in the anti-vaccination movement and offers detailed insights into Czechia's COVID-19 anti-vaccination Facebook communities.

The findings of this study present implications for various stakeholders, including public health agencies, policymakers, and social media platforms. Specifically, the insights revealed by this study could be leveraged to develop targeted communication strategies to counter misinformation and address the specific concerns prevalent in the anti-vaccination communities. Moreover, this research underscores the importance of developing more effective mechanisms for identifying and mitigating misinformation spread on social media.

In conclusion, this study provides detailed insights into the dynamics of Czech anti-vaccination social media communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. It advances the field by not only exploring the topics of discussion but also their evolution over time, offering a comprehensive overview of how these conversations shift in response to external events. Future research should aim for more advanced analysis of social media vaccination discourse and its impact on public health.

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# Infodemic – “Epidemic of Rumours”. The Characteristic Features of the Phenomenon on the Example of the Infodemic Accompanying COVID-19 in 2020

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**Abstract:** The purpose of the analysis described in the text was to identify the characteristic features of the infodemic as a phenomenon on the example of the infodemic accompanying the COVID-19 epidemic in 2020. The author began with the definition developed by the World Health Organization in 2018, and traced the earliest scientific studies describing the phenomenon. Then, based on results of the examination of the studies and experts’ comments relating to the COVID-19 infodemic, the author described the main features of infodemic and their indicators. As a result of the investigation, the author decided to add four additional features to the initial infodemic characteristics. This is a new approach to the topic: the scientific literature on the does not contain such detailed characteristics of infodemic and focuses rather on selected phenomena associated with it.

**Keywords:** infodemic, COVID-19, coronavirus, social media, fake news, misinformation, media effects, media audience

## INTRODUCTION

Although several other epidemics have broken out during the 21st century, the COVID-19 epidemic was global and therefore became the focus of news media (both the traditional components of print press, radio and television broadcasts, and the digital of websites and podcasts) and the users of social media (platforms). In this context, the concept of infodemic refers to a very large amount of information accompanying the epidemic. The phenomenon is currently under intensive research all over the world, but its in-depth characteristics have not

yet been discerned because the focus of research has so far been the analysis of the infodemics individual aspects.

The purpose of this article is to fill this gap, by providing all the characteristics of the phenomenon based on the topic's scientific literature, articles and scientists' comments published on opinion-forming media websites, and the query of scientific and commercial research. The article aims to map the characteristic features of an infodemic and their indicators. Such a map will enable future research to confirm the presented characteristics, and create premises for the risk management model of an epidemic.

The author used secondary data analysis as the main method. Sources used for this analysis included: media monitoring reports such as that prepared in 2020 by PSMM, (a Polish media monitoring company), about the nation's media during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The report presented the volumes of both media and social media and fake news coverage concerning COVID-19 and an internet audience measurement (Comscore and Gemius/PBI research). The author also used the published results of scientific research which used different methods and data sources.

## THE GENESIS AND THE DEFINITION OF THE PHENOMENON

During the initial two decades of the 21st century, at least seven major epidemics broke out: SARS (2003), bird flu (2003–2006), influenza A / H1N1 (2009–2010), MERS (2012), Zika (2013–2016), Eboli (2014–2016) and COVID-19 (beginning in November 2019). The World Health Organization (WHO) has officially recognized both Influenza A / H1N1 and COVID-19 as pandemics due to their long contagious period and subsequent rapid rate of spread. Epidemics as potentially dangerous events with a large reach have also become the object of the strong media interest (see Shih et al., 2008).

The term 'infodemic' was coined by John N. Erni (2008), who describes the SARS epidemic in Hong-Kong in 2003 as a media phenomenon. Erni argues that like other large-scale epidemics, SARS was a reality with two parallel tales. The first tale presents the disease in epidemiological and clinical terms, the second describes an epidemic of meaning, an infodemic, evident in the rhetoric, symbols and cultural frameworks that the media provide. Erni (2008) argues epidemic spawned a triumphant media and that this triumphalism was then socially embedded, for the first time in recent history, as the sign of an emboldened public, or the image of the masses reaching a platform where their voices could finally be expressed and heard (Erni, 2008, p. 602).

The WHO used the concept of infodemic in its current sense for the first time in the report *Managing Epidemics. Key Facts about Major Deadly Diseases* released in 2018. According to WHO, infodemic is a type of „epidemic of rumors”:

the rapid spread of information of all kinds, including rumours, gossip and unreliable information. They are spread instantly and internationally through the growing popular use of mobile phones, social media, the internet and other communication technologies. (WHO, 2018, p. 26)

In this document the WHO also notices the popularity of web-based ‘experts’ with diverse and often contradictory views that can generate confusion, anxiety and even panic in times of serious infectious outbreaks. The organization also stresses that fake or misleading information are dangerous because they can cause widespread public reluctance to well-founded infection control measures promoted by health authorities – and thus delay essential interventions (WHO, 2018).

The WHO definition provided an interpretative framework for further analysis. Researchers studying the media outbreak of the Ebola virus in Africa in 2014–2016 noticed that during this epidemic, rumors and unverified information emerged, which caused widespread fear. This alarm led to global entry bans of people from the affected countries and the introduction of trade barriers (Gunnlaugsson et al., 2019). During this epidemic, Sell et al. (2020) argue that information from traditional media mingled with that from social media and attracted the attention of the news outlets even in those countries where there were fewer cases of infection.

At the end of 2019, a new virus (SARS-CoV-2) appeared in China, causing COVID-19. The virus gradually spread in China and then around the world. In Europe, the onset of coronavirus cases occurred at the turn of the first and second quarter of 2020. The pace and extent of COVID-19 transmission were so high that on March 11, the WHO made the assessment that COVID-19 could be characterized as a pandemic.

During the Munich Security Conference in February 2020, Tedros Adhanom, WHO Director-General, pointed out that „we’re not just fighting an epidemic, we’re fighting an infodemic” (Zarocostas, 2020, p. 676). Sylvie Briand from WHO emphasizes that every outbreak of an epidemic is accompanied by an information tsunami, which always contains misinformation and rumors. Societies have known this phenomenon since the medieval times, but due to the advent of social media spreads the information faster and further (Zarocostas, 2020). Researchers argue the COVID-19 related infodemic was for the first time on an enormous scale (Kulkarni et al., 2020; Hao & Basu, 2020), and social media played a crucial role in it (Hao & Basu, 2020), which was caused by their popularity and enabling every user to spread content (Gavvani, 2020).

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE COVID-19 INFODEMIC

From the previously quoted definitions and descriptions of the phenomenon (WHO, 2018, 2020; Chao et al., 2020; Erku et al., 2020; Gao et al., 2020, Ni et al., 2020, Sell et al., 2020) the characteristic features of the infodemic are:

- flood of information accompanying the epidemic;
- use of communication technologies, especially the internet, mobile technologies and social media;
- speed of information dissemination;
- co-existence of true and false information;
- emotional discomfort of the media audience.

Have all these elements appeared in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic? The answer to this will be provided by the literature review, analyses, statements of researchers and publications describing COVID-19 in the context of the infodemic.

## FLOOD OF INFORMATION

The media were strongly interested in COVID-19 issues. This could be seen even from the perspective of the media audience: websites launched special sections devoted to coronavirus, the topic completely dominated TV and radio broadcasts, and was also widely reported in the press. As the PS&P (2020) report confirms, in less than two months preceding the epidemic threshold in Poland and shortly afterwards (January 1, 2020 – March 10, 2020) there were 235,000 pieces of coverage in the press, on the radio, television and internet portals, and 1.1 million social media posts (PS&P, 2020) The topic of COVID-19 was most often described by publications specializing in news (Table 1).

Table 1. Digital portals with the highest incidences of items about the pandemics

Publication	Pieces of coverage – number
www.wnp.pl	2602
Polsat News	1803
Radio TOK FM	1640
TVP Info	1603
TVN24	1527
Polskie Radio 24	1465
www.niezalezna.pl	1257
TVN24 BiŚ	1156

Publication	Pieces of coverage – number
www.rp.pl	1135
www.polskieradio.pl	1114
Polskie Radio Program 1	1076
www.stooq.com	1006
www.polskieradio24.pl	962
www.portalsamorzadowy.pl	931
www.se.pl	917
www.forsal.pl	898
www.bankier.pl	889
www.fakty.interia.pl	868
Polskie Radio Program 3	866
www.rmfm24.pl	741

Source: PS&P (2020)

The media not only produced a lot of information about COVID-19, but also the demand for this information from the media audience was high. This is confirmed by the volume of the traffic on the websites and mobile applications of news outlets. In selected European markets – French, German, Italian, Spanish and British (Gevers, 2020a) these websites and applications in March 2020, when COVID-19 first appeared in Europe – had high visit incidences (Table 2). A similar trend occurred on the Polish market – in March 2020 compared to March 2019, the traffic on the news outlets websites increased (Gevers, 2020a).

Table 2. Increase in the quantity of real users for the top 10 news outlets in Poland

Node	Real users		Views	
	03.2019	03.2020	03.2019	03.2020
onet.pl / Information and journalism	8 412 900	14 142 565	140 455 184	419 668 519
wp.pl / Information and journalism	9 197 041	11 843 128	193 512 351	451 688 534
tvn24.pl / Information and journalism	7 592 576	11 384 784	120 286 505	290 693 627
wyborcza.pl / Information and journalism	7 174 357	10 736 316	65 930 423	137 107 426
naszemiasto.pl / Information and journalism	7 197 135	10 320 705	140 617 710	192 352 901
fakt.pl / Information and journalism	4 544 454	9 998 811	65 876 108	110 354 785
rmfm24.pl	3 959 440	8 809 272	19 943 264	64 651 384
gazeta.pl / Information and journalism	5 788 541	8 710 119	44 009 171	102 641 266
se.pl / Information and journalism	4 769 141	8 705 370	43 464 300	88 282 644
interia.pl / Information and journalism	7 514 871	8 600 772	93 594 840	209 841 364

Source: PBI (2019; 2020)

For many consumers, the websites of news outlets were the main channel, from which they learned about COVID-19. These sites were the first to count a significant increase in user activity as early as January 2020, when the epidemic had begun to spread beyond China’s international borders. Another major peak occurred at the end of February 2020, when the coronavirus appeared in Europe. The moment of introducing national lockdowns in mid-March 2020 resulted in another peak in the internet consumption and lasted until Comscore’s analysis was carried out at the end of May 2020 (Gevers, 2020b).

**Table 3. News/information websites and applications: visit incidences across selected European countries, 13 January 2020 – 10 May 2020, WEEK OF JAN 13 – JAN 19 = 100**

	JAN 13 – JAN 19	JAN 27 – FEB 2	FEB 24 – MAR 1	MAR 9 – MAR 15	MAY 4 – MAY 10
	Germany, Italy and Spain confirm their first cases of the coronavirus within their borders	As the virus spreads in northern Italy, jitters are felt in the financial markets	Italy and Spain declare national lockdowns	The process of lifting restrictions starts	The process of lifting restrictions starts
France	100	110	129	142	157
Germany	100	110	126	142	143
Italy	100	112	153	170	136
Spain	100	100	105	148	142
United Kingdom	100	115	128	140	140

Source: Gevers (2020b)

In turn, the data of American analytical companies show that 10% of the content placed on the websites of American news outlets in mid-March 2020, covered the coronavirus topic. The website traffic and the number of users reading a single article at the same time, increased. Also, the time spent on a piece of coverage lengthened, and the number of page views increased by 33% (Molla, 2020; Husnayain et al., 2020).

The high demand for pandemic information was also shown in the increased number of pandemic-related queries to Google search, shown by Google Trends. An analysis of search behaviors of Italian users proved that “China coronavirus” was most searched phrase in Google shortly before the epidemic outburst and especially when COVID-19 was diagnosed in two Chinese tourists. However, the growing number of cases in Italy did not translate into the growth of adequate searches until the announcement of the pandemic (March 11, 2020). When the Italian government imposed strict restrictions to prevent further spread of the coronavirus, the number of inquiries about disease symptoms and protective

measures increased again, which mirrored rising social anxiety (Rovetta & Bhagavathula, 2020). Similar regularities were observed in the analysis of Google searches on the other continents (Husnayain et al., 2020).

## USE OF COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

The use of various communication technologies, especially the internet, social media and mobile technologies, accompanied the COVID-19 epidemic. As previously mentioned, there was an increase in demand for coronavirus information through general news services and applications. When country lockdowns were introduced and most people stayed at home, there was a shift in audience towards communication technologies. At the beginning of March 2020 (and for Italy even earlier, in the second half of February 2020), the visits both on social networking and messaging sites and applications increased, as shown by Comscore’s internet traffic analysis for selected European countries (Gevers, 2020a).

The pandemic was also accompanied by an increased supply of current information on social media platforms. The report of Press-Service and Publicon, cited as PS&P above, noted that there were 1.1 million posts in Polish social media; this number was almost five times higher than the number of pieces of coverage in traditional media. The content, that most engaged internet users, was more entertaining or sensational in nature, while the pieces created by experts did not meet with such a large response (PS&P, 2020).

The communication on social platforms was also carried out by various communicators. The authors of the content were not only media representatives and experts, but also influencers, and internet users (sometimes anonymous or not verifiable). The communication around COVID-19 also converged – the traditional media communicated through owned profiles on social media (PS&P, 2020). The reverse pattern was also observed: traditional media journalists were inspired by stories from social media.

Table 4. Top profiles on social media by the number of posts

Top social media profiles	Number of posts
Rzeczpospolita (Twitter)	788
portal tvp.info (Twitter)	620
Polskie Radio 24 (Twitter)	607
Tvn24 (Twitter)	555
Radio ZET NEWS (Twitter)	452
PolsatNews.pl (Twitter)	477
PolskieRadio24.pl (Twitter)	439

Top social media profiles	Number of posts
Polskie_Sluzby (Twitter)	416
Telewizja Republika (Twitter)	386
Polska Dzisiaj (Facebook)	332
Człowiek w Masce (Twitter)	328
LudzieHonoru (Twitter)	306
Dziennik.pl (Twitter)	279
wPolityce.pl (Twitter)	269
Forsal.pl (Twitter)	269
polsatnews.pl (Facebook)	263
Comparic (Twitter)	251
Fakty TVN (Facebook)	247
Radio Maryja (Twitter)	240
Z Ostatniej Chwili (Twitter)	230

Source: PS&P, 2020.

Internet usage during the first weeks of the epidemic was so intense that Speedtest observed significant decreases in the speed of internet connections in several countries, including Poland, Italy, the United States, and Ukraine (PJ, 2020).

## SPEED OF INFORMATION DISSEMINATION

Due to the widespread use of the internet in communication, information on the epidemic was disseminated very fast, much more than in case of Ebola epidemic in 2018. During the first month of the epidemic, over 41,000 English-language press articles related to coronavirus, and 19,000 put the name of the disease in the headlines. In the case of articles about Ebola, these numbers were respectively 1,800 and 700 (Ducharme, 2020). In turn, Polish media became interested in the subject relatively quickly, in January 2020, when the first disturbing news began to flow from China (PS&P, 2020).

The speed of spreading information depended also on the social platforms – their specifics and their popularity. Users could connect with their friends, create content on their own, and share information (Miotk, 2017). Social media platforms are very popular on a global scale: in April 2020 Facebook had 2.5 billion users, YouTube and WhatsApp messenger – 2 billion each, Facebook Messenger – 1.3 billion, Instagram – 1 billion, Twitter – 386 million (Statista, 2020). At that time, the largest platforms in Poland were Facebook with 22.2 million users, YouTube – 20.9 million, Instagram – 8.6 million and Twitter – 6.4 million (PBI, 2020). Because the platforms gather mass audiences around the world – people

connected with each other and were enabled to publish content on their own – information on social media can disseminate very fast, on a global scale and in a totally uncontrolled way.

## TRUE AND FALSE INFORMATION

Social media platforms, such as YouTube and Twitter contain a lot of content and may amplify rumors and questionable information (Cinelli et al., 2020) and increase the reach of both fake news on social media (Vosoughi et al., 2018) and algorithmic filtering, which supports sensational and controversial content (Tarkowski, 2020). The dissemination of fake news deriving from social media, in traditional ones, is also easy. Many journalists have problems with fake news recognition (Public Dialog, 2017) so do the users of social media platforms (Editorial LDH, 2020)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, true information in the media or on social media was accompanied by false information. Lebanese researchers who analyzed a sample of 673 tweets noticed that 24.8% of them contained misinformation and 17.4% of them – unverifiable information about the pandemic. The misinformation rate was higher among informal individual and group accounts (33.8%). More incorrect information was also found in tweets from unverified accounts – 31.0%, while in the case of verified accounts it was 12.6% (Kouzy et al., 2020).

Most of the fake content concerned the prevention of the coronavirus infection, but also false images or conspiracy theories about the origin of COVID-19 (PS&P, 2020; Rogowska, 2020). In the flood of false information, it was possible to notice the content from information wars – such as the content connecting the epidemic with the launch of the 5G transmission network in Europe, widely spread on the internet by Russian intelligence (Gliwa, 2020). Internet fraudsters used the coronavirus-related messages to phish for money – the pandemic was a time of their increased activity (Maj, 2020; Fontanilla, 2020). Numerous memes were also created, which a scientist specializing in cultural research called a ‘memdemic’ (Kamińska cited by Mazur, 2020).

Users of social platforms barely distinguished true and false information about COVID-19 (The Lancet Digital Health, 2020). This was caused by the sheer volume of information, use of social media as the main source of information, and panic (PS&P, 2020; Ahmad et al., 2020), which could translate into further sharing of content evoking high-arousal emotions and controversy (Ahmad et al., 2020).

## EMOTIONAL DISCOMFORT

The COVID-19 pandemic was accompanied by a decrease in the mood of media audiences. The hyperactivity of social media, due to which information spread very quickly, created an environment of heightened uncertainty. This, in turn, fueled fears and hostility toward strangers, especially people of color (Petropoulos & Makridakis, 2020; Rovetta & Bhagavathula, 2020). Even memes, seemingly innocent at first glance, expressed aggression or were racist in tone (Mazur, 2020). Moreover, press coverage about the coronavirus often used the term “fear”, which could negatively affect the audience’s emotions. Khan (2020) observed a similar phenomenon in media coverage on the H1N1 influenza epidemic, but it did not occur when reporting the topic of ‘ordinary’ influenza.

As shown by analyses of Twitter posts (20,325,929 tweets, 7,033,158 unique users from over 170 countries) at the beginning of the pandemic, fear and anger were the dominant emotions of the authors. The anger culminated on the day after the WHO announced the pandemic (March 12, 2020) but afterwards the number of tweets expressing anger remained high. Fear derived from little knowledge of the new disease. Anger was associated with xenophobia against the Chinese and Asian people when the disease was only developing in the Far East. Anger was also raised by the criticism of governments and epidemiological services, and prolonged isolation. Sadness was also expressed because of the loss of loved ones taken by the pandemic. The authors of the posts also expressed gratitude, hope and joy of well-being, but very seldom (Lwin, 2020).

Attention was also paid to the traditional and social media influence on anxiety and panic in the audiences (Sell et al., 2020; Ahmad & al., 2020; Kulkarni et al., 2020). Social media exposure during a pandemic could result in mental health problems (Gao et al., 2020). Moreover, the negative sentiment of the press coverage corresponded with the number of COVID-19 cases in the same area (BBAV, 2020).

## CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 infodemic has all the features of the phenomenon. There was a flood of information about the pandemic, true and false, and modern communication technologies such as websites, social platforms or mobile applications were used to disseminate it. The pace of dissemination was rapid, even faster than in the case of the other epidemics. The exposure to this tsunami of information caused emotional discomfort in the audience.

As a result of the examination of the COVID-19 infodemic, four additional features could be added to the characteristic. The first is the high demand for

information from media’s audiences. Available analyses of audience behavior showed that a large amount of information in the media about the COVID-19 pandemic met the audience’s increased interest. The second feature is the nature of this information – sensational, emotional, sometimes even tabloid-like (which all influence the audience’s moods). Communicators comprise the third feature. They participate in the discourse on the pandemic, are representatives of traditional media and epidemiological services, and are also average internet users (often with unverified identities). The fourth feature is the convergence of the media active on the discourse. Traditional media journalists were inspired by and communicated through social media, and their content was distributed by users of the latter. All the features of an infodemic match with the detailed indicators of media and audience activity, selected from the examination (Table 5).

Table 5. The main features of an infodemic

Feature	Indicators
Flood of information	Higher than average number of pieces of coverage in traditional and social media
Use of communication technologies, especially the internet, mobile technologies and social media	Slowing speed of internet connections, increase of traffic on social networking sites/applications, greater than average use of instant messages sites/applications
Speed of information dissemination	Information on the epidemic appears in the media from around the world shortly after its outbreak, the use of inherently fast communication technologies (internet, social media)
Co-existence of true and false information	True information, mainly from official sources and false information from sources of unknown identity co-exist
Emotional discomfort of the media audience	The contact with information about the epidemic results in deterioration of mental and physical well-being among the media audiences
High demand for information from media audience	Increase of number and length of visits to news outlets websites, increased number of searches on epidemic-related keywords
Variety of communicators types	The information exchange involves both official media, government institutions, epidemiological and sanitary services, average internet users and people with an unspecified identity
Emotionality and negative sentiment of media messages	Coverage in traditional media about epidemics is strongly emotional and have a negative sentiment, the word „fear” and its synonyms are used more often than average
Traditional and social media convergence	Journalists are inspired by information from social media, traditional media conduct communication via social channels, social media content is distributed on social media.

Source: own query

Since the author used secondary data from many sources, the limitation of this analysis is that the data are presented in the scope (regarding both periods and territory) disclosed to the public by either the company or scientists. The authors’ intended to describe the infodemic phenomenon by characterizing its

main, observable features. Therefore, the main infodemic features presented above would require further empirical studies. In particular, the set of infodemic features presented at the end of this article needs further targeted research. The proposal would be worth investigating in specified countries affected by COVID-19, to compare the differences in the intensity of the features and to clarify the infodemic model. The next step would be to compare COVID-19 with other epidemics to identify these features, which are independent of the stage of technological development and show the evolution of the phenomenon over time. On the practical side, confirmation of the proposed model of this phenomenon could aid in the development of an effective risk management model for an epidemic.

Due to the development and popularization of social media and their convergence with traditional ones, outbreaks of subsequent epidemics will increasingly be accompanied by an infodemic, a flood of true and false information, as well as misinformation. This is a phenomenon characterized by a flood of information, the use of communication technologies (especially the internet), the speed of information dissemination, the occurrence of true and false information and the emotional discomfort of media users. This description should also include a high supply of information from their recipients, various types of communicators taking part on the discourse, the emotional and sensational tone of the information, and the convergence of various media channels. The infodemic is a major challenge for information services, but at present cannot be stopped completely because it would require total censorship of the media, which as Tarkowski (2020) argues is the price society pays for open information flows.

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# Government of Georgia's Public Rhetoric – Minuscule Model of Russian Propaganda

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**Abstract:** Russian propaganda exploits the idea of freedom of information to promote disinformation. It aims to sow confusion using conspiracy theories and ensure there is not a single issue for society to consolidate. As a well-tested approach, this malicious practice of “brainwashing” can be applied in across countries or circumstances. Observation of statements made by Georgian authorities leads to the hypothesis that methods of Russian propaganda have been embedded in Georgia’s ruling Georgian Dream party’s rhetoric. Therefore, the focus of this paper is to study features of the Georgian government’s public communication through the prism of propaganda and test whether its rhetoric is analogous to Russia’s propaganda toolkit. The study shows apparent parallels between these two phenomena. The Georgian government’s rhetoric implies vociferous accusations against people being critical of the authorities, cultivating groundless fears among the population and shaping a negative agenda.

**Keywords:** Propaganda, Disinformation, Russian, Georgian, government, comparative analysis

## INTRODUCTION

### PROPAGANDA AND THE RUSSIAN INFORMATION WARFARE

Propaganda is one of the widely used terms in mass communication, politics, or other related fields. At the same time, however, an accurate and comprehensive definition of propaganda remains rather challenging. It is also difficult to identify propaganda since it consists of well-structured messages designed in advance where facts, opinions, and manipulations are all mixed. According to Richard Vincent (2006), a communication scholar, propaganda uses relevant communication channels to access a mass audience and seeks through different techniques of persuasion to shape or change public opinion in the interests of those who promote it. Propaganda is used by the governments

of countries at local and international levels to exert a desirable influence over of their or foreign countries' public opinion. In addition, propaganda methods are applied by various non-government actors to advocate their ideas among the public.

Propaganda largely has a negative connotation in the modern world. The reason behind this may be use of propaganda methods by political regimes, particularly in the 20th century, as "brainwashing" instruments. Moreover, such perceptions are further enhanced by actions of contemporary 21st century Russia which has taken "brainwashing" of a society through propaganda to new heights. Experts of Russian propaganda, Pomerantsev and Weiss (2014) argue that at least since 2008, strategists in the Kremlin's military and special services no longer speak about information as any of the commonly acknowledged methods of persuasion, and public diplomacy or even simply as propaganda. Kremlin strategists now refer to information as a weapon able to sow confusion or be an instrument of blackmail which aims to demoralize, subvert and paralyze.

Pomerantsev and Weiss (2014) provide detailed descriptions of Russian methods of weaponization of information, culture and finances and suggest the Kremlin uses the idea of freedom of information to promote disinformation among the public. The aim is not to convince (as happens in classic public diplomacy) or gain trust, but instead to sow confusion through conspiracy theories and the proliferation of lies. Pomerantsev and Weiss (2014) note that weaponization of information is a vital element of contemporary Russia's hybrid, unconventional warfare.

Paul and Matthews (2016) argue the major features of Russian propaganda are rapidity, continuity (incessant dissemination) and not adhering to consistency since it acts according to a specific reality. Furthermore, such messages that may be completely out of touch, are spread through many channels which modern media and social networks provide. Russian propaganda operates as being in some endless war and never shies away from concocting and spreading the most extraordinary conspiracy theories.

We may, therefore, argue that with rapidity and continuity, Russian propaganda makes and spreads falsehoods built on the same principle used and sophisticated in the most radical cases of propaganda in the past. The argument is that the systematic repetition of a lie, will eventually lead to it being accepted as a truth. The most vivid example of such an attempt from Russian propaganda is Bucha Massacre committed by the Russian forces in 2022 (The Economist, 2022b), which Russia continues to blame Ukraine for (Khutsiberidze, 2022).

As mentioned earlier, Russia uses several methods to promote disinformation, although most of them have one thing in common as they are based on negativity. Similarly, disinformation and attempts to distort reality in general are also discernible in the Georgian government's rhetoric, as MEP Viola von Cramon

argues “Georgian Dream’s [Georgia’s ruling party] disinformation is reaching the Kremlin’s level” (von Cramon, 2022).

This paper aims to understand how reasonable is the parallel drawn above, because it is vital for the public to be aware of dangers, which may follow implementation of Russian propaganda methods into public communication.

## RESEARCH METHOD AND HYPOTHESIS

Observations on statements of the Georgian authorities over time led to the hypothesis that various propaganda techniques characteristic to Russian propaganda have been embedded in the ruling Georgian Dream party’s public communication. These techniques include manipulative allegations, attempts to make inimical images and distorting reality.

The focus of this paper is, therefore, to study features of the Georgian government’s public communication through the prism of propaganda and to test whether its rhetoric is significantly similar to the Russian propaganda toolkit and if these two phenomena have any aspects in common.

To this aim, this paper used a comparative analysis method (Mills et al. 2006), which includes both quantitative and qualitative comparisons of social entities. However, for this paper we used the qualitative version and therefore conducted a detailed analysis of the cases. Azarian (2011) explains that irrespective of any paucity of comparable cases this method allows systematic and in-depth analysis of research problems and drawing relevant comparisons at national, regional and international levels. This method is particularly valuable when a research problem or social phenomenon cannot be measured by precise statistical methods and experimental studies. Moreover, despite certain limitations, comparative analysis can be successfully applied to solve academic challenges if they clearly present comparable variables, general context and aims (Kocka 1996:197-8 as cited in Azarian, 2011). In this sense, the cases presented in this paper (examples of Russian propaganda tricks and methods used by the government in public communication), which are subjected to comparative analysis, are of virtually identical field and context.

This research study uses the ‘highlighting the particularity’ approach of comparative analysis (Azarian, 2011), which by thoroughly studying comparable variables and dozens of related cases enables the study to show in a structured way the similarities between the Georgian government’s rhetoric and Russian propaganda. Therefore, on the one side of comparative analysis there is the well-studied topic of Russian propaganda and on the other is the unexplored and novel phenomenon of the Georgian government’s propaganda messages.

The discussion in the paper is placed in a substantial theoretical framework about propaganda techniques. This implies tailoring a broadly acknowledged (by academia) specific propaganda technique to practical reality, which is currently employed by Russian propaganda and can also be discernible in the Government of Georgia's (henceforth 'the government') public communication. It should be noted here that the propaganda messages (both Russia's and the government's) discussed in the article are not and cannot be identical content-wise because the phenomena of two completely distinct countries are compared. Thus, the article mainly focuses on the search for similarities between the approaches used by the authorities of both nations. However, in some cases, the content of the two sides' propaganda messages are identical, which we will discuss below.

Since propaganda is a complex issue, it is impossible to examine all its approaches in one article thoroughly. Besides, Jowett and O'Donnell (2012) point out that „[P]ropaganda is too complex to limit its techniques to a short list” (p. 299). However, according to broadly established sources (such as McClung Lee & Briant Lee, 1939), some basic propaganda techniques can still be elaborated, such as name calling, glittering generality, transfer, testimonial, plain folks, card staking, and bandwagon. For this article, those techniques that are particularly noticeable in the public communication of the government and also show similarities with the approaches used by Russian propaganda, have been selected.

As for the selection of specific statements from the rhetoric of the Georgian authorities, they are mostly related to socio-political crisis periods. In particular, the pre-election period, which was quite polarized and tense, the events of July 5-6, 2021 (when far-right, pro-Russian mobs physically assaulted dozens of journalists). Also, the Russia-Ukraine war, which affects Georgia too, and has had a notable impact on the public communication of the government. In such periods, the use of propaganda tactics by the government is more evident.

With respect to limitations of the study this can be a nature of qualitative research method itself when findings cannot be generalized as widely as in case of quantitative research (Ochieng, 2009). However, as mentioned earlier, in order to compensate for this challenge, the paper includes not a small number of cases and at the same time they are analyzed in detail, based on unambiguous examples. One of the challenges in general, including for this paper, is clear demonstration of strong similarity between different phenomena (Mills et al. 2006). However, as Ragin (as cited in Mills et al., 2006) wrote, if research is focused on explicit, instead of associative relations, this challenge can be overcome.

## ANALYSIS

### PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF PROPAGANDA METHODS – GEORGIAN EXAMPLES AND RESEMBLANCE TO RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

One of the most widespread and simple propaganda techniques is name-calling, which requires the labeling (negative or positive) of a person, group or idea. Mostly, name-calling is used in a negative context. In addition, the goal of this propaganda technique is to demoralize the recipients of the information and discourage them from scrutinizing the facts behind the label. In other words, the intention is to make sure that emotions erode evidence-based discussion. Name calling is used to create enemy image through developing and customizing assorted stereotypes. The main objective of this technique is to manipulate the audience's emotions and push them to make hasty and superficial conclusions (Vincent, 2006). Russian propaganda frequently resorts to this technique. The most recent and vivid example would be war of Putin's Russia against Ukraine. Before and after start of the war, Russian authorities and their propaganda mouthpieces attacked and continue to denounce legitimate government of Ukraine as Nazis, neo-Nazis and fascists (Horvath, 2022). Furthermore, one of the official reasons for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which Moscow insisted was a "special operation," was the denazification of Ukraine. This term is so meaningless and vague that even the Kremlin struggled to provide a proper definition (Project, 2022 as cited in Realpolitika, 2022). The important issue, however, is not the lack of any kind of rational explanation but the manipulation of the audience's emotions (the domestic audience of Russian nationals) which is vulnerable to propaganda, sowing fear among them and negating their common sense in this manner (The Economist 1843 magazine, 2022). Prior to the outbreak of war, Russian President Vladimir Putin used this term multiple times vis-à-vis the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky. Another label which Mr. Putin used against the government of Ukraine was the "gang of drug addicts" (The Print, 2022). This groundless label was nevertheless a strong weapon to discredit the opponent, manipulating the audience's stereotypical and negative attitude towards drug users.

Recently, in the run-up of 2021 Georgia's local self-government elections, drug addiction was a quite popular topic in Georgian politics. This discussion was spearheaded by the ruling Georgian Dream party when the party chairperson, Irakli Kobakhidze, proclaimed without producing any evidence, that the former political ally and later leader of the opposition party, Giorgi Gakharia, was a drug addict by calling him a "cokehead" (Kavkasia TV, 2021). Given how obvious it was that this label was intended for extremely negative propaganda purposes, even some of the Georgian Dream's current members were reluctant

to repeat this claim (Chichua, 2021). However, certain events before this statement, when the candidate for Mayor of Tbilisi, Kakha Kaladze, suddenly and out of context decided to take a drug test and urged opponents to do the same were a clear indicator that the above-mentioned label was a result of deliberate and advance-planned smear campaign (Radio Liberty, 2021e). Like Russian propaganda, it was also intended to manipulate public's negative attitudes towards people suffering from drug addiction.

The Russia-Ukraine war illustrated resemblance of the Georgian Dream's rhetoric to Russian propaganda, particularly about targeting opponents with negative labels. Since the outbreak of war, many among the public and government opponents came to believe that the Government's positioning in supporting Ukraine, especially with respect to the element of rhetoric, is insufficient (Kutidze, 2022). In response to this idea, the statements of the Georgian Dream members started to feature "war party" label which was initially directed against the United National Movement (UNM), Georgia's largest opposition party, but later was expanded to include virtually every individual who criticized the incumbent government for its position vis-à-vis Russia-Ukraine war. This label was based on false and manipulative arguments (Batashvili, 2016), although deep-rooted among the public narrative, that suggested it was possible to avoid the 2008 war with Russia but that the-then ruling UNM did not do that. However, this narrative later went beyond the UNM and was used to target some other political parties (which did not even exist in 2008) or even the Public Defender (the Office of the Ombudsman). These statements below, made by the Georgian Dream's leadership, to illustrated this.

Irakli Kobakhidze<sup>1</sup>: "There is a war party in Georgia whose sole objective is to drag Georgia into a military conflict. Covert campaign which is directed against the decisions made by the Government vis-à-vis sanctions and sending volunteers serves precisely that objective. We would like to remind the public once again that dragging Georgia into a military conflict, something that the war party wishes for, would bring devastating consequences..." (Radio Liberty, 2022).

Irakli Gharibashvili<sup>2</sup>: "If we imagine for a second that Bidzina Ivanishvili<sup>3</sup> had not get rid of this anti-statehood and anti-national power under Saakashvili's [Mikheil Saakashvili – the third President of Georgia] leadership, bent on destroying and ruining this country, I guarantee you that Saakashvili

1 Chairperson of the ruling Georgian Dream party.

2 Georgian Prime Minister.

3 Founder of the Georgian Dream and former Georgian Prime Minister, believed to be informal ruler of Georgia's incumbent government.

would have still been in power and we would be having a second Mariupol here” (Interpressnews, 2022b).

Sozar Subari, Member of the Parliament, in response to a draft resolution about Ukraine prepared by the opposition Lelo party, stated: “The Chairperson of the Georgian Dream’s parliamentary faction made it clear that we will not take seriously any of the initiatives on foreign issues put forward by the “war parties”, let alone discussing them” (Interpressnews, 2022a).

Irakli Kobakhidze: “Public Defender represents that political group whose name is a war party.” In addition, according to Irakli Kobakhidze, anyone who supports sending the former President and current convict Mikheil Saakashvili abroad for medical purposes, including the Public Defender, is part of efforts that war breaks out in Georgia (Interpressnews, 2022c).

It is noteworthy that together with active application of the “war party” label, the Georgian dream invented a new conspiracy theory which blames the opposition for attempting a coup d’état.

Irakli Gharibashvili: “What do you think why Mikheil Saakashvili came to Georgia? He came to Georgia for one purpose alone – to cause instability in the country, revolution and mass killings, including killing of the opposition leaders and to organize coup d’état. This, with no doubt, meant nothing but outbreak of a new war in the occupied country...” (Interpressnews, 2022b).

Irakli Kobakhidze: “First and foremost, Saakashvili came to aggravate situation in the run-up of the elections in Georgia and naturally, the main reason to aggravate situation was toppling the government and after government overthrow Saakashvili was coming to power with his partners – Gakharia<sup>4</sup> and Lelo<sup>5</sup>. He was about to get involved in war under Georgia’s name. I am saying this based on our logical conclusions and information. Certainly, it was planned scenario of the “war party”, which has been foiled...” (Interpressnews, 2022d).

It is also noteworthy that recently, the term “global war party” (henceforth GWP) appeared in the rhetoric of Georgia’s ruling party, which suggests was the GWP was trying to drag Georgia into a war against Russia (Chichua, 2023). Although the Georgian Dream party does not specify whose interests the GWP

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<sup>4</sup> Former Georgian Prime Minister, currently leader of one of the opposition parties.

<sup>5</sup> One of the opposition parties.

represents, they indirectly point to the West. There is evidence a similar term was already well-established in the Russian narrative (Konkov, 2013; Tass, 2016). After the war in Ukraine started, Russian propaganda used this 'global war party' epithet more frequently to refer to the Western countries.

The frequency of the messages from the Georgian authorities indicates that the propaganda campaign incessantly "bombarded" the audience, which made it similar to Russia's tactics. As mentioned, Russian propaganda uses the *ad nauseam* technique, which involves endless repetition of the same idea or slogan (media Literacy Lab – MilLab). In addition, when the "war party" label was attached to political or public groups which were not directly linked with the UNM, the authorities used another ploy – generalization. In this case, an entire cluster is shown negatively through generalizing a specific event, subject, or idea. This enables the authorities to blend all critical thoughts into "one pot" and portray them as uniformly unacceptable, hostile and advocates of narrow partisan interests. Indeed, the identity of the author of criticism – any opposition party, Public Defender, civic sector, or media is not important (Kutidze, 2021). Russian propaganda has tested and used this approach when suggesting "western maliciousness" as an explanation of any negative occurrence in the Western countries. The approach seeks to aggrandize a specific negative event as a problem affecting society as a whole (Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014).

Confronting an accuser is yet another propaganda technique, which Vincent (2006) argues is using the logic that says the best defense is a good offense (Vincent, 2006). Absurd lies and conspiracy theories are often used in this technique, which it is known as 'huckster' propaganda (Ballentine, 2015). Russian propaganda has employed this technique numerous times, particularly in crisis situations. An example of huckster propaganda would be Russia accusing the Ukrainian army of brutality against their own citizens, victims of the Bucha Massacre, which was committed by the Russian army (Khutsiberidze, 2022). Another similar example occurred when a passenger aircraft of Malaysia Airlines was shot down over Ukraine's territory. At that time, Russia started to advocate an obnoxious theory about the USA's CIA shooting down. Moscow also accused the Ukrainian military of accidentally shooting down the aircraft, having mistakenly identified the plane was carrying the President of Russia. This dense information fog concealed the simple truth that ill-trained pro-Russian separatists had accidentally shot down the plane with a missile supplied by Russia (MacFarquhar, 2016). The subsequent investigation also confirmed later that Russia-backed rebels were involved in shooting down the plane and killing innocent civilians (BBC NEWS, 2020).

The Georgian government too, resorts to such tactics of self-defense in crisis. Speaking of 5-6 July 2021 events (when far-right, pro-Russian mobs physically assaulted dozens of journalists and the insufficient response from the authorities

(Social Justice Center, 2021), government figures were stating that violence against journalists is unacceptable, although journalists themselves often commit violence against public, albeit psychologically. One of the leaders of the Georgian Dream and Mayor of Tbilisi, Kakha Kaladze made the following statement:

Undoubtedly, violence and hatred strangle our country and its future and all those people who showed no mercy, hit you and assaulted you, were damaging development of the country and our tomorrow. This action is punishable, and all of these are shameful. No less evil is psychological violence which unfortunately takes place in our society for years. We often hear from different TV channels and TV screens how people are mocked, defamed, bullied only because of different political or other grounds (Radio Liberty, 2021c).

The Prime Minister responded with the similar rhetoric to rallies erupting after the July 5-6 events demanding his resignation. According to Irakli Gharibashvili, anti-statehood, anti-church and therefore anti-national messages were voiced at the July 11 rally outside the Parliament of Georgia organized by media workers (*Radio Liberty*, 2021a).

Additionally, in times of crises, when the government also bears responsibility, authorities do not seek to debunk allegations through relevant arguments but instead attack opponents with propaganda messages and churn out conspiracy theories. Since the Georgian Dream came to power, the party has informed the public about numerous plans of the opposition to conduct coups d'état, accusations of insurrection over "the Gavrilov affair", the 2021 plan to overthrow the government, etc., (Rekhviashvili, 2022). The latest in this string of allegations was Irakli Kobakhidze's statement (Interpressnews, 2022d) that Mikheil Saakashvili, Giorgi Gakharia and Mamuka Khazaradze (leaders of the opposition parties), had plotted a coup d'état, and would on coming to power open a second front against Russia in parallel with Russia-Ukraine ongoing war. None of these cases have been investigated, which lends further credibility to an argument that such statements were intended for propaganda purposes.

Similar to the huckster method is the 'what-aboutism' propaganda technique, which instead of answering difficult questions either poses counter-allegations or shifts focus to another issue aiming to either or both switch attention from the object of criticism and justify this objective through making false comparisons and manipulative moral judgements (Media Literacy Lab – MilLab). This tactic was extensively used by the Soviet Union, pointing out problems of the West in response to any criticism. This approach is still very popular in modern Russia (Leonor, 2016). The Russian Federation which still lags far behind the West in terms of economy, technology, quality of life and prosperity (The Economist, 2022a) constantly aspires to discredit Europe and the USA through messages

of disinformation (Chatham House, 2021). This is yet another example of negative propaganda, characteristic for Russia, which nurtures the following idea: “Maybe not all is well in Russia, but it is worse in the West.”

There is an abundance of similar examples in the public communication of the Government. The Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili when questioned why he failed to protect journalists during the 5-6 July 2021 crackdown, gave the following answer:

You [Journalists] represent the United National Movement... All of you. In Saakashvili's time the state was committing violence against TV, business, citizen, against everyone. If there was some kind of fistfight in the street, the state prevented it and arrested all offenders. This is what is important (Rustavi TV 2, 2021).

The authorities use similar rhetoric vis-à-vis numerous other problems. For instance, when discussing rapid growth of oil prices in 2022 and subsequent protests.

Irakli Gharibashvili: “...I would like to remind our citizens that under the previous government there were basically several groups at the market. One group had monopoly in their own hands and they dictated, giving directive to every importer. This was in the hands of former Minister of Defense, Davit Kezerashvili and Saakashvili...” (Tolordava, 2022).

Election campaigns of the Georgian Dream, especially those of the last few years, can be considered as cases of similar public communication. The ruling party's answer on flaws in judiciary or other pressing problems is that the situation was worse during the UNM's rule and public's main concern should be preventing this opposition party from ever coming back to power. In other words, the predominant rhetoric of the Georgian Dream is based not on the visions of future, but on defeating the UNM. The ruling party's campaign is largely attuned to negative and meaningless messages instead of campaign platform and pledges (ISFED, 2021). The Georgian Dream's election motto (for the run-off of 2018 presidential elections where the ruling party had to spare no efforts to win) “No to the Nazis!<sup>6</sup> No to the evil!” (Tabula, 2018) also confirms this. The propaganda nature of this motto is best illustrated by posters unveiled for 2021 self-government elections where the photo of Giorgi Gakharia, former leader of the Georgian Dream and currently an opposition figure, was added to the photos of incumbent and former leaders of the UNM. The motto was

<sup>6</sup> Denoting the major opposition UNM “United National Movement” party.

also modified as follows: “No to the Nazis! No to the evil!” No to the treachery!” (Tarkhnishvili, 2021).

One more propaganda technique, the ‘bandwagon’ approach, implies the use of the notion: “Everybody does that.” This approach urges members of public to ‘bandwagon’ this or that group and follow the crowd (Vincent, 2006). Often, Georgian authorities also seek to bandwagon with religion or traditions. Here, a special emphasis needs to be made on statements of government figures issued about 5-6 July 2021 events, when the March of Dignity announced by LGBTQ+ groups was followed by counter-rally and assault on journalists by a small group. Prior and after these events, high-ranking public officials stated that LGBTQ+ community should not have gathered at Rustaveli Avenue because this contradicts teachings of the Georgian Orthodox Church and the will of most of the population.

Irakli Gharibashvili: “*When 95% of our population opposes demonstratively holding propaganda march or parade, we all should obey this. This is the idea of the absolute majority of our population and we, as government elected by the people, have to take this into account. We will always take this into account and minority will no longer decide the fate of majority unlike to what used to happen in the past when any decision in Georgia was made with violence*” (Radio Liberty, 2021b).

However, public opinion polls illustrated that the Prime Minister could be wrong when speaking on behalf of the population, because 95% of the population, after all, does not oppose holding the above-mentioned march. Moreover, according to 73% of the surveyed respondents, the state should ensure freedom and safety of assembly for the minorities” (Edison Research, 2021, as cited in Radio Liberty, 2021f).

The similar approach has been used multiple times in various types of crises when the Government was targeted with heavy criticism. Under such circumstances, the ruling party members seek to bandwagon with the so called “majority”, “will of the people” and church, which is currently the most influential institution of the country.

As mentioned earlier, one of the reasons why Russian propaganda spreads so easily is that the purveyors do not think much about homogeneity of messages and act only according to needs. In this case, it is possible to argue one thing today and claim its absolute opposite tomorrow. Old data vanishes so rapidly in the unending waves of information that propaganda mouthpieces are not afraid to adopt a drastically new stance. Furthermore, Russian propaganda does not, as Pomerantsev and Weiss (2014) argue, even bother to prove “its own truth”. Russia’s propaganda does not aim to convince or gain trust but to sow

confusion and spread lies through conspiracy theories. This approach is reminiscent of card stacking propaganda technique, defined by McClung Lee and Briant Lee (1939) as involving the selection and use of facts, falsehoods, distractions, and logical or illogical statements to confuse the audience.

The incumbent government's communication with the Georgian population before and after elections bears a clear resemblance with the cardstacking approach. Since 2013, the ruling Georgian Dream party has been claiming that the former ruling power, the UNM was finished and had a very little influence as an opposition party. However, in the run-up of every new election, virtually the whole election campaign of the Georgian Dream revolves on the notion of how dangerous it will be if the UNM comes back to power. This campaign, as mentioned earlier, was characterized by strong and negative slurs, such as "murderers", "traitors", etc. As a result, the narrative was shaped so that it was not future ideas and the prospect of development that mattered in the upcoming election but "ending" the UNM. Of additional note is that the list of those that needed to be "ended" is inevitably expanded with new opposition parties and government propaganda seeks to equate them with the UNM. There are several examples to illustrate this approach of the Georgian authorities.

Election year is coming and politically bankrupt parties and politicians will try to somehow remind population of themselves (Kaladze, K. 2015).

They [UNM] are spreading rumors, they are well aware that they have no chance to achieve a serious result – they had 46 people in the parliament and now they may gain 10 seats. (Ivanishvili, B. 2016).

The UNM is a bankrupt political party. (Kaladze, K. 2018).

Despite these statements, even after nine years of coming to power, the Georgian Dream still proclaimed in the run-up to 2021 local self-government elections that "ending" the UNM was a major objective (Kuntchulia, 2021). Video footages with mottos "Being Nazi is a Shame"! Let's End Nazis!" was published on 18 October 2021 at the Georgian Dream's official Facebook account (Georgian Dream, 2021). At the same day, one of the leaders of the ruling party, Mamuka Mdinardze, stated:

We have to rule out risks, as much as possible, that our opponent achieves any success in even a single municipality. This is because in this case it will be some kind of revolutionary HQ and with this one victory (we should not allow that, but), I am speaking hypothetically here, they will make some kind

of revolutionary municipality and it will not be focused on the needs of public. (Radio Liberty, 2021d).

Candidate for the Mayor of Tbilisi, Kakha Kaladze, also changed his rhetoric before the run-off in local self-government elections. As opposed to the first round when his communication with the voters was based on “European-style, forward-looking election campaign” and demonstration of future urban development plans of the city, Kakha Kaladze also started to speak about problems during the rule of the previous government:

Unfortunately, today we have to remind everyone once again how people’s dignity was infringed, how terror and violence took place, how property rights were disregarded, how innocent youth were murdered, how freedom of speech was suppressed, how media was cracked down and there was cynicism, lies and racketeering. This is a dark past of our country and our city which we will never, ever, come back. However, we should not forget to know – what path did we take and what mistakes we made (Georgian Dream, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

This document offers an overview of propaganda techniques of persuasion:

- 1) Negative name calling against undesirable subjects and groups together with shaping an image of an enemy.
- 2) The *ad nauseam* technique that implies constant repetition of one slogan or idea and seeks to convince the public with seemingly the most inconceivable lies.
- 3) Generalization that puts the entire cluster into a negative light through generalization of a specific occurrence, subject or idea.
- 4) Challenging the accuser is based on the logic that the best defense is a good offense.
- 5) Huckster technique that employs absurd lies and conspiracy theories.
- 6) The ‘what-aboutism’ technique that instead of giving answers to difficult questions either comes forward with counter-allegations or shifts the focus to other issues to evade well-deserved criticism.
- 7) The ‘bandwagon’ approach that implies the use of the notion: “everybody does that” and urges the members of society to bandwagon this or that group and mimic crowd behavior.

- 8) Cardstacking, the taking inconsistent positions (similar to card stacking) where the purveyor does not think much about homogeneity of messages and acts only according to practical needs. It is perfectly possible in this case to argue one thing today and start to claim the absolute opposite the very next day.

All eight of these techniques are universal and can be used for a variety of situations and purposes. However, the cases examined in this article – Russian propaganda and the Georgian government's rhetoric – exhibit similar characteristics, which means they are primarily based on a negative agenda, create enemy images and promote conspiracy theories to keep their misdeeds out of sight.

Notably, negative propaganda campaigns used by the Georgian authorities have become particularly robust during pre-election periods and during assorted political or social crises. The ruling Georgian Dream party seeks to discredit its opponents by negative name calling. The labels of the “war party” and the wider GWP are vivid examples since the target was essentially the UNM opposition party, albeit it is routinely used against the other opposition parties. Georgian Dream has broadened usage of these war party labels to target their supporters including Georgia's Office of the Public Defender (Ombudsman), all media outlets, western politicians and any actor who criticizes the government. The rhetoric of the government not only bears similarities to Russian propaganda in its approaches but also disseminates precisely the same message. Specifically, it is evident that the GWP label, around which the corresponding conspiracy theory was constructed, was already firmly entrenched in the Russian narrative. Following the commencement of the war in Ukraine, Russian propaganda increasingly employed this epithet to characterize Western countries.

For years, the Georgian government has been sowing the fear that the opposition parties were about to start a coup d'état. Since 2013, the claim is that several cases have been launched to this aim, although none of them were investigated, which lends credibility to an argument that such statements were intended for propaganda purposes alone.

Furthermore, when targeted with criticism, the Georgian Dream starts to employ the counter-allegation technique and instead of speaking on challenges currently facing the country, strives to remind wrongdoings of the previous government. The Georgian Dream's rhetoric, when discussing poverty in Georgia, problems afflicting the judiciary, safety of journalists or fuel prices still heavily features problems during the rule of the previous government. Moreover, it has been tenth year already, since the Georgian Dream started to feed voters with propaganda narratives that states the although previous government of UNM was a politically “bankrupt” party, the “ending” of the UNM remained as a strategic goal of the country in the run-up to every election.

Finally, it is possible to conclude that public communication of the Georgia Dreams' government implies not only making severe allegations against political opponents and civil society with critical thoughts, but also sowing groundless fear among the population, and through making manipulative public sentiments attempting to shape a negative agenda. This should be a matter of concern for Georgia's populace. This type of communication, akin to Russian propaganda, contributes to disorientation and disunity throughout the society.

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# Women's Lifestyle Magazine Instagram Profiles: A Comparative Analysis of Polish, French and British Publications

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**Abstract:** The authors have studied Instagram profiles of women's magazines published in Poland, France and the United Kingdom: *Twój Styl*, *Vogue PL*, *Marie Claire*, *Vogue FR*, *Vogue GB* and *Stylist*. All (464) posts published on Instagram profiles in April 2022 were analyzed. The aim of the research was to show similarities and differences in the ways of communication via Instagram profiles. This paper's chosen methodology is qualitative and quantitative content analysis and is based on types of posts and their functions and on audience reactions to posted content. The results proved that the similarities emerge between the profiles of magazines that operate in specific media markets – the content and communication is adapted to the country in which the magazine operates. This study contributes to academic literature on the integration of traditional media with new media as a response to media convergence.

**Keywords:** Women's Magazines, Instagram, Social Media, Convergence

## INTRODUCTION

Women's press is an important sector within the media systems of the UK, France and Poland, as well as Europe as a whole. Women's magazines have long provided a stable source of income for their publishers (which now consist largely of international conglomerates), due to both their high copy sales and the sale of advertising space (Kalombe & Phiri, 2019). We can observe that the emergence of information and communication technologies enabling the development of social media have contributed to a significant change in the inner workings of women's magazines. To attract new customers, women's magazines must engage with a younger readership online, often through magazine social media accounts which appeared first on Facebook, and then Instagram (Dąbrowska-Cendrowska, 2018). An online presence enables magazine editors to create and post multimedia content, receive feedback from customers and promote the paper versions of their magazines (Szews, 2014). Leszek Olszański emphasises that 'magazines on social media should be active in four main fields: information, promotion, customer engagement, and data collection' (Olszański, 2012, p. 226). Editors of women's magazines can use social media to report on issues of interest to women, whilst keeping their social media presence connected to their physical publication. Through digital profiles, magazines can engage their readers in discussions on topics covered by women's printed press. User feedback provides a source of knowledge on the needs and interests of women; editors can draw inspiration from the topics of online conversation. Magazine social media profiles also provide another channel of promotion for hard copies, as well as an additional place for the further distribution of content.

In 2010, the emergence of Instagram – an image-based social media platform – gave media outlets additional opportunities to attract new audiences and establish reliable communication channels with existing readers. According to the Digital 2021 Global Overview Report (Dataportal, 2021) on the use of social media, Instagram is one of the world's most-used social platforms. Moreover, after Snapchat, it is the second most popular social media site amongst women (Statistica, 2023) – rendering Instagram an attractive space for media concerns looking to attract new consumers.

The aim of this article is to characterise the communication methods of selected women's magazines using their Instagram profiles. To achieve this, specific research objectives have been determined, including the classification of Instagram posts, the characterisation of readers with an evaluation of their engagement, and appraisal of the ways in which women's publications make use of the tools provided by Instagram.

## LITERATURE REVIEW & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The discussion about the need for women's magazines to have websites and social media accounts has been ongoing for several years. There is consensus that traditional analogue media – print press, radio and television broadcasting – are losing their audience to new digital media (Kęsicka, 2010; Novita et al., 2022; Yoedtadi et al., 2021). In addition to the decrease of sales and circulations, print media outlets have also lost their advertising incomes due to the rise of social media platforms and changes of media consumption. The main reason is magazine readers, especially young people, increasingly prefer to consume content from websites and social media platforms, in part due to the speed and accessibility of online commenting which may foster a sense of community and empowerment (Bly, 2010; Everett, 2011; Novita et al., 2022). As a rule, advertisers follow consumers. In the early 2010s social media enabled traditional media to create accounts to promote their content. Soon after, the social media took over a part of printed editions' audiences and advertising budgets (Kreft, 2012; 2019). Still, the traditional media companies did view the platforms as opportunities rather than threats. The relationship primarily concerns low marginal costs and access to potentially multiple audiences and to deliver a unique customer experience, but also to lower barriers to entry and open markets. Facebook, Instagram or Telegram support media companies in establishing deeper connections with their customers, shaping their relationships and making it easier to identify niche markets in the media industry. They enable businesses to „smartly” tap the potential of customer preferences and establish personalized contact with them, but also shape individual and collective behaviour. Publications now encourage online engagement, with the role of the reader becoming progressively more active (Kreft, 2022).

Social media has changed the way the press industry works, both for media outlets and consumers (Farhi, 2009; Gleason, 2010). Whilst Twitter has had the biggest impact on news publications, Instagram has had more influence over the women's press sector. The traditional models of distribution and monetization in the media industry – copy sales, subscriptions and the sale of advertising space – have become insufficient (Vidas-Bubanja & Bubanja, 2015). To survive, publications must adapt to the changing media landscape; integrating analogue print media with new digital media (Everett, 2011; Novita et al., 2022; Nurliah, 2008; Restendy, 2020; Yoedtadi et al., 2021). The use of social networking platforms by traditional media outlets is a manifestation of convergence: the combining of traditional and new media in the process of content creation and distribution (Lawson, 2003). This 'melting together' (Jenkins, 2006) has been enabled by digitization and the development of information technology, above all the Internet (Jean & Ispandriano, 2021). Research emphasises that producing

digital versions of newspapers and magazines has become a necessity (Smits, 2014). Nevertheless, media convergence presents a huge challenge to the press industry, as most newspapers find it difficult to adjust to the new digital media environment (Krumsvik, 2006). Those media companies that can quickly and appropriately adapt to the requirements of a digital environment gain a strategic competitive advantage; accessibility across various platforms equates to new content distribution channels (Everett, 2011; Krumsvik 2006; Küng, 2008; Oliver, 2014). Magazine digitization and the function of social media in the press are discussed further in studies by Chan-Olmsted and Chang (2003), Dennis et al., (2006) and Meikle and Young (2008).

The largest media conglomerates, including magazine publishers, use multiple content distribution channels simultaneously, implementing multi-platform production and circulation instead of using only one medium (Doyle, 2010; 2015). The multi-platform expansion strategy promises to generate new streams of revenue, improve management and effectively utilise media resources (Doyle, 2010; 2013).

Among the platforms most often used by the press, blogs initially dominated (Yahr, 2008), which were replaced by interactive social media such as Twitter (Engesser & Humprecht 2015; Hermida 2013; Lawrence et al., 2013; Szews 2014), Instagram and Facebook (Greenwood et al., 2016; Manovich 2016; Skogerbø & Krumsvik, 2015). At the time of writing, few authors have studied the use of Instagram by print press outlets (Brandtzaeg et al., 2016; Larsson 2017).

Researchers emphasize that before media outlets enter the social media market, they should develop effective audience engagement strategies to encourage readers to use magazine-related social media (Magazine Media Factbook 2015). Media outlets must first identify their target audience; their personality type, relevant psychographic variables and motivations, to determine what will encourage social media engagement (Jain et al., 2017). Media outlets should try to understand audience expectations, monitor their social platforms, and adapt to changing reader preferences (Jain et al., 2017).

Research reveals that readers now expect magazines to have a social media presence (Jain et al., 2017). Twitter and Instagram users engaging with online publications were found most likely to follow the accounts of magazines focused on fashion, celebrity gossip, health and fitness, and travel, for whom young female students were identified as the main participant demographic (Jain et al., 2017). The Magazine Publication Association report for 2015 (MPA, 2015) shows that *National Geographic* and *Vogue* were amongst the top five most followed magazine profiles on social media. Jain and colleagues conclude:

This finding has implications for publishers in that they should not only be concerned about the platforms where most people congregate but also

target and push content that is geared toward motivational use of specific platforms. For example, *Vogue*, a magazine focused on fashion, would most benefit from targeting users on Pinterest and Instagram as opposed to, say, Facebook, given our findings that most people prefer fashion-based content in the form of visuals that are more likely to be accessed on Pinterest and Instagram.’ (Jain et al., 2017, p. 15)

Cooperation and consolidation can be taken as key tenets for publications developing in a media landscape in which we see the convergence of industry, markets and consumer behaviour (Jenkins, 2006; Yoedtadi et al., 2021). Publications are increasingly becoming active across multiple platforms, which affects all participants in the media industry, from content creators and journalists to readers.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper used a mixed method that combines quantitative and qualitative content analysis, which has been adapted to suit the needs of social media content research (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2001; Krippendorff, 2013). The aim of the study was to *investigate* the ways, in which popular women’s lifestyle magazines use Instagram. Women’s magazines published in three countries, Poland, France and the UK, were selected for comparative research. This article focuses on six magazines, examining two from each media system – Poland: *Twój Styl*, *Vogue*; France: *Marie Claire*, *Vogue*; UK: *Stylist*, *Vogue*. According to number of copies sold, *Twój Styl*, *Marie Claire* and *Stylist* were the leading women’s magazines in their respective markets – it is also interesting to note that these are all domestic publications. Polish, French and British *Vogue* were included in the study as examples from an historic and internationally well-known women’s fashion and lifestyle magazine brand.

To determine the ways magazine outlets communicate using Instagram profiles, the following hypotheses were put forward:

- (H1) National editions of *Vogue* will share a similar communication style.
- (H2) Significant differences will be found across the profiles of *Twój Styl*, *Marie Claire* and *Stylist*, resulting from the distribution strategy to the profiles.
- (H3) Original posts will dominate the magazines’ online output<sup>1</sup>.
- (H4) The individual editorial offices will perform various functions on their digital profiles in their own distinct ways.

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<sup>1</sup> By the phrase “original”, the authors mean content created by a specific brand for that concrete content distribution channel i.e. for Instagram.

The research for this article was conducted in April 2022. The time frame of one month was established according to the frequency of Instagram posts. All posts published during April 2022 on each of the above-described Instagram profiles were collected for analysis. The total sample was 464 posts. The selected parameters allow the authors to capture the functional dynamics of the Instagram accounts of women's lifestyle magazines. Empirical data collected during the research process was recorded on an ongoing basis using MS Excel spreadsheets. A separate spreadsheet was created for each magazine profile. Posts copied from the above-mentioned Instagram profiles were pasted into the spreadsheets. For the purposes of the article, the posts that served below as examples for the categories in the categorization key were translated into English by the authors of the article. A single post was adopted as the unit of analysis.

For the purposes of the study, we constructed a categorization key consisting of two elements – type of post and post function (Tables 1 and 2) and two parts (Tables 1 and 3)

**Table 1. Type of Post and Category Description**

No.	Type of Post	Description
1.	Referring to the website of the parent magazine	A message aimed at redirecting the user to content published on the official magazine website (e.g. 'Princess Diana loved bows and veils, she wore bowler hats and wide brims, and her favourites included headgear inspired by the '60s. At <i>Vogue.pl</i> we curate a selection of Easter hats worn by the royal family') <sup>2</sup> .
2.	Referring to printed editions of the magazine	A message aimed at redirecting the user to the paper version of the magazine (e.g. 'The May issue of <i>Twój Styl</i> goes on sale tomorrow').
3.	Promotional	A message promoting a service or product. May advertise its own brand (e.g. a competition organized by the magazine) or other brands (e.g. 'Removing make-up is a recommended daily activity to keep skin healthy. That is why Bioderma has designed 'Crealine H2O', specially adapted for sensitive eyes...').
4.	Linked to other media	All references to other communication channels both magazine-related and non-magazine-branded (e.g. post on new episode of <i>Le Street Style</i> on the magazine's YouTube channel).
5.	Containing additional content	Not classified in any of the above categories but aiming to engage the audience (e.g. "Go Back to the Future" with this delicious Iranian rice dessert, which takes us directly to childhood. A sweet note of flavour to end the weekend. Do you have a favourite rice pudding recipe?').

Source: Authors' own research

Due to the specificity of the content posted on Instagram, we created two additional categories that combined at least two types of posts. This approach

<sup>2</sup> Due to its internal limitations Instagram is not so simple to redirect traffic to a website – you can insert only one link in profile description (so called "bio") and cannot insert active links (hyperlinks) to posts. So it is difficult to redirect traffic to a website. The ways of referring to websites will be discussed more extensively in the in-depth research planned by the authors.

of seven categories allowed for the characterization, analysis and evaluation of the studied media.

**Table 2. Combined categories**

No.	Type of Post	Examples
1.	Referring to both the website and the printed issue	For example: 'You can order the May issue of Vogue Polska with one of three covers to choose from today at Vogue.pl. On sale from 28 April.'
2.	Promotional post which also refers to the website	For example: 'Dreaming of summer? The new Habitat home collection means sun and holidays... Link in bio'

Source: Authors' own research

The second part of the categorization key refers to the post topics (Table 3):

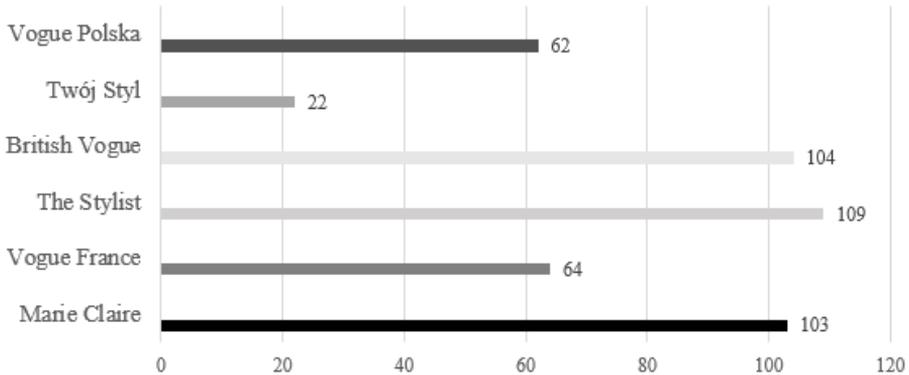
**Table 3. Post Function and Category Description**

No.	Post Function	Thematic Category
1.	Information	Posts containing current information related to lifestyle topics dominant in women's magazines (fashion, beauty, celebrity news, health, recipes, travel, etc.). Can include information about the publishing cycle of the printed magazine and its content. They introduce topics that are expanded upon across the magazine's other social media sites, website or printed edition.
2.	Advice	Posts in the form of instructions, providing 'step by step' information on how to apply perfect make-up, how to choose clothes and accessories etc.
3.	Entertainment	Posts referring to both the subject of everyday life, e.g. morning coffee to improve mood, and important societal events, e.g. encouraging readers to vote. Supplemented with photos, memes, gifs, and videos.
4.	Promotion	Posts promoting own-brand services and products or those of other brands.
5.	Culture	Posts related to culture (theatre, film, books, art, etc.)

Source: Authors' own research

Each of the six surveyed magazines has its own Instagram profile on which appeared the posts (N=464), of which the UK's *The Stylist* (n=109), the UK's *Vogue* (n=104), France's *Marie Claire* (n=103), *Vogue France* (n=64), *Vogue Polska* (n=62) and Poland's *Twój Styl* (n=22) (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Number of Instagram Profile Posts (N=464) by Magazine during April 2022



Source: Authors

Our research identified that the magazine Instagram profiles differ in terms of frequency of posting. *Twój Styl* only updates every other day at most, whereas the accounts of rest of the other five magazines publish content at least once a day. The analysis also revealed significant variation in methods of communication by the type of content released.

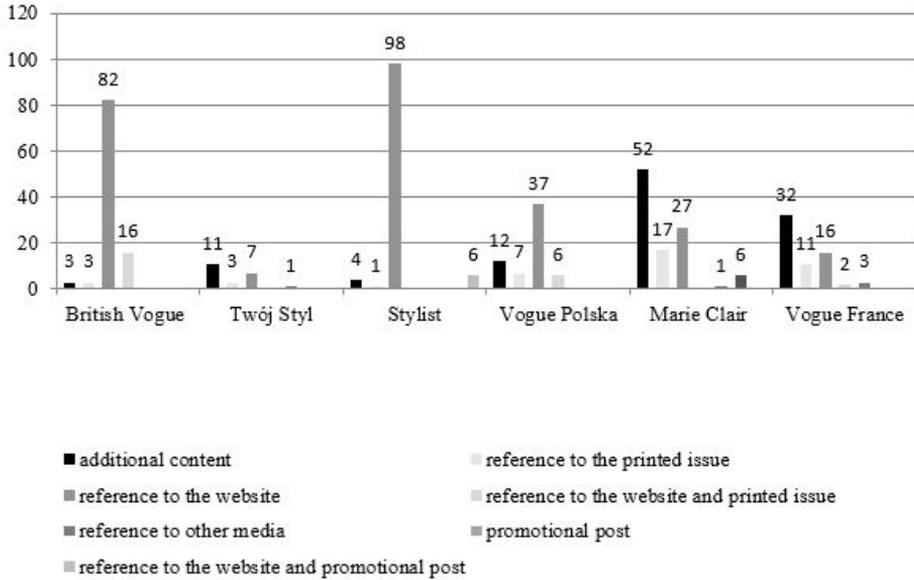
*British Vogue's* dominant type of post comprised references to its website (n=82). There were also some posts that referred to the website and the printed issue simultaneously (n=16), and there were minimal references to the printed issue (n=3) and additional content (n=3). During the study period of April 2022, there were not any references to other media, promotional posts, or combined website reference or promotional posts on *British Vogue's* Instagram profile. In *The Stylist*, as in *British Vogue*, references to the website dominated (n=98), there were a few posts containing additional content (n=4) and a post referring to its print issue (n=1). Analysis of *The Stylist's* profile did not uncover the presence of other post categories.

*Twój Styl's* posts most frequently contain additional content (n=11), followed by references to the website (n=7), as well as the printed issue (n=3) and to affiliated media in the form of *Twój Styl Men* (n=1). None of *Twój Styl's* posts featured combined categories. On the *Vogue Polska* profile – as with *British Vogue* – the dominant posts were references to the website (n=37) and the remaining categories consisted of additional content (n=12), referring to the printed issue (n=7), and combined categories (n=6).

Most posts on *Marie Claire's* profile concerned additional content (n=52) plus posts referring to the website (n=27), the printed issue (n=17), promotional posts (n=6), and a combined post referring to the website whilst promoting a brand (n=1). The dominant post on *Vogue France's* Instagram account concerned additional content (n=32), followed by references to the website (n=16) and the print

issue (n=11), as well as posts referring to other media (n=3), and combined posts referring to the website and the printed issue at the same time (n=2). See Figure 2 for the breakdown of each magazine’s posts.

Figure 2. Types of Posts on Women’s Magazine Instagram Profiles (N=464) during April 2022.



Source: Authors

There are distinctions in the dominant categories of types of posts across national press markets. British magazines mainly use Instagram profiles to promote official websites and as a ‘transitional’ platform whose purpose is to redirect the user’s interest to the website and generate traffic. In this case, Instagram is treated an integral part of the magazine’s online brand – at the centre of which is the official website.

The Instagram profiles of French magazines are more autonomous. Their content is designed to keep the user on the profile, and as such is less dependent on other distribution channels (websites or printed magazines). They also act as an additional, separate content distribution channel, unlike British Instagram accounts.

The profiles of Polish periodicals are varied. *Vogue Polska* has an active Instagram account publishing a range of posts (though still dominated by those promoting the website). On the other hand, *Twój Styl*’s account publishes relatively few posts. *Twój Styl*’s Instagram largely features posts with additional content, the purpose of which is to maintain reader engagement and evoke

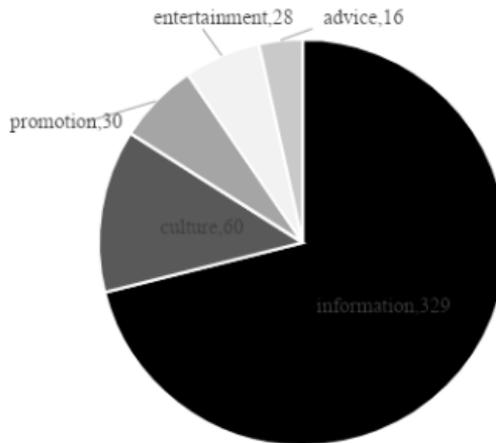
response (comments, likes). In terms of content, *Twój Styl*'s profile bears a closer resemblance to those of French magazines.

The ways that the profiles of licensed magazines (e.g. *Vogue*) communicate with their audience differs across countries. This suggests that when planning content posted on Instagram, international brands consider the characteristics of the recipient groups of individual media markets.

It is apparent that the publishers of the surveyed magazines intend to build their online brands using the Instagram platform. However, neither promotion of the magazine in its traditional format, nor working with advertisers to finance publishing activities form the companies' primary digital aims. Additionally, it does not seem that publishers plan to encourage readers of paper versions of magazines to use online distribution channels. Rather, taking into consideration the target demographics of women's magazines and social media sites such as Instagram, we find that these companies are mainly seeking to attract a younger online audience.

Analysis of types of post published allowed for the determination of their functions. In all the surveyed Instagram profiles, information concerning women's interests proved dominant (n=329). Posts on culture followed second by a wide margin (n=60). The number of posts performing a promotional function (n=30) and on entertainment (n=28) were quite similar. Few posts provided advice to readers (n=16). This trend is also echoed in printed women's magazines, which focus more on fashion and lifestyle than advice.

Figure 3. Functions Performed by the Instagram Profiles of the Surveyed Magazines (N=464) during April 2022



Source: Authors

Examining information posts over the individual magazine accounts, we see that *The Stylist* profile included most posts of this type (87 out of 109). There were slightly fewer posted by *British Vogue* (76 out of 104). The French magazines displayed lower numbers – *Marie Claire* (61 out of 103), *Vogue France* (45 out of 64) – and whilst *Vogue Polska* had a high incidence of information posts (49 out of 62), *Twój Styl* had the lowest (11 out of 22). It should be noted that on all the profiles surveyed, the role of these posts was to provide current information related to lifestyle topics of interest to women. Topics included:

#### Fashion:

Alessandro Michele turns his ‘beloved’ handbag into the ultimate object of desire by revisiting the emblematic @Gucci models, GG Marmont, Jackie 1961, Horsebit 1955 and Bamboo 1947. (*Vogue France*, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcqHU23ImTU/>);

#### Food:

The long weekend is the perfect time to experiment in the kitchen: try adding an Asian touch to traditional dishes. In the spirit of comfort food, Katarzyna and Zofia Pilitowska from the popular Krakow breakfast restaurant *Ranny Ptaszek* have prepared simple recipes just in time for lazy long weekend cooking. Link in bio’. (*Vogue Polska*, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cc-KTZFvYjw/>);

#### Women’s health:

Model Alice Detollenaere shares a lengthy video in which she breaks down the steps of preventive mastectomies. She openly supports women affected. (*Marie Claire*, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CboVcAOoUh8/>).

Some information posts also concerned the publishing cycles of the printed magazines and their content:

The May issue of *Twój Styl* goes on sale tomorrow! It features @omenaamensah, @kach\_blazejewska\_dietetyk, @dereszowska, @martamanowska, @paulina\_holtz, @katarzyna\_dowbor\_official, @aleksandrapoplawska and the volunteers we talk to about the need for altruism. Also on the cover is Wanda Traczyk-Stawska – our Woman of the Year 2021 (*Twój Styl*, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcTAo7AMKDR/>).

Information posts generally aim to introduce readers to a given issue which can be explored using alternative brand tools, such as the magazine's other social media accounts, website, or printed edition.

Instagram posts on culture were the next most frequent genre for *The Stylist* (n=16), *British Vogue* (n=14), and *Vogue Polska* (n=9). We included all posts in which there were references to cultural products and events in this category, such as:

From the glossy new adaptation of legal thriller #TheLincolnLawyer starring Neve Campbell and scandalous investigative documentary #OurFather to the long-awaited return of #StrangerThings, @Netflix's bumper May line-up is here, and it certainly doesn't disappoint. Head to the link in our bio for our roundup of the best new films and TV shows landing on the streaming service next month. (*The Stylist*, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cc8YvoUubJI/>)

For *Twój Styl* and *Vogue France*, the second most common type of post was promotional; these magazine profiles respectively published 5 and 9 posts advertising products or services, including their own:

PhotoVogue's global open call for the next great fashion photographers. This year, #PhotoVogue has become a global project that engages the entire network of Condé Nast worldwide. Being global will translate into more opportunities for artists to have their work published or commissioned by our brands across all 32 markets and commercial partners, and also more worldwide events, talks, exhibitions, and portfolio reviews to further conversations around and the promotion of creativity and diversity in image making. More information in the link in bio. (*Vogue France*, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcDbIn4Dqce/>)

They also promoted other brands:

The editor of TwójSTYL.pl @joanna\_andrzejewska\_ has chosen on-trend pieces for us from @modivo's new collection. Are you ready for the new season? *Twój Styl*, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcDzfgUFaom/>)

In *Marie Claire*, second place was occupied by entertainment posts (n=18), however very few of these were published by the other magazine accounts.

Over the analysed period of April 2022, entertainment posts were published on the profiles of *British Vogue* (n=3), *Twój Styl* (n=3), and *Vogue France* (n=3). Entertainment posts have a noticeable aesthetic appeal, and are usually supplemented by photos, videos or gifs, such as:

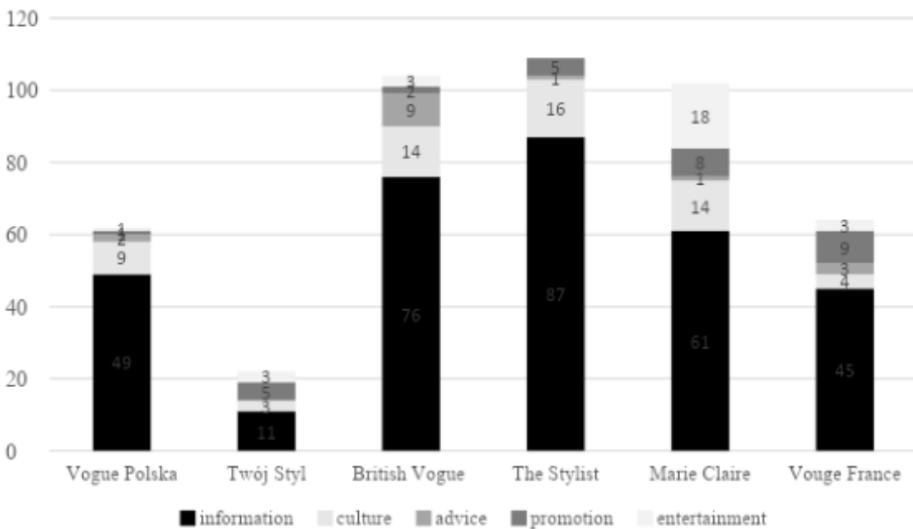
A magnificent array of tulips lighting up this April morning. This colourful field, located between Lurs, La Brillanne and Forcalquier, entrances us with a symphony of peppery colours! The best vitamin to start the day. (*Marie Claire*, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cb4U89pIImW/>)

As mentioned previously, advice posts only appeared infrequently. *British Vogue* published the most posts with tutorials and tips (n=9), for example:

With spring upon us, #BritishVogue and @CarolinaHerrera have staged a masterclass in how to style a statement dress that will work for any occasion. Click the link in bio for the best investment dresses you can buy now and how to wear them. (*British Vogue*, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cbz7mozM8Vf/>).

See Figure 3 for these statistics.

Figure 4. Comparing the Functions of Women’s Magazine Instagram Posts (N=464) in April 2022



Source: Authors

Reader reactions to posts were also evaluated as part of this study. Each post was compared by the number of likes and comments, and those with the highest number on each profile are described here. Our analysis shows that *Twój Styl* received its largest number of likes (n=487) for a post published on 13 April 2022, which contained information about the new issue of the printed magazine, the stars on its cover, and its content. The post tagged many of those people featured in or collaborating on this issue (make-up artists, hairdressers, photographers, etc.). The post with the most comments (n=26) was dated 25 April 2022, and

encouraged Instagram users to read an interview with the actors of the new Polish Netflix series 'Zachowaj spokój' ('Hold Tight').

In *Vogue Polska's* account, one post from 26 April 2022 had both the most likes (n=27,926) and comments (n=112). Similar to *Twój Styl's* most liked post, it contains information about the latest issue of the printed magazine, including various covers, photo shoots, and those people featured in or collaborating with the edition (make-up artists, photographers, hairdressers, etc.). There is also a link to the *Vogue* website, encouraging readers to subscribe the magazine.

*The Stylist's* most liked post (n=24,494) was published on 9 April 2022. It consisted of a tagged video of the singer Dua Lipa practicing yoga, allowing readers a glimpse into the life of the star. The post with the most comments (n=80) was from 23 April 2022, and included a fragment of author Amy Beecham's writing about the complicated life of an only child, as well as a link to the website to read the full article.

The most liked post (n=548,033) on *British Vogue's* profile was an entertainment post from 6 April 2022. It was a clip from a video of Brooklyn Beckham and his wife Nicola Peltz playing a game during which they answered questions about their private lives. The post included a link to the magazine's website containing the entire video, and tagged the game participants, video directors, make-up artists and other creative staff, as well as the US TV series 'Gilmore Girls', which was mentioned during the game. A promotional post from 22 April 2022 received the most comments (n=1,879). It presented spring makeup trends inspired by the US TV series 'Euphoria' and the rapper Lisa from Kpop group Blackpink.

On *Vogue France's* account, an information post from 11 April 2022 received the most likes (n=183,035). It contains a report from the wedding of Brooklyn Beckham and Nicole Peltz, featuring description and photos of their clothes and the ceremony. The post also tagged the profiles of the brands with which the newlyweds cooperated. An information post published on 9 April 2022 received the most comments (n=598). It concerned an upcoming collection from Italian label Pucci to be revealed in Capri. The post tagged the designer brand, as well as online fashion retailer Mytheresa, which was selling the collection.

An information post on 14 April 2022 was the most liked (n=49,015) on *Marie Claire's* profile. It was about blogger Dani's #stopviolenceagainstwomen campaign against the sexual harassment of women. A promotional post published on 6 April 2022 received the most comments (n=1,652). This post advertised a competition organized by the magazine, tagging brands sponsoring the prizes and describing the terms and regulations of the competition. Posts that tagged celebrities and brands (fashion, shopping, make-up, etc.) attracted the most audience engagement. Hashtags and profile tagging have an impact on user responses; they can both help magazine followers find content posted online, as well as draw in other

Instagram users. The most popular posts are about famous people and the industries they work in (fashion, beauty, popular culture etc.), as well as events from their private and public lives.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article examines the role and importance of the Instagram profiles of printed women's magazines in the Polish, French and British press markets. Our research was centred on six magazines: regional editions of *Vogue* from the above-mentioned demographics, as well as domestic publications from each country – *Twój Styl*, *Marie Claire* and *The Stylist*. Based on the results of the study, we can make some concluding remarks.

Currently, printed magazines have Instagram profiles, due to the media convergence process and the search for new audience engagement channels. Based on high profile activity (number of publications added), Instagram is an important part of the communication strategy for British magazines and the French edition of *Marie Claire*. The low activity of *Twój Styl* profile accounts for the magazine's low commitment to branding in the social medium of Instagram.

We hypothesised that we would find greater similarities in communication methods across the regional Instagram profiles of *Vogue*, rather than those of domestic magazines. However, our results proved otherwise. *Vogue*'s Instagram profiles are tailored to the media markets of individual countries. Similarities emerged instead between the profiles of magazines that operate in specific media markets, e.g. *Twój Styl* and *Vogue Polska*. We also hypothesised that magazine Instagram posts of the type classified here as containing 'additional content' (i.e. related only to the Instagram profile) would prove dominant across all profiles. This type dominated the profiles of *Twój Styl*, *Marie Claire* and *Vogue France*, suggesting that the Instagram pages of these magazines have a greater level of independence. This was not the case for *The Stylist*, *British Vogue* and *Vogue Polska*, where the dominant posts were those that referred to the magazine's website and functioned as a means of multi-platform communication. As with printed women's magazines, the most common subject category for all Instagram posts was information concerning women's lifestyles and interests.

There are limitations to our study. Our sample only included Instagram posts, leaving out the other forms of content delivery Instagram offers, such as Stories, which is a short-term publishing system for photos, videos, animations or captions. We did not include Instagram Stories in the study due to the temporary nature of the posts; the content disappears after 24 hours.

This study contributes to academic literature on the integration of women's press with social media. So far, in literature on the subject, there has been discussions

regarding consumer expectations and interaction with social media, as well as on changes in the organisation of editorial work because of the media convergence process. However, there are not many publications that refer to the content and functions of the social media profiles of women's magazines. The findings of this study confirm our belief that there is a need for comparative research on the functioning of women's press in social media, and for research on how to use the tools offered by social media.

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# Legislation for Video-Sharing Platforms on the European Audiovisual Market. The Polish Transposition of Audio-Visual Media Services Directive

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**Abstract:** The progressing convergence of television and Internet services has caused a dynamic development of the audiovisual market. The decision to regulate the subject matter of video-sharing platforms (VSPs) in the amended Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) was dictated by recognition that such platforms compete for the same viewers and incomes as other audiovisual media services. Coordination of legislation on the European level led to the necessity to introduce amendments to Polish law. The main purpose of this article is to present selected provisions of AVMSD and Poland's Broadcasting Act concerning VSPs as an area of media policy, which previously had fallen outside the scope of institutional intervention and regulatory restrictions relating to the traditional media market. The central question that author attempted to resolve was whether measures used in relation to VSP providers are legitimate, necessary and proportional. The study explains the definition of video delivery services which is fundamental from the point of view of imposing some obligations on these types of services.

**Keywords:** audiovisual media service, video-sharing platforms (VSPs), VSP provider, user-generated video, jurisdictional regime.

## INTRODUCTION

The traditional model of the audio-visual market with the strict division into broadcaster and recipient is shifting towards a market of video-sharing platforms (VSPs). Users, who create, share and comment on digitalized content become active participants of the media market (Badźmirowska-Masłowska, 2020, p. 439). The European Union (EU) has noticed the significance of platforms as a medium of exchanging information and shaping user opinions. The EU intended via Directive (EU) 2018/1808 amending the Directive 2010/13/EU Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) to ensure equilibrium between access to online contents, guarantees of competitiveness and recipients' protection (Klaflkowska-Waśniowska, 2018, p. 10).

Implementation of the Directive 2018 generated a wave of strong emotions in the public space of the Polish Internet. Websites of the Polish regulator of the electronic media market, the Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji (KRRiT—the National Broadcasting Council) reminded users of their obligations under the Directive (KRRiT, 2022). Users publishing video materials on VSPs like *YouTube*, *TikTok*, *Twitch* and *Facebook* that profited from the service, e.g., under appropriate agreements with advertisers or representatives of the VSP was obliged to have an entry on the list of users maintained by the Chairman of KRRiT. The discussion was also joined by Poland's Ombudsman, in whose opinion any difficult-to-comply-with obligations imposed on content creators might constitute violations of both the freedom of speech and that of artistic creation that the Constitution of the Republic of Poland and other normative acts guarantee (RPO, 2022). The combination of declarations by the authorities and negative comments by confused VSP users (Dąbrowska-Cydzik, 2022) provided the stimulus to write this article, using the legal-dogmatic method, to discover whether Poland's new legislative framework is simply incomprehensible or excessively detailed. This article provided an analysis of VSPs to prescribe specific legal criteria, which determine whether a service meets the definition of a VSP and whether it falls within Poland's jurisdiction. Defining video delivery services is fundamental from the point of view of imposing certain obligations on this type of service, which this article discusses. These considerations form a contribution to further research on the regulatory regime's validity and an attempt at its evaluation. The central question that the author sought to resolve is whether measures used in relation to VSP providers are legitimate, necessary and proportional.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The amendment on 11 August 2021 of Poland's Broadcasting Act (URTV) introduced VSPs into Polish law. It was dictated by the need to legally implement the norms of the AVMSD, which EU member states were obliged to transpose by 19 September 2020. However, most EU countries found implementation of the new specifications a difficult challenge, both from the point of view of legislation and adjustment of the system. Indeed, the Polish legislator did not meet the implementation deadline (Matlak, 2022a, p. 40). The provisions governing VSPs are included in the dictionary of terms of Art. 4 items 22a-22d and Chapter 6b of the URTV (both added by the 2021 amendment). The provisions allow the AVMSD to preserve its legal framework and to ease of its implementation by the addressees of the discussed norms (Explanatory Memorandum, 2021, p. 2). Also, the AVMSD addresses the activities of VSP providers to a limited degree, in selected Recitals and in the added Chapter IXA, containing the provisions of Art. 28(a), regarding establishment of jurisdiction, and Art. 28(b) regarding the contents shared on the platforms. The method of regulating VSP activities adopted by Polish legislator corresponds to the general European tendencies in this area, shown in *Mapping of national rules applicable to video-sharing platforms* by European Audiovisual Observatory (EAO, 2022). As VSP regulation operates under minimum harmonization regime, every member state may legislate for measures that are more detailed or stricter than those in the AVMSD (Duda-Staworko, 2022, p. 37).

The national authority in charge of the regulation of VSPs remains generally in the hands of public authorities which is entrusted with regulation of audiovisual media services (EAO, 2022, p. 37).

There are two key pre-requisites when considering VSPS—definitions of providers and users and the legal criteria. The first concerns the term 'video-sharing platform services' (VSPS) and the way the 2018 amendments to the AVMSD defines both VSPS providers and users. Under Art.1 (1) (aa) VSP is: a service as defined by Articles 56 and 57 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), where the principal purpose of the service or of a dissociable section thereof or an essential functionality of the service is devoted to providing programs, user-generated videos, or both, to the general public, for which the video-sharing platform provider does not have editorial responsibility, in order to inform, entertain or educate, by means of electronic communications networks within the meaning of point (a) of Article 2 of Directive 2002/21/EC; and the organization of which is determined by the video-sharing platform provider, including by automatic means or algorithms in particular by displaying, tagging and sequencing.

The Polish wording of the definition is almost identical as in another European countries (EAO, 2022, p. 11; Niewęglowski, 2021, p. 177), as Art. 4 item 22(a) of the URTV defines a VSPS as being: provided by electronic means, as a part of economic activity conducted in that area, if the principal purpose or essential functionality of that service or a dissociable section thereof is provision to the general public, for informational, entertaining or educating purposes, of programs, user-generated videos or other contents for which the video-sharing platform provider does not have editorial responsibility but the organization of which is determined by the video-sharing platform provider, including by automatic means or algorithms in particular by displaying, tagging and sequencing.

VSPs may be rendered by video sharing providers, that is, under Art.1(1) letter (da) of AVMSD natural or legal persons. Polish definition in Art. 4, item 22c URTV adds commercial partnership providing VSP (EAO, 2022, p. 15; Explanatory Memorandum, 2021, p. 31; Duda-Staworko, 2022, p. 40).

A part of the definition of the VSP service is also the concept of the user's provision of the video. In AVMSD a user-generated video means a set of moving images with or without sound constituting an individual item, irrespective of its length, that is created by a user and uploaded to a video-sharing platform by that user or any other user.

The analysis of the provision of URTV (Article 4, item 22b) suggests that the Polish definition is transposed verbatim (EAO, 2022, pp. 14–15).

There is no definitions and therefore no limitation who can be a user by the AVMSD ( Woods, 2018, p. 9) whereas Article 4, item 22d URTV gives a legal definition and defines them as a natural person, legal person or organizational unit referred to in Art. 331§1 of the Civil Code, using a VSP, in particular, by holding an account on the video-sharing platform, posting or receiving, through the platform, programs, videos or other contents generated by the user or by other users (Duda-Staworko, 2022, p. 40).

The definitions cited above highlight the model of VSPs operation. The next stage explores the jurisdictional criteria. According to AVMSD rules the country-of-origin principle, each Member State is supposed to ensure that all audiovisual media services rendered by the providers of services situated within the State's jurisdiction meet the requirements set forth in AVMSD, and under Art. 28b of the amending Directive an analogous solution was introduced with regard to VSPs. Under Recital 44 of AVMSD, providers are consequently subject to the provisions on the internal market set out in that Directive if they are established in a Member State.

It is appropriate to ensure that the same rules also apply to VSP providers which are not established in a Member State, in so far as those providers have either a parent undertaking or a subsidiary undertaking which is established in a Member State or where those providers are part of a group, and another

undertaking of that group is established in a Member State. A group means parent entity, any subsidiary entities and any other entities having economic or legal and organizational ties with the foregoing (Cole, 2018, p. 42; Cavaliere, 2021, p. 10). Under Art. 1a (5) URTV, a VSP provider is deemed to be established in Poland if the provider has their seat in the Republic of Poland. An exception was introduced to that rule under Art. 1a(6) URTV which states that a VSP provider is also deemed to be established in Poland if the provider does not have a seat here but has, in that territory, a parent entity, a branch, agency or subsidiary entity, unless the provider is seated in another Member State of the European Union. The same provision also mentions a parent entity, branch, agency or another subsidiary entity in the territory of another Member State of the European Union established prior to the establishment of the parent entity in Poland, provided that their relations with the economy of that Member State are actual and permanent (Chałubińska-Jentkiewicz & Nowikowska, 2022, p. 87; Explanatory Memorandum, 2021, pp. 33–35).

The European Commission should be notified about providers subject to jurisdiction of Member States. For that purpose, they shall prepare and update lists of VSP providers seated in their territory or deemed to be seated in their territory and shall indicate one of the criteria discussed above as the basis of jurisdiction. The obligations following from that fact, imposed on VSP providers, are discussed in a further part of the considerations.

## METHODOLOGY

### DEFINITIONS AND SCOPE

The regulation of VSPs in the AVMSD is a new element of EU media regulatory framework. The definition of VSP contains several elements pointed below. The EC is aware that it is not easy for either an entrepreneur or a regulator to qualify as a platform within the context of VSP services and thus the non-binding Guidelines on the Directive's transposition, in relation to the VSP definition were published (European Commission, 2020).

Video sharing platform service means a service as defined by Articles 56 and 57 of TFEU. Under Recital 6, the definition of a VSP service should not cover non-economic activities, such as the provision of audiovisual content on private websites and non-commercial communities of interest. Where a dissociable section of a service constitutes a video-sharing platform service for the purposes of Directive, only that section should be covered by that Directive, and only as regards programs and user-generated videos (Konarski, 2020, p. 149; Woods 2018, p. 3). Also, the URTV shall not apply to services provided electronically,

allowing content to be shared by their users (social networking sites), provided that their principal function is not the provision of user-created audiovisual or video programs.

The AVMSD definition introduces alternative criteria to recognize VSP – principal purpose of the service or of a dissociable section thereof or an essential functionality of the service. Under the Guidelines – in reliance of the definition referred to in Article 1 (1) (aa) of the Directive – VSP services may be identified based on three criteria. These are services in which the principal purpose is to provide either or both programs and user-generated videos to the general public. These services of broader scope have a dissociable section whose principal purpose is to provide either or both programs and user-generated videos to the general public. The essential functionality of these services is to provide both these content types to the general public (Kukliš, 2020a, p. 98; Weinand, 2018, p. 280).

Many problems are posed by the determination if the functionality is essential. In the definition of VSP, the concept of service appears, defined in Art. 1 of the Directive as services (also user-generated) whose scope, form and positioning in relation to other competitive entities, and the nature of the of their posted contents (informational, educational, entertaining) demonstrate that the activity is not auxiliary to another essentially different activity. In the Guidelines, the European Commission laid down certain indicators national authorities should consider when determining the “essential function” criterion. These are: the relationship between the audiovisual contents and the core activity; the quantitative and qualitative (understood as the contents’ use and their scope) significance of the audiovisual contents within the service, monetizing of the audiovisual contents or generating incomes with the contents, as well as the availability of tools intended to increase the visibility or attractiveness of the audiovisual contents (Matlak, 2022b, p. 716).

Audiovisual contents may be considered as constituting a “small part” of the service-related activities if, based on quantitative (for example, the small number of videos) and qualitative (no contribution to the allure, functionality or market success of the service) criteria, they seem to play an insignificant role in the general service-related activity (European Commission, 2020).

There are no details in the Polish legislation on how to interpret “principal purpose” and “dissociable section” (EAO, 2022, p. 359). Also, no definition of “essential functionality” is specified in the adopted legislation. It stipulates that consideration shall be taken of the relationship between the audiovisual content and the principal economic activity or activities provided by the service, the quantitative and qualitative importance of the audiovisual content for that service. Furthermore, the means by which the audiovisual content generates revenue and the availability within the service of tools designed to increase the visibility or the attractiveness of the audiovisual content are important (EOA, 2022, p. 359).

Types of content of VSP by AVMSD definition are programmes and user-generated videos which are defined terms. “Program” means a set of moving images with or without sound constituting an individual item, irrespective of its length, within a schedule or a catalogue established by a media service provider, including feature-length films, video clips, sports events, situation comedies, documentaries, children’s programs, and original drama (Matlak, 2022b, p. 717).

The definition from AVMSD on “user-generated video” at first glance looks clear enough (Woods, 2018, p. 9). Video clips embedded in the editorial content of electronic versions of newspapers and magazines and animated images such as GIFs should not be covered by the Directive. In the Polish definition there is also “provision of other contents” means any contents other than programs or user-generated videos, that is, for instance, commercial communications or billboard communications, such as information from non-governmental organizations not having a commercial status (Explanatory Memorandum 2021, p. 32; Duda-Staworko, 2022, p. 40).

The definition of VSP requires that the provider determines the organization of the content and gives a non-exhaustive list of the means, which may be employed to do so: by automatic means or algorithms in particular by displaying, tagging and sequencing (Woods, 2018, p. 4; von Drunen, 2020, p. 174).

Another central point of the implementation of the discussed amendments is the regime of liability for the contents posted on a video-sharing platform. The significant share of the contents available in the services of a video-sharing platform are not subject to editorial responsibility of the platform’s provider, however, such providers, as a rule, decide about the organization of contents, that is programs, user-generated videos, and commercial audiovisual communications. A VSP provider does not verify the contents prior to their publication, however, under Recital 47 and the provisions of Art. 28b of Directive 2018/1808, the provider is obliged to follow certain restrictions intended to protect fundamental values in the interest of the society.

The definition of VSPs from AMSDV and URTV also specifies that the service should provide audiovisual content to inform, entertain or educate (Woods, 2018, p. 4; Duda-Staworko, 2022, p. 41).

The “as a part of economic activity” prerequisite from the Polish definition of VSP implies activities conducted on one’s own behalf, in an organized and continuous manner, with the intention to generate income from the sharing of contents, whereby it is irrelevant if the income has been generated. For example, if a user publishes periodically on their account on the platform and generates specific income – among the published contents there are advertisements, fees are charged for viewing (e.g. pay-per-view), sponsorship agreements are concluded, then it should be concluded that the user conducts economic activity. On the other hand, the user does not conduct economic

activity in case of one-off, accidental, incidental non-profit activities. Activities unregistered because of a low-income level are not considered economic activities, which is decided by the provisions of Art. 5 of the Entrepreneurs Law Act. Practical clarifications were also offered by KRRiT, which specified that if a user is an amateur, hobbyist and does not generate income from the user's audiovisual products – the activity does not generate any income – the user does not have to follow the obligation of entry in the list maintained by KRRiT (Niedbalski, 2022; Duda-Staworko, 2022, p. 39). The evaluation if a given user meets the prerequisite of “conducting business activity” should always be evaluated *in concreto*.

The EU definition refers to services provided through electronic communications networks in the understanding of Art. 2 letter (a) of the Directive 2002/21/EC. Services rendered by platform providers are considered to be information society services in the understanding of the Directive 2000/31/EC. “Provision of services by electronic means”, in the light of URTV provisions, should be understood as: A (distant) provision of a service without the parties' simultaneous presence, by transfer of data upon individual request of the customer, transmitted and received through electronic processing devices, including digital compression and storage of data, which is entirely sent, received or transmitted through a telecommunications network. As a sidenote, it can be added that providers of such services, under the Act of 18 July 2002, were obliged to provide the customer with specific information on the service provider, and to prepare terms and conditions of the services within the scope specified by the Act, and only to such extent, prior to entry into force of the URTV amendment, platforms were subject to legal regulations.

The definition of VSP requires editorial responsibility. AVMSD introduces a new definition of it, by specifying that these are decisions taken on a regular basis for the purpose of exercising editorial responsibility and linked to the day-to-day operation of the audiovisual media service (Explanatory Memorandum, 2021, p. 33; Piech, 2019, p. 252). The prerequisite of incurring by an entity of editorial responsibility for programmes included in the catalogue means that the entity decides what audiovisual contents are to be provided through the video-sharing platform. Editorial responsibility is incurred by a person deciding about what contents and in what way are to be publicly made accessible to the recipients. VSP provider only distributes audiovisual contents posted by users, rendering its services by positioning the contents, organizing and proposing them, for reception by users (Kukliš, 2020a, p. 99). As a rule, the party making contents available through a VSP will incur the editorial responsibility since that party makes the final decision about what audiovisual contents are to be provided (assigned to the channel or account held by that party). Under Recital 48, a significant share of the content provided on video-sharing platform

services is not under the editorial responsibility of the video-sharing platform provider – is of vital importance for the interpretation of the measures (Kukliš, 2020a, p. 100). Broadcasters are objectively responsible for every single piece of content appearing on their broadcasts while VSP are responsible for its systematic treatment. Measures must not lead to ex-ante control tools or upload-filtering practices that would conflict with the E-Commerce Directive. Articles 12–14 of the ECD limit liability for information society services in three cases: mere conduit (art.12), caching (art.13) and hosting (art.14). All VSPs fall under the liability regime concerning hosting providers which – according to article 14 ECD – is an information society service consisting of the storage of information provided by a recipient of the service (van Drunen, 2020, p. 177). Such a service is not liable for the information stored by the user, provided that the provider does not have actual knowledge of illegal activity or information. Also, as regards claims for damages, service is not aware of facts or circumstances from which the illegal activity or information is apparent or the provider, upon obtaining such knowledge or awareness, acts expeditiously to remove or to disable access to the information (Cabrera Blázquez et al., 2018, p. 19). The limitation of liability does not apply when the user of the service acts under the authority or the control of the provider.

The Digital Service Act (DSA) due for adoption in February 2024 will replace the ECD and specifically articles 12, 13 and 14. Broughton Micova and Kukliš (2023, p. 92) make the interesting distinction between the DSA as *lex generalis* and the AVMSD as *lex specialis*.

### **OBLIGATIONS OF VSP PROVIDERS – URTV ANALYSIS**

The VSP regime seems justified by the growing popularity and universality of Internet video platforms. Already in the provision of Art. 1 URTV, it is provided that the tasks of radio and television are fulfilled by providing media services, distributing television programs, and providing video-sharing platforms. The provisions of URTV envisage as well that reception (...) of contents published in VSP intended by their providers for general reception is open, subject to the conditions laid down in legal provisions. Under the provision of Art. 471 URTV, imposition on a VSP provider of an obligation or prohibition to publish any specific programme, user-generated video or another content on the video-sharing platform may take place only under statutory law. This provision is intended to guarantee independence to VSP providers, just as to broadcasters and VOD providers. As a rule, providers usually do not post contents although, technically speaking, they are able to do so. However, they may not be obliged to undertake such activities without an express statutory basis (Chałubińska-Jentkiewicz, 2022, p. 535).

Operation of a VSP requires its notification for the list maintained by KRRiT in an electronic system. Such notification is purely formal, it is processed by means of a decision and the provisions of URTV do not envisage a possibility to refuse an entry. An omission to notify does not result in a prohibition to conduct activities in operating a video-sharing platform but only in a possibility of imposition of a financial penalty by KRRiT (Matlak, 2022a, p. 51; Explanatory Memorandum 2021, p. 37). Notification should contain basic information about the VSP provider, as specified in the Regulation of 21 October 2021. Such notification should indicate the video-sharing platform provider, the provider's seat, or place of residence, mailing address, including email address, permitting efficient and quick contact, as well as the tax identification number (NIP) and the REGON identification number. It should also specify the video-sharing platform, and the countries in which viewing of the video-sharing platform is possible. This solution follows AVMSD, as the national regulatory authority will determine the requirements (EAO, 2022, p. 43).

Until November 2022 (KRRiT, 2023, p. 40), the above-mentioned list included 16 video-sharing platforms: BanBye, Cda.pl; Demotywatory.pl, Hrabi.tv, Joemonster.org, Jbzd.pl, Kawusia.pl, Hopaj.pl; Kwejk.pl, Mklr.pl, Sadistic.pl; Wgrane.pl; Wiocha.pl, Vider.info, Vider.love, Zaq2.pl. The notification obligation for the list has not yet been complied with by several platforms that should be subject to the Polish regulator as per the jurisdiction criteria and operation model suggesting that the criteria have been met of the definition of a video-sharing platform under Art.1a (5–6) and art. 4 item 22a of the Broadcasting Act.

Bearing in mind media convergence and changes in the use of media, a growing number of countries simplify their licensing systems, by limiting them only to certain linear services or introducing simplified licenses, whereas other non-linear services are either subject to registration/notification or operate in an open system of market access (Kubiak&Myrda, 2020, p. 155). The structural changes in the regulatory environment move from the traditional media/regulator dichotomy to a media/user/regulator triangle (Kukliš 2020b, p. 24; Broughton Micova & Kukliš, 2023, p. 77).

In the context of information, the purpose of the provision of Art. 47(m) of the URTV is to ensure to users an easy, direct, and permanent access to basic information about the video-sharing platform. The basic data involves names, address, as well as contact details, including email address and website address. The necessity of providing this information, which is published on the provider's website is dictated by the need to enable users to exercise their rights under URTV, relating to complaints or resolution of disputes concerning the posted contents (Matlak, 2022a, p. 51; Konarski, 2020, p. 151). KRRiT may specify, by regulation, the method of presenting the above information by the VSP provider. It should consider the integrity of the contents, the method of the

platform's operation and the impact on the interests of users and non-imposition on the providers of excessive burdens and costs relating to the provision of information. So far, however, such provisions have not been adopted (KRRiT, 2023, p. 41).

The new legislation requires transparency of ownership. In EU countries, there is an obligation to notify the regulatory authority about the ownership structure and any modifications imposed on the providers of media services. This information is made public either on the website or in the database of the regulatory authority (KRRiT, 2020, p. 9). Also, a correlation exists between ownership structure and public access to such information and media pluralism (Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers CM/Rec, 2018). The Council of Ministers in this instance instructs the EU member states to implement legislative solutions or other equally effective solutions specifying clearly and precisely the obligations imposed on the media in respect of disclosure of information or transparency. These obligations may involve the name and contact details of the immediate owner or co-owners along with their shareholdings, which may enable them to exert influence on the operation and strategic decision-making of the provider of media services. The KRRiT recommends the owners apply a 5% threshold of shares for the purposes of the disclosure obligations (KRRiT, 2020, p. 10).

Article 47m also ensures recipients can easily access information. The Article stipulates that a VSP provider conducting economic activities in the form of a commercial partnership or company is obliged to ensure to recipients an easy, direct, and permanent access to information about the given names and surnames or names of partners. Polish law obliges VSP providers ensure recipients an easy, direct, and permanent access to a list of all media services, video-sharing platforms and magazines published by the VSP provider. This obligation covers media services, VSPs and daily newspapers or magazines provided or published by entities within the same capital group in the understanding of the Act of 16 February 2007. The above data should be made public in a consistent manner so that users can enjoy the easiest possible access to such information (Explanatory Memorandum, 2021, p. 10). URTV provisions envisage that a video-sharing platform provider is obliged to indicate KRRiT as the authority competent in matters of video-sharing platforms.

As already discussed, a significant share of the contents available in the services of a VSP are not subject to editorial responsibility of the platform's provider, however they must decide about the organization of contents, such as programs, user-generated videos, and commercial audio-visual communications. The VSP provider does not verify the contents prior to their publication, however Recital 47 and the provisions of Art. 28b of AVMSD obligate the provider to follow certain restrictions intended to protect fundamental values in the interest of the society

(Piech, 2019, p. 253; Weinand, 2018, p. 280; Kostovska & Broughton Micova 2023, p. 93; Duda-Staworko, 2022, p. 38).

Article 47o(1) URTV, implementing Article 28b(a) of Directive 2018/1808, forbids publishing of programs, user-generated videos or other contents on VSPs that threatening the proper physical, mental or moral development of minors, especially any comprising pornographic materials or contents unjustifiably exposing violence, without adequate technical safeguards (Weinand, 2018, p. 291; Matlak, 2022a, p. 52). A user posting contents on the platform is obliged to follow the content qualification principles under Art. 47p URTV and the principles of the Regulation of 13 April 2022.

The provision of Article 47o(2) URTV, implementing Article 28b (b) of the amended Directive, prohibits the posting of content containing incitement to violence or hatred against a group of people on grounds referred to in Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights. These features are i.e., sex, race, skin color, ethnic or social origin, genetic characteristics, language, religion or belief, political opinion or any other opinion, nationality, membership of a national minority, wealth, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation (Jaskiernia, 2021, p. 886; Matlak, 2022a, p. 52; Rozgonyi, 2020, p. 86).

The European legislator prohibits, under Art. 28b letter (c) of the amending Directive, contents whose dissemination constitutes an offence under the European Union Law, which is reflected in Art. 47o (3) URTV (Galewska, 2021, p. 125; Grzesiok-Horosz, 2023, p. 69). That is contents that might facilitate commission of a terrorist offence, pornographic materials involving a minor, contents inciting to insult a group of population or a specific person on grounds of their nationality, ethnic, racial, religious, or non-denominational status.

All VSPs are obliged to establish and operate transparent, easy to use and effective procedures for the handling and resolution of users' complaints. The obligations securing the interests of contents' recipients, in both the EU's AVMSD and Poland's URTV, may have a technical or systemic nature. Technical means verification of age or the parental control system governing the access to contents harmful to minors. Systemic nature means efficient procedures of the receipt and verification of user complaints (Kukliš, 2020b, p. 13; Duda-Staworko, 2022, p. 38).

Although the norms of URTV impose obligations on a VSP provider under statutory provisions, which will be further specified by KRRiT's Regulations, most the delegated legislation is optional.

Polish VSP providers who may be covered by statutory obligations did not receive from KRRiT any in-depth analysis of the legal provisions they are obliged to follow in their activities. The British regulator of the audiovisual and telecommunications market prepared many informations (Ofcom, 2021) while the Polish regulator gave only *ad hoc* clarifications.

VSP providers are encouraged to go with self-regulatory legislation, such as codes of good practice set with the intent of the Unfair Commercial Practices Act (23 August 2007). It shall clearly define the objectives and provide for regular, transparent, and independent methods of evaluating their achievement and lay down arrangements for the effective enforcement of their provisions, including sanctions for non-compliance.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Forming a regulatory environment that provides a framework for the media in the 21st century is difficult. Key issues involve the parameters for submitting audio-visual content to abide by the regulations governing the hardware infrastructure, including the essential issue of market regulation. There is now the novel reverse situation, in which the regulation of the hardware infrastructure is subordinated to that of software, i.e. digital contents (Chałubińska-Jentkiewicz & Nowikowska, 2022, p. 87). The amendment to the Broadcasting Act, implementing Directive 2018/1808 as discussed in this article, was prepared using the novel type of regulation.

The principles of operation on the European audiovisual market should be reflected in legislation introducing a reasonably uniform Europe-wide standard for VSP providers, which should be convenient to users and ensure real protection of their rights. The regulatory framework and the measures used in relation to VSP providers should be legitimate, necessary, and proportional.

The legislative framework discussed in this text is legitimate in as much as legislator is trying to keep up with technological developments. To achieve this, Polish legislation is attempting to level the disproportionate requirements set for analogue broadcasters (radio and TV), which each have less viewers and listeners than the users of digital media.

The legislator realizes the difficulties that might be involved in defining VSPs. Moreover, the number of potential entrepreneurs covered by the regulatory regime and their location, important for the establishment of jurisdiction, may impede efficient identification of service providers within a short period after the implementation of the AVMSD (KRRiT, 2020 p. 38). Application of the country-of-origin principle ensures the notification obligation covers VSP providers based in Poland. Such solution is supposed to ensure clarity as to the provision of which Member State shall apply. The quite casuistic establishment of jurisdiction is justified by both the complexity of this juridically new topic and the cross-border contexts. The rules provided in the AVMSD should prevent any evasion by VSPs through the multi-layered registration of both EU and non-EU enterprises. However, evaluations of the Polish regulatory framework

must bear in mind that the range of entities covered is quite narrow due to the principles of establishing jurisdiction.

The creation of digital videos to be displayed on VSPs implies the need to comply with the reasonable obligations laid down in the provisions of both EU and national law. Such obligations are not excessive.

Nevertheless, the new regulatory framework for VSPs does impose certain obligations and greater responsibility in the context of monitoring posted contents. However, these obligations are justified by the need to adjust the ecosystem of audiovisual media to the challenges of the digital era. The VSP providers have much less influence on the contents of disseminated audiovisual materials than a traditional provider of media services, so it was legitimate for the EU legislator for VSPs to provide for a slightly different regulatory regime with less requirements and of lesser severity. The disclosure obligations are intended to assist the contents' recipients in obtaining easy access to the information enabling identification of the service and the party responsible for the service, and to ensure transparency of activities on the Internet. The voiced concern that the introduction of the obligation to register on a national VSP list implies censorship of the Internet is nullified, as the requirement neither restricts the freedom to carry out economic activity nor depends on any approval by a public authority. The amendment of the Polish Act introducing the regulatory framework governing VSPs is an implementation of a Europe-wide obligation and not a "whim" of the KRRiT—the Polish regulator.

The answer to the question if the regulatory regime discussed in this article is proportional poses some difficulties. What started as television broadcasting without frontiers over thirty years ago, today includes audiovisual media services and VSP services. The regime seems to be intended to prevent the threats coming from large platforms. There are additional logistic, technical, legal and financial burdens relating to such large platforms, which might not capture the specificity of the model and contents posted on a complex and professionalized YouTube channel or a private Instagram or TikTok profile comprising a series of very short video reports. Apparently, such disproportions have been noticed by the Polish regulator, which decided that the execution of the provisions introduced in the Polish legal system and addressed to platforms of lesser, national range should proceed by using "soft law" instruments, such as calls or notifications. Only in the event of repeated violations, upon carrying out precise analyses of the offered services, KRRiT would be able to exercise a number of administrative powers delegated to the authority under URTV. The main challenges seem to relate to cross-border platforms, on which videos posted by users constitute a whole or a large dissociable section of the service, as their impact on the society, through moderation of contents, algorithmic processes or placement of advertisements is highly significant. To work out an effective supervision model over the

execution by such providers of the obligations under the implemented Directive, national regulatory authorities enhance their cooperation within the European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services and develop instruments for the exchange of information and mutual assistance. Digital Services Act may guarantee a safer digital space where the fundamental rights of users are protected.

The regulatory regime of VSPs is necessary as it establishes a more level playing field for all actors in the audiovisual landscape in Europe and ensures cultural diversity and the increasing level of user protection. However, these are innovative and unchecked provisions, on both the national and international level, and their practical operation must be brought by practice. Nevertheless, the new regulatory regime governing VSPs is necessary to the extent it expands the conceptual scope of audiovisual media and adjusts the ecosystem to the challenges of the digital era, in which video-sharing platforms have a prominent place as they are a significant medium for the exchange of information, for entertainment and education.

## **EUROPEAN UNION AND POLISH LEGISLATION RELATED TO AUDIOVISUAL PROVIDERS AND SERVICES**

### **EUROPEAN UNION**

Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12012P/TXT>.

Directive 2000/31/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 8 June 2000 on certain legal aspects of information society services, in particular electronic commerce, in the Internal Market, OJ L 178, 17.07.2000, p. 69. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32000L0031&from=EN>.

Directive 2002/21/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 March 2002 on a common regulatory framework for electronic communications networks and services, OJ L 108, 24.4.2002, p. 33. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32002L0021&from=EN>.

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# Datafication and Regulation: Today's Controversies in Publicness and Public Opinion Research

## Interview with Professor Slavko Splichal

Professor Splichal, I warmly congratulate you on your Media and Democracy Karol Jakubowicz Award 2023. The award is the prestigious recognition by the Polish Communication Association and the Journal of Central European Journal of Communication to a scholar for an outstanding contribution to media and communication science. Your book titled "Datafication of Public Opinion and the Public Sphere: How Extraction Replaced Expression of Opinion" was released last year. The publication discusses the contemporary issues of public opinion and publicness. In the next couple of minutes, we will be discussing the main issues and the takeaway messages of the book.

In media and communication studies the terminology of public sphere, public opinion, publicity, and publicness are often interconnected and used as synonyms. I wonder what you think about the cacophony of terms and what is your approach to the structure of the interrelated concepts.

I believe that this is a very important issue, particularly in relation to language. I have published quite a lot in English, particularly concerning matters related to publicness, and particularly the public sphere. It is worth noting that English terminology differs from Slovenian terminology, and it also diverges from the terms and definitions you would find in German-language books and articles.

Consequently, the debate on the public sphere is, I would say, mostly limited to English-language literature. For instance, in the German language, you would hardly find discussions about what they would refer to as „öffentliche Sphäre." This term does not exist in the German literature; instead, they deliberate on issues related to „Öffentlichkeit," a term that does not have a direct English equivalent. I am not sure how this matter is handled in Poland or Hungary, but

it is crucial for us to begin contemplating these significant differences among languages, which are also linked to diverse cultures. Instead of concentrating solely on English-language publications, which is presently the dominant trend, it is crucial that we start acknowledging and integrating national concepts that are absent in English literature into the global discourse. I hope that recent developments in artificial intelligence will support this direction and make different languages more equal in the global academic community.

It's important to introduce national concepts, absent in English literature, into the global discussion. Presently, everything seems to be subservient to concepts developed in the English language even if [they are] not used in our national languages. In the case of the topic addressed in my book, we should reflect on what happened to the concept of the „public,“ which was the central idea until, let's say, the 1930s and 1940s. During this time, the terms „public“ and „public opinion“ were in sharp decline in social science critical discussions. A discourse dictated by opinion polls has prevailed, reducing public opinion to poll results. In the same vein, with the invention of the concept of the public sphere, the notion of the public has gradually faded from use, not only in English but also in several other languages. Presently, the focus is predominantly on the „public sphere,“ which is often perceived as an institutional, technological, and societal infrastructure. In contrast, the concept of the „public“ or „publics,“ which would place more emphasis on the actors, behaviors, and dynamics, has taken a back seat, with less attention paid to the structural elements.

/// In your book, you discuss the great dichotomy of private and public. In what ways do you think the private and public distinction is relevant in our era? Why should we, communication and media scholars, pay particular attention to the issues of public and private?

This narrative traces back to the 19th century, a period marked by significant developments in the relationship between the public and the private, which offer valuable insights in relation to current developments. Two important events from that era are noteworthy. Firstly, in the late 19th century, scholars primarily in the field of sociology, recognized that the prevailing dynamics, in which newspapers were driven by market forces, did not align with the ideal functioning of publicness within society. Secondly, they started to discuss the possibility of how to regulate the press to preserve its democratic essence. Market forces were deemed an unsuitable mechanism for this purpose, and other possibilities were looked for, unfortunately without success.

At the same time the concept of privacy became very important, largely propelled by the invention of cameras and the widespread use of photographs in the press. It became obvious that privacy is not something given but is something

that should be, on the one hand, developed, worked for and, on the other hand, protected. It was during this period that the principles of safeguarding both publicness and privacy began to take shape.

The two parts of the great division between the public and the private are intrinsically linked, negatively defining each other. They serve as mutual reference points: the private is defined as that which is not public, and vice versa. However, particularly with the advent of digital technologies, this boundary between the private and the public has become increasingly blurred.

In the contemporary landscape of digital platforms, we observe that both private and public communication coexist and are routinely practiced on the same platforms. The control over this blend of private and public communication lies primarily with the platform owners, rather than being subject to regulation by societies or governments. This close and sometimes problematic connection between privateness and publicness is becoming, I think, one of the most pressing challenges in democratic societies today. It underscores the need for careful consideration and research by communication and media scholars.

/// The Internet radically changed our understanding of publicness. Some say that the metaverse is the future of the internet. What are the possible scenarios, challenges, and even risks of the increasing importance of virtual or augmented reality technologies from the viewpoint of the social sciences?

Central to these considerations is the issue of regulation. This includes questions related to access to these platforms and the rules that govern behavior and communication within these platforms. These questions should not be solely entrusted to the owners of these platforms. History repeats itself in this case because this was a problem with newspapers in the late 19th century. At that time, the discussion around regulation proved to be too late to redirect prevailing editorial policies and business models.

Today, the danger persists that without immediate action to regulate the Internet, societies may find themselves in a similar difficulty. In fact, we may already be too late. Only a few but huge corporations dominate social media. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to introduce a new regulation against their will because they are so powerful.

Today, digital social networks define what public opinion is, how it is formed, and what the public sphere will be like in the future. If this infrastructure is completely dominated by corporate interests, it cannot possibly have a genuine public character and prevents the formation of public will from representing an authentic general will.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter addresses the issue of the quantification of public opinion. When providing the overview of the efforts of measuring opinions, you introduce the concept of datafication. What do you mean by that and what are the main ambivalences of the empirical public opinion studies?

Datafication is a process in which all characteristics of any kind and all aspects of communication can be transformed into quantified data. In the context of public opinion, we shift our focus from words, sentences, and thoughts of individuals to data collected in opinion surveys, and polls, and data analysis. Based on this data analysis, we attempt to make decisions that can have a significant impact. Consequently, the question becomes not how these opinions can influence decision-makers, but rather how we can influence those expressing their opinions in opinion polls.

The manipulation of individual opinions in a statistical sense is a necessary part of this process, and it began with opinion polls. However, this shift in interest in statistical data has also transformed the original idea of public opinion as fostering robust public debate on important social issues with significant long-term consequences into eliciting answers to very specific questions, often with binary „yes” and „no” responses.

With the advent of digitization, the situation is somehow getting worse. In survey methods, respondents were at least aware that they were participating in an interview, as they were explicitly asked and had to consent to participate. By contrast, today's digital datafication often happens without the knowledge of those whose opinions are being „datafied.” This raises crucial questions about how this communication is regulated, whether through legal means or other mechanisms.

Opinion mining and big data research of social communication are some of the most fashionable topics in communication studies. You critically examine such academic trends. Please explain why we should be careful with AI-based methods!

While datafication has brought about numerous benefits, it has also raised significant ethical concerns. The data collected online is frequently used in various ways to influence user behavior. Just remember the attack on the US Capitol, which is being investigated as being based on a „big lie” about election fraud in 2020. It was actually a result of conscious and orchestrated manipulation that included the former president of the United States. All this data collected by the owners of social media platforms and those who are contracted with the owners is very helpful in planning how to influence people's behavior instead of helping them to discuss publicly relevant issues. That is why I suggest more

control over the use of social media data. If regulation is not coming soon, it will not come at all.

That is why I am in favor of enhanced control and oversight regarding the use of social media data. Without prompt regulatory action, there's a risk that it may never materialize, and the consequences of unbridled manipulation could continue to pose serious challenges to the integrity of public discourse and decision-making processes.

Lastly, let me ask about your success in initiating and managing academic platforms in Central and Eastern Europe! You are the founder of the International Colloquia on Communication and Culture, which were held in Slovenia, Finland, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Italy and the USA. The European Institute for Communication and Culture developed from these colloquia, co-founded by you, and a journal entitled *The Public*, where you hold the post of Editor. The audience of this interview should know that this journal is the only Slovenian social science journal included in the Social Sciences Citation Index. Tell me please what made you so active at the international level and what do you think was the key to successful institution-building?

It might be more fitting to have someone else evaluate this journey, but I can certainly offer my perspective. In the 1980s, a group of media and communication scholars, including figures like Karol Jakubowicz, engaged in discussions about the advent of democracy in Eastern Europe. Our conversations touched upon the challenges of publishing manuscripts pertaining to Central and Eastern Europe. While Western academic interest in our region was very high at that time, the authors writing about the democratic transition were mostly from outside Central and Eastern European universities, largely American academics. It was evident that the visibility of scholars based in CEE in journals and conferences needed a boost.

Our idea was to provide a platform for scholars genuinely interested in the media and communication field within our region but from an insider's perspective. We aimed to bring this perspective to a wider international podium, which led us to organize workshops and publish edited volumes. However, the reach of these books was limited in reaching individuals beyond our network. Hence, we decided to establish „Javnost – the Public”, the journal you mentioned.

To my surprise, the journal was quickly included in international bibliographical collections. Nonetheless, publishing for a national market and operating in an international academic environment presented distinct challenges. In the 1990s, international academic publications primarily relied on print circulation, which required specialized facilities. So we sought an international publisher and our collaboration with our publisher, Routledge, has been excellent.

Today, we face the challenge of a changing academic publishing ecosystem: what types of journals are being published, changes in publication practices, profit margins in the book and journal industries, the emergence of open access, and the relationship between authors and publishers, among other considerations. These are substantial issues that are largely related to the issue of regulation, although in a different context than the kind of regulation needed for the digital realm. In this case, universities should play a more active role, rather than tacitly accepting the rules established by international corporate publishers, which may not always be in the best interest of inclusive knowledge production.

Over the years, I've come to realize that the „publish or perish” culture has had an impact on research quality, and it's not always positive. As an editor, I can attest that a significant portion of the research submitted for publication is poorly designed and often has limited added value. The immense pressure on university teachers and researchers to publish to maintain status or get promotion also leads to some unethical practices, while fueling a lucrative publishing business with high profit margins. That is not the purpose, nor should it be the purpose of scientific publications.

*Slavko Splichal was interviewed by Gabriella Szabó on the 14th October 2023.*

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Slavko Splichal holds the position of Professor of Communication and Public Opinion at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana. He is a fellow of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts and Academia Europaea. As the founder and director of the European Institute for Communication and Culture (EURICOM), he also serves as the editor of its journal *Javnost-The Public*. His research interests include communication theory and research methods, media politics, public opinion, and the public sphere. Some of his most recent English-language publications include *The Liquefaction of Publicness: Communication, Democracy and the Public Sphere in the Internet Age* (editor, Routledge 2018), “In data we (don't) trust: The public adrift in data-driven public opinion models” (*Big Data & Society*, 2022), “The public sphere in the twilight zone of publicness” (*European Journal of Communication*, 2022), and *Datafication of Public Opinion and the Public Sphere* (Anthem 2022).

**SLAVKO SPLICHAL (2022): *DATAFICATION OF PUBLIC OPINION AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE. HOW EXTRACTION REPLACED EXPRESSION OF OPINION*, LONDON: ANTHEM PRESS, 182 PP., ISBN: 978-1-83998-450-1**

Slavko Splichal is a professor of communication and public opinion at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Ljubljana. His book “*Datafication of Public Opinion and the Public Sphere. How Extraction Replaced Expression of Opinion*” is an extremely important historical study of Enlightenment ideas about society, changes in the basic phenomena of the formation and operation of public opinion, and the development of the public sphere. In the book, Splichal cites and refers to such important publications as Ferdinand Tönnies’ *Kritik der Öffentlichen Meinung (Critique of Public Opinion)* (1922), Walter Lippmann’s *Public Opinion* (1922), Gabriel Tarde’s (1901) *L’Opinion et la Foule (Opinion and the Crowd)*, and finally, Jürgen Habermas’ (1962) extremely catchy book *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft (The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society)*. Furthermore, Splichal attempts to combine normative-critical theoretical conceptualizations with constructive empirical applications and research on the public sphere. Splichal recognizes the changes that have taken place in interpersonal communication through the development of digital communication technologies, the increasing availability of digital communication channels and networks. In these changes, he sees not only opportunities for more efficient communication and expression of one’s own individual views, but also sees dangers. As he writes:

no matter what they are, but also allows corporate-owned social network platforms to systematically and often covertly monitor and influence users’ online communication and even offline behavior. The ubiquitous processes of datafication made possible by digital technology have also strengthened the quantification of public opinion triggered by the invention of opinion polling in the 1930s. In the same vein as polling in the past, *opinion mining* (prevalently called *sentiment analysis*) by harvesting and analyzing large data sets from social media services online now seems to facilitate *extraction* even more effectively to replace free expression of opinion that has been traditionally conceived as the core of (the principle of) publicness. (Splichal 2022, pp. 2–3).

Moreover, the author points out that with these new technological inventions has come algorithmic communication, based on opinion analysis and the analysis of large data sets, which are often used to legitimize individual opinions thereby legitimizing various interests, such as political or economic. Hate speech, discriminatory discourses and fake news and disinformation are also often used for this purpose. The place that opinion polls have occupied for decades in social research has been taken by social media and opinion mining (Splichal, p. 4). At the same time, Splichal does not treat opinion polls indiscriminately, nor as the gold standard for „testing” the validity of an opinion poll.

In the emergence of online integrated private-public networks and communication platforms, Splichal sees a liquefaction of the boundary between the once clearly separated domains of public and privacy. As he states:

Privateness and publicness are connected qualities as they are each other's negation, but they also constitute each other, as they are what they are only through their relation with each other. Maintaining boundaries between the public and private spheres and enhancing their autonomy are therefore essential to human freedom and democratic governance. (Splichal, 2022, p. 5).

He calls for maintaining privacy by controlling the extent to which others have access, but also by self-controlling that access. The changes in production and consumption and new modes of communication that have liquefied the private-public dichotomy become the basis for Splichal's reflections on critical development issues. He poses the questions of whether the originally critical notions of advertising, public opinion and the public sphere have lost their critical impetus and epistemic value? If so: How can a critical perspective be restored? What role did the rise and fall of the idea of the public sphere play in this? (p. 10)

These questions become the starting point for broader normative-critical considerations of theoretical conceptualization and empirical reference to specific situations and conditions of the rise and fall of public opinion and the public sphere in scientific and public discourse. To achieve this goal, Splichal divided his book into five chapters.

The first chapter discusses the early history of the idea of public opinion and the concept of the principle of the public (then called „publicity”). Splichal supports the discussion with the approaches of Machiavelli, through the Enlightenment thoughts of Bentham, Rousseau, and Kant, and the idealist approach of Hegel, and finally the contemporary empirical-historical approaches of Tarde, Tönnies, Lippmann and Dewey. Adopting a chronological approach, Splichal identifies the key points of development and marginalization of the critical concept of public opinion, marked by the invention of opinion surveys, the rise of opinion methods and data analysis. The closing catch of this part of the book is the

consideration of a new category that emerged in the mid-21st century, the idea of the public sphere.

The second chapter focuses on the phenomenon of quantifying public opinion and the belief that public and private actions can be translated into numerical data, thereby making it possible to track and forecast phenomena. Quantification of public opinion, through opinion polls, has been greatly enhanced by the latest digital forms of data. This, in turn, has contributed to questioning the legitimacy of public opinion as a national and transnational phenomenon.

The third chapter addresses the decline of the concept of public opinion in scientific discourse, which was replaced by Jürgen Habermas' concept of the public sphere. According to Splichal, this was the need to respond to the collapse of the once-critical concepts of the public and advertising, which lost their critical epistemic value due to the development of promotional advertising and surveillance, and due to the commercial and political spread of opinion. Now there is a liberalization of the concept of the public sphere, which is being accomplished through internetisation.

The fourth chapter deals with the eponymous datafication of communication and data mining, associated with the development of digital communication, which is changing the public sphere and influencing public opinion. Splichal points to their operational reduction by narrowing their scope, stripping them of their discursive nature and blurring the line between what is private and what is public. The mining of opinion in online networks leads to the replacement of opinion polls, and this reopens the question of the essence of public opinion and makes us think about possible threats to the autonomy of the public sphere.

The final section of the book presents a framework for developing a public scenario on news media and journalism at a time when public communication is becoming increasingly private and threatened by the development of commercial messaging apps that can manipulate and steer opinions. Splichal proposes the creation of a „public knowledge algorithm,“ a way for researchers to critically respond to techniques that manipulate public opinion. The chapter presents the six basic elements of the public (VARMIL) as benchmarks for research on three levels related to (infra) structural conditions of the public sphere. They can also be used to identify the basic functions that should be performed by the media and journalists as key indigenous actors constituting the public sphere. Splichal suggests and urges comprehensive empirical and theoretical work, a close connection between social theory and research. He argues that the development of digital communication and data-driven public sphere research should prompt critical reflection on the theoretical foundations and epistemic value of empirical approaches.

Slavko Splichal's book *Datafication of Public Opinion and the Public Sphere. How Extraction Replaced Expression of Opinion*, is a must-read for anyone whose

research focuses not just on the categories of public opinion, the public sphere and democracy, but also digital communication and big data research. This study of crossing the divide between normative-critical theoretical conceptualization and „constructive” empirical application in the social sciences, prompts deeper reflection and consideration of the impact of major technological developments, such as data and opinion mining and algorithms, and on the social nature of communication and research approaches.

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**BEATA JAROSZ (2023): *JĘZYK ZAWODOWY POLSKICH DZIENNIKARZY PRASOWYCH (XIX–XXI W.) [PROFESSIONAL LANGUAGE OF THE POLISH PRINT PRESS JOURNALISTS (19TH-21ST CENTURY)]*, LUBLIN: MARIA CURIE-SKŁODOWSKA UNIVERSITY PRESS, PP. 951, ISBN: 9788322797174**

As a reviewer of various scholarly books, I have often employed the term „scientific monograph” in my evaluations. Yet, perhaps for the first time, I am presenting a review of a publication that occupies a privileged, central, prototypical position within the semantic field of humanities and social science research—a place reserved for what constitutes a proper scientific monograph. Such is the monumental work of Beata Jarosz, recently published by the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University Press.

With such an introduction, it is easy to deduce that I regard this publication as exceptional and rate it extremely highly. Its merits are numerous, but above all there is the logical, thoughtful, and rational organization of the vast analytical material covering two centuries of the development of journalistic jargon. Although, as the author herself states in the book’s Introduction, the monograph contains classical compositional elements: “this introduction, a conclusion, a bibliographic listing, and two indices – of surnames and names mentioned in the book” (p. 13). Other elements are a classical Theoretical Introduction, the aims and subject of research. The most significant that lies in the first part of the book is the research concept, or rather, the author’s research procedure employed in her work. The author does not reach for new and unknown methods in linguistics or textology, but the sequence and methodological consistency she proposes to guarantee the quality of her research. The procedure comprises six stages: source selection, identification, definition, verification, confrontation, and presentation. Each stage represents many hours the author spent in libraries, editorial offices, printing houses, on websites, and within corpora and dictionaries of the Polish language. The aim of this effort was to ascertain with precision and responsibility that the journalistic jargon is multi-layered, variably dependent, influenced by the general Polish language, but also, and perhaps most importantly, by various foreign languages.

These countless hours of material exploration, recordings, and interviews with press creators, after overcoming all the stages of the methodological procedure presented in the research part, enabled Beata Jarosz to write three extensive analytical chapters amounting to about 600 pages). I refer to them as lexicographic-lexical, for they concern lexical units from the jargon of press journalism, forming a unique kind of specialized dictionary with descriptive definitions. Still, such terms must fully reveal the richness of information they contain. The constant scheme of each of these chapters: Periodicals, The Structure of a Periodical, Textual and Graphic Materials, People, Places, Actions, Irregularities, Instrumentarium, Units of Measure, and Others are essentially the titles of sections in a thematic dictionary. But the monograph under these section reveals not only the entries but also their detailed lexicographic description. Beata Jarosz has selected these areas as titles of specific semantic fields created by the vocabulary of press journalism. Reading each section in turn is a true pleasure and an immensely educational intellectual adventure for any linguist, media studies scholar, or communication theorist. The final chapter complements this pleasure - Selected Linguistic Phenomena, where the author points out further leads, dependencies, and connections she has observed in the analysis of press journalism over the past two hundred years.

I need help to point out any gaps, defects, or shortcomings in this work. It is undoubtedly a „Benedictine task,” where nothing is too little or superficially described. However, I see various perspectives from which this rich material could be defined differently and ideally by Beata Jarosz or those who will benefit from her experience. First, it would be interesting to apply cognitive methodology to this material and the analyses and interpretations conducted and to create a conceptual network, or rather integrate the concepts already described in this monograph. Second, as the author writes, contemporary media is a time of convergence at various levels and in different places. Thus, the methodology developed in this work is ripe for transfer to other media – radio, television, or the Internet. The latter area, contrary to the author’s concerns, could be the most interesting due to its contemporaneity and would complement her already comprehensive research. Third, this book is an excellent textbook for journalism and other related professions. Still, it begs for publication in another form – not as one bulky volume with which one could inflict harm, but rather as a multi-volume set locating the theoretical part, each analytical chapter, and the linguistic phenomena in separate volumes. Indeed, the latter could indeed be expanded into a stand-alone book). If this is not deemed a good idea, I propose publishing it in a simplified version as a handbook or dictionary of press journalism terms.

Every reader of this monograph faces a daunting task – reading nearly a thousand pages of densely written text. I will not claim that the book is unputdownable, but I assure you that authentic and unforced cognitive and scientific satisfaction will accompany every reader during and after reading.

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**GÖRAN BOLIN & PER STÅHLBERG (2023): *MANAGING MEANING IN UKRAINE: INFORMATION, COMMUNICATION, AND NARRATION SINCE THE EUROMAIDAN REVOLUTION*, THE MIT PRESS, 166 PP., ISBN: 9780262374576, DOI: 10.7551/MITPRESS/14147.001.0001**

The book *Managing Meaning in Ukraine. Information, Communication, and Narration Since the Euromaidan Revolution* written by Göran Bolin and Per Ståhlberg is very timely coming approximately a year after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The book doesn't focus on the ensuing events, but rather on the communication approach of Ukrainian-Russian relations during the previous decade. This enables the authors to seek answers about how and who narrated these relations in terms of meaning, technology, and communication channels.

The time frame of the research covers the Euromaidan revolution in 2013, followed by the annexation the Crimean Peninsula by the Russian Federation a year later in 2014 and all ensuing events until 2019.

The main objects of the research are the management of both information and meaning after the Euromaidan events as the authors emphasize: "*Ukraine was perceived as almost invisible to the rest of the world and in need of a recognizable "face" and that "an urgent need for information management was expressed"*" (3,7). Indeed, the 2010s were fruitful in terms of communications strategies and innovations in information and meaning management, especially in the context of huge leaps in ICTs.

The book is based on more than six years of field research, 2013-2019, on branding, propaganda, and information and meaning management in Ukraine. The main research method is serendipity, since the study started just before the unexpected Euromaidan events and the authors state: "*It was not possible to demarcate a stable research field, and there was no way to plan exactly where and when to observe, who to meet, and what material to study*" (p. 16). However, the research framework is a little vague and based on improvisation. The common conclusions and tendencies found in the unstructured interviews are described to bring out specific results. The analysis builds on interviews with mass media representatives, PR consultants, political administrators, and brand designers but also on branding material, including the design of logotypes.

The main aim of the book is “to analyse the management of meaning in Ukraine and to discuss how information policy is formed at the intersection of state politics, corporate business, and civil society activism. ... We argue that information management and policy must be understood as stories or narratives told by a plurality of agents—journalists, PR professionals, political administrators, and many others” (p. 13). Also, the authors emphasize the shift of power in the mass communication processes as PR professionals, the voluntary sector and user-generated information are turning into influential information sources. They bring to the table new channels, new content, and points-of-view during what is described by Bolin and Ståhlberg as “information warfare”.

The book’s structure consists of an introduction, five chapters, notes, references, and index with an aggregate of 166 pages. The book follows the typical research approach comprising a broad theoretical framework, followed by research analysis, and conclusions.

The methodology of describing historical events and thus seeking and explaining crossing points with communication approaches and meaning is quite appropriate for the research topic and helps the reader understand better and follow the steps and reasons for the research decisions. This is most visible in Chapter 1, as the authors explain the main terms starting from “revolution” and drawing comparisons between the Euromaidan Revolution and other historical events. The term “propaganda” is also explained and related to contemporary events and expressions such as disinformation, fake news, and information war. This way enables the authors to seek the semiotic meaning of the terms and how it relates to current information policy. The term “nation branding” is also explained as well as the views of the newly available means of communication, as a “*repertoire of available media has increased manifold*” (p. 34). The terms “meaning”, and “narrative” are also explained through the synergy of the literature review and historical facts, as well as “information management” and “meaning”, emphasized by the authors as “management of meaning”. The chapter introduces the reader thoroughly and deeply to the main phenomena.

The second chapter is dedicated to the managers of meaning. Alongside the government authorities as official information sources, there are more parties “*there are a number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), think tanks, and branding agencies involved in forming images and communicating information about Ukraine to international publics*” (p. 48). Next, the authors move on to the Ministry of Information Policy (MIP) in Ukraine as the official source of information and the way traditional media are used as “soft information power” narrating stories and shaping public opinion: “*The project of embedding journalists is, in this sense, a kind of outsourcing of the management of meaning to commercial media organizations*” (p. 54). The chapter describes the role of NGOs is and how they not only serve as a soft power but also through their activism they support the

government, although their trust in it is very low. The authors describe the use of public relations (PR) companies for communication purposes as well as the effect of technological advancement. This approach outlines the key players in communications and their roles in the processes of meaning dissemination and interpretation. The authors conclude that: *“What we see in Ukraine is not only a blurring of boundaries between organizational forms—between state, market, and voluntary organizations. It is also a blurring of boundaries between types of meaning-making activities—that is, what exactly the various organizations are working with”* (p. 66).

The third chapter is dedicated to information content, its creators, tools, and channels used for dissemination. The authors outline the importance of the meaning to influence a bigger proportion of the audience. The authors use examples to *“show how narratives and textual components circulate between media technologies and media forms in the contemporary landscape of mass, niche, and social media”* (p. 73). The principles of contemporary information circulation are explained and their crossing point with ‘information and meaning management’ in Ukraine during the research period. The case studies prove the authors’ hypotheses about the new means of communication and their effects. I would agree with their conclusion that *“Today, mass, niche, and personal media exist side by side and in symbiotic relationships with one another, not least in the area of news reporting and information dissemination...”* (p. 93).

In the fourth chapter, Bolin and Ståhlberg examine the messages themselves. They decided to analyse the media coverage of the Euromaidan Revolution as well as the 2017 Eurovision song contest. Alongside the conducted interviews, the chapter focuses on case studies analysis, which deepens and broadens the research and leads to more punctual conclusions. The narration and meaning in the messages are the chapter’s main focus, but also the context, political and societal factors. Besides culture (the Eurovision example), a sports case is also analysed to examine the meaning sent with channels beyond traditional and new media. This enables the authors to prove the functionality of information management in the context of their research.

In the last chapter, which serves as a conclusion, the authors summarize the results of their study. They emphasise the multiplication of both media technologies and communication genres. Messages, images, and narratives are disseminated across and between platforms, converging and complementing each other, and the audience has a growing role in the mass communication process. The authors stress the importance and definition of narrative, especially in crisis situations as those observed in the book. The authors conclude there are two important parts of strategic narratives: rhetoric oriented towards the goal fulfilment of the messages; and effects of how narratives are scripting behaviour. The role of the state as an information source is described, but also there are many more parties

involved in narration and information and meaning management. The authors conclude: “*The way Ukraine is presented domestically as well as to others around the world makes this particular story of three revolutions in the twenty-first century a semiotically, organizationally, and technologically complex and interpretatively challenging phenomenon. Whether it will also revolutionize the informational state remains to be seen in future research and analyses.*”

Besides being a timely publication, I think the book *Managing Meaning in Ukraine. Information, Communication, and Narration Since the Euromaidan Revolution* written by Göran Bolin, and Per Ståhlberg is valuable for providing a deep analysis of events prior to the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022. The book gives readers the bigger picture and helps to understand the underlying processes from a communication perspective. The authors describe the processes of information and meaning management in a multidisciplinary approach, which reflects the importance within the field of communication of both new key players and platforms. It will be interesting to see further development of this research for the events after 2019 as well as a mirrored analysis and a comparative to international and Russian approaches to communication strategies, and information and meaning management.

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**LULU CHEN (2022): *INFLUENCE EMPIRE: INSIDE THE STORY OF TENCENT AND CHINA'S TECH AMBITION*, HODDER & STOUGHTON, PP. 240, ISBN: 9781529346855**

Lulu Yilun Chen has been writing about China and its technology for *Bloomberg News* and *Bloomberg Business Week* for over a decade. She has received several awards from the Society of Publishers in Asia. This book is much more than just a story about Tencent's journey as an application company. Lulu Yilun Chen describes not only how *Tencent* succeeded in making *WeChat* a messaging medium with 1.3 billion users, but also how few Chinese technology companies are and will be prepared to be high-fliers and transform into giant technology companies. However, and unfortunately, any potential high-flying companies are deliberately thwarted by the Chinese government, which is biased towards *Tencent*. Why? This book will review the answer.

*Tencent*, a Chinese technology business, surpassed *Facebook* around five years ago to become the fifth-largest company in the world. Although it is still an odd name to many people in the west, *Tencent* is a crucial stakeholder in world-renowned technology companies and products such as Spotify, Tesla, Snapchat, Monzo, and Reddit. Moreover, *Tencent* is behind the world's best-selling video game makers, such as Fortnite, League of Legends, Clash of Clans, and Call of Duty. Lulu Yilun Chen argues that *Tencent* has the ambition for unlimited business expansion revealing that *Tencent's* activities now include nascent programs in the world of finance, cloud storage computing, messaging, video streaming, and film production. A key element in Tencent's business expansion was the development of the WeChat super app. This is a versatile platform that can be used as a social media platform as well as a digital wallet and currently has more than 1.3 billion users.

*Tencent* has achieved international capitalist supremacy in a country that has the world's most significant communist, which is a quite astonishing fact. However, the author warns readers not to be surprised because according to her all companies with close ties with the Chinese government will be financially successful. This, Chun says is because Beijing will fully support any communications and information companies that allow the government to access their information channels and the data they collect each day, such as *Tencent*. The lack of Chinese data protection law means that Beijing can monitor users of WeChat

and even imprison users deemed to be endangering national security through various online messages.

This activity by Beijing intrigued Chen, who has a very sharp reporter's instinct, to conduct further investigations to discover the deep secrets of the core information and communication services provider company in China—*Tencent*. Her journalistic soul is driven to explore and expose the threads that connect the Xi Jinping regime to the population's social media accounts related to apps issued by *Tencent*.

Chen relates the book's story started in 2015 when she managed to conduct in-depth journalistic interviews with *Tencent* programmers regarding the company's access to information-gathering activities. Chen later discovered from various interviews and information searches that the founder of *Tencent*—Ma Huateng—did not have a transparent scheme when he wanted to set up platform. This resulted in Ma Huateng and his friends initially experiencing various failures in the early days of the development process. In 1998, they tried making internet access via a pager device. After realizing his various mistakes in developing this technology, Ma Huateng made various breakthroughs and improvements. Finally, with regular updates, their app continued to attract both users and multi-million dollar investments.

*Tencent's* success results from the ability of both the company to adapt to the changes in the internet, and Chen to skillfully map out the business diversification over the years. However, it is also clear that Ma Huateng, who was and remains a private entrepreneur, has survived and thrived in a state-dominated economy through intelligent business decisions, diplomacy, and political sensibility. In addition, Ma Huateng is currently a member of China's legislature, which meets once a year in Beijing with other top officials to discuss the national agenda.

The most exciting material in the book is Chen's exploration of the relationship between *Tencent* and the Communist Party of China. Chen describes how the Chinese communist government has deliberately disrupted the communication and information services provided by *Tencent*, especially for foreign users of *Tencent's* services. What is the reason? Chen conveys this happened because the Chinese government wanted to show „they are the boss”.

Chen also describes several occurrences that have resulted in fraught international-level tensions created by Beijing's refusal to allow US auditors to inspect communications companies in China. At this stage, to some degree, *Tencent* has been embroiled in a proxy war between world governments. Chen also wrote that one of the most remarkable was how President Donald Trump tried, before he left the White House, to prevent American companies from dealing with WeChat.

There are many other tipping points and decisive battles for *Tencent*, of which Chen conveys the various dynamics in an enthralling way. In the final chapters, Chen also invites readers to think about how to manage technology giants whose

products are an integral part of the lives of the majority of the global population, particularly if authoritarian regimes have close relationships with them..

In summary, this book tells a story about one of the most influential organizations in the world, particularly in the arena of communication and information. However, the main attraction of this book is that the author involves one of the most authoritarian governments in the world in the various discussions. This book is a must-read for anyone who wants to understand how the strange clash between business, technology, and politics in China today is a unique phenomenon that will reshape our world. Lulu Yilun Chen has written a sharp, witty, and compelling report on the rise of some of China's most influential companies, among which is the world's largest and richest tech giant *Tencent*.

Despite their enormous size and power, only a few people outside China know or understand these companies. For the time being, because of *Influence Empire: Story of Tencent and China's Tech Ambition*, the eyes of the world will be more open.

*Dani Fadillah, Zanuwar Hakim Atmantika*

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## SLAVKO SPLICHAL WINS THE MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY KAROL JAKUBOWICZ AWARD 2023

*Datafication of Public Opinion and the Public Sphere: How Extraction Replaced Expression of Opinion* (London, New York: Anthem Press, 2022) – a recent book by Slavko Splichal received the Media and Democracy Karol Jakubowicz Award 2023. A special Media and Democracy Karol Jakubowicz Award 2023 was awarded to Jolanta Kurska for her book *Wieczny powrót Dreyfusa* (Eng. *Dreyfus: A Perpetual Comeback*; Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie Dialog, 2022).

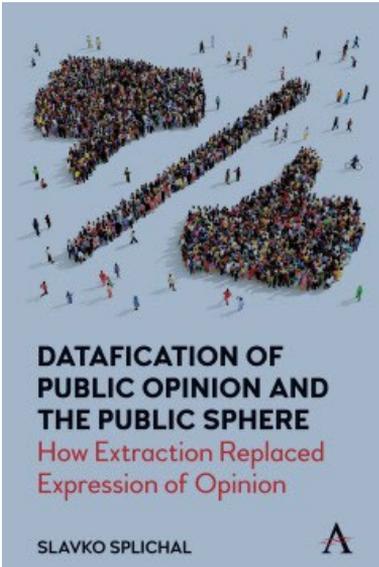


Photo 1. Book cover of Splichal S. (2022).  
*Datafication of Public Opinion and the Public Sphere: How Extraction Replaced Expression of Opinion.*  
London, New York: Anthem Press.



Photo 2. Professor Slavko Splichal.  
Source: The Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SASA).

The Selection Committee argues that the recent book by Slavko Splichal is an excellent example of turning existing studies and empirical data into new critical normative conceptualisations. The monograph *Datafication of Public Opinion and the Public Sphere* explains risks and opportunities for democracy in digital and data-driven societies through an in-depth theory review from a wide range of existing sociological and political sciences. The monograph has

a high potential to contribute to media and democracy as the societal contexts of algorithms and data become crucial to understanding the power of high technologies in shaping public discourse and fostering democratic deliberations. At a time when democracy is being challenged, regardless of geography and the traditional divisions between Western and emerging democracies in the Global South, Splichal's book is particularly topical. Moreover, it has successfully transformed a multi-layered analytical approach into a narrative that appeals to everyone.

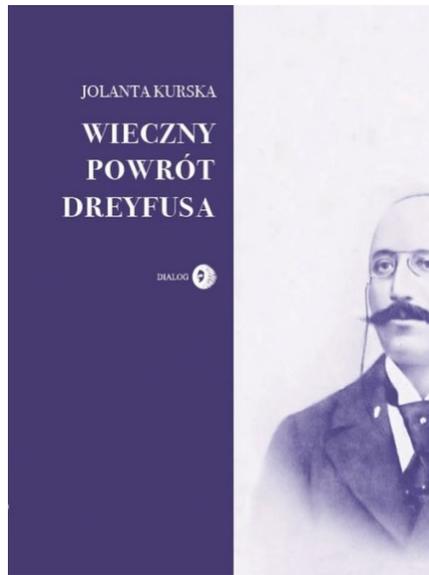


Photo 3. Book cover of Kurska J. (2022). *Wieczny powrót Dreyfusa*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie Dialog.

Slavko Splichal is a Professor of Communication and Public Opinion at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia and an associate member of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts. Slavko Splichal is the founder and director of the European Institute for Communication and Culture—based in Ljubljana—and the scholarly journal *Javnost-The Public*. Splichal's research interests include communication theory, media politics, public opinion, and communication research methods and he is also an expert in examining media and democracy in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond. Furthermore, Slavko Splichal acknowledges the impact of Karol Jakubowicz's research in the Prologue, which summarises the author's longitudinal scientific interests.

Moreover, the Selection Committee awards the excellence of *Wieczny powrót Dreyfusa* (Eng. *Dreyfus: A Perpetual Comeback*), a book by Jolanta Kurska, with a special Media and Democracy Karol Jakubowicz Award 2023.

The publication was acknowledged for raising awareness about where the sources of polarization in society lie and as a warning sign that the Dreyfus Affair is universal. Therefore, the Committee notes that the theme of this collection of essays meets the idea of the Award and needs further dissemination.

The Award Ceremony took place on May 15, 2023, during the opening of the scientific conference *Studia i Perspektywy Medioznawcze* (Eng. *Media Studies: Research and Perspectives*), organized by the Institute of Journalism and Social Communication at the University of Wrocław, Poland).

Every year, the Media and Democracy Karol Jakubowicz Award recognizes original methodologies and the societal impact of scholarly publications in media systems, media policies, media ethics, and public service media in Central and Eastern Europe, and beyond. A full list of this year's nominees can be found on the Award's website: <https://www.ptks.pl/en/awards/the-media-and-democracy-karol-jakubowicz-award>.

**Photo 4.** The Award Ceremony in Wrocław, Poland, on May 15, 2023: prof. Michał Głowacki, prof. Iwona Hofman, dr Jolanta Kurska (on stage, left to right); prof. R. Eugene Parta, prof. Slavko Splichal (online, top to bottom).



Photo by: Jacek Mikucki, University of Warsaw, Poland.

On behalf of the Committee and all the stakeholders, we warmly congratulate the Winners and the Nominees!

*Dagmara Sidyk-Furman and Michał Głowacki*  
UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW, POLAND

## 15 YEARS OF DTA, ONLINE SEMINAR, DECEMBER 9, 2022

Fifteen years have passed since the article *Bringing Discourse Theory Into Media Studies* by Nico Carpentier and Benjamin de Cleen was published in the *Journal of Language and Politics*. The *15 years of DTA* (Discourse Theoretical Analysis) online event thus reflected the development and current status quo of Discourse Theory (DT).

The Post-Marxist discourse interpretation of Discourse Theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), which brought together the discourse's ontology, political identity theory, as well as democratic theory (Mouffe, 1997, p. 18; Carpentier & De Cleen, 2008), holds the political as the primary. The interpretation has thus remained a long time within the realm of political theory in rethinking political democratic development.

Carpentier and De Cleen through the article however demonstrated the possibility to apply Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Theory to other disciplines since the political encompasses all the social. The pair of authors opened the event by explaining their need for a dialog between discourse and media studies but also to connect discourse theory and methodology by re-articulation of DT into DTA, since the former's abstract nature lacked methodological guidelines.

Their introduction was followed by interventions by six researchers. Michal Krzyzanowski, the editor of the *Journal Language and Politics*, a key platform for DT research, opened with a question of potential re-contextualization of how to further analyze change through discourse considering recent developments of populism. Krzyzanowski mentioned the recent rapid change of discourse into a much more conceptual abstract mode and the consequent lack of theoretical and analytical language.

Nicolina Montesano mentioned the value of DT in her research of the Podemos political movement, the social movement of eco villages, or education – social justice in primary schools, where she used participatory research. Discourse theory enabled her to evaluate existing interpretations through text: how processes are being shaped, reconstructed and contested and to view the issues of power and emancipation of others. She added her view of the recent change of Laclau and Mouffe's primacy of the political to the primacy of markets and nature as becoming strong agents in the neoliberal era.

Kiril Filimonov and Yiming Chen, focused on media discourses and practices, and noted the importance of the subject position in DTA. Filimonov through alternative Russian media and Chen in the context of Chinese journalistic

professional identity, identified the fluidity, contingency and rigidity of identifications in media professional identity in the Chinese and Russian contexts.

Vaia Doudaki and Yianis Mylonas have used DTA to unpack ideological and cultural aspects of news making, to analyze media content and coverage to study how ideology and hegemony is being reproduced through media.

Lastly, David Howarth, focused on the methodological and ontological aspects of DT, questioned the exclusive focus of discourse on society, which might cause researchers to primarily focus on the national level and to omit the local, global dynamics. In the context of new forms of aggressive nationalism, the challenge might thus be to meld the macro and micro approaches in DTA and to re-contextualize some of the theory's core concepts, such as hegemony, into new methodology research strategies within new emerging contexts.

By outlining concrete issues of hegemony, power and change with the use of Discourse Theory's key concepts and its' methods within the 15 years of Discourse Theoretical Analysis' evolution, the event not only celebrated a milestone anniversary of the article's publication but also reflected and questioned how society and the role of scholars have changed.

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*Kristýna Kopřivová*

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## **THE THREATS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE CHANGING CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN MEDIA ENVIRONMENTS. CEECOM CONFERENCE, BRNO, CZECHIA, JUNE 29–30, 2023**

The Department of Media Studies and Journalism—at Masaryk University, Brno, Czechia – in cooperation with the ECREA Central and East European Network organized CEECOM's, 14th Central and Eastern European Communication and Media Conference at Brno, Czech Republic on June 29–30, 2023. The theme of the conference was “Threats, Challenges, and Opportunities in the Changing Central and Eastern European Media Environments.”

The conference organizers announced the main field of discussion as: “The rise of illiberal tendencies, populist and radical political actors and populists and radical communication is associated with increased political hostility towards knowledge-producing elite institutions. In populist discourses, established professional media are typically labeled as ‘fake news’ or ‘a part of liberal propaganda’, and professional journalists as enemies of the public. Moreover, during the last two years the countries in the region were hugely affected by two crises – COVID-19 and the Russo-Ukrainian War taking place in the region.”

The conference touched those particularly important issues, but not only for the region. This was particularly evident in the selection of Professor Katalin Feher as the keynote speaker. She is an associate professor at the University of Public Service, Budapest (HU), a recent Fulbright Research Scholar at Drexel University, Philadelphia (US), a Bolyai Postdoc at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and UNKP Bolyai+ Scholar of the Ministry for Innovation and Technology (HU), a visiting professor at the Masaryk University, Brno (CZ), a member of the University of Southern California MASTS and also of the editorial board of the journal KOME. Feher is a founder and PI of AI Media Research. Her presentation about the influence of AI on journalism and communication concentrated on the symbiosis of convergence, mediatization, and AI.

The discussion in the individual panels continued various AI and digital journalism-related problems from many perspectives. The panels entitled: Digital and Specialized Journalism; Social Media Communication; and Going Digital specified the most important challenges not only for CEE region but for modern journalism in general.

Photo 1. Participants of the CEECOM Conference



Photo by: Agnieszka Węglińska, University of Lower Silesia in Wrocław, Poland

The other crucial topic of the conference was the war in Ukraine. Attending researchers presented studies of social media, traditional media, public opinion, and journalists regarding the conflict in Ukraine. Other topics included an interesting and substantial corpus of research about media freedom in CEECOM countries such as Hungary, Poland, Kosovo, Albania, etc., as well as populism, polarization, radicalizing public opinion, and fake news.

Photo 2. Participants of the CEECOM Conference



Photo by: Agnieszka Węglińska, University of Lower Silesia in Wrocław, Poland

## EVENT

An emotional moment during the conference was the acknowledgment of Professor Bogusława Dobek-Ostrowska's contribution to the development of media research in CEE. The conference attracted academics from many European countries, including: Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Albania, Slovenia, Kosovo, Georgia, Sweden, Bulgaria, etc.

*Agnieszka Węglińska*

UNIVERSITY OF LOWER SILESIA IN WROCŁAW, POLAND

## **THE ECREA'S POLITICAL COMMUNICATION SECTION INTERIM CONFERENCE "NAVIGATING THE NOISE: EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION FOR SOLVING POLITICAL PROBLEMS", BERLIN (GERMANY), AUGUST 31 – SEPTEMBER 1, 2023**

The Political Communication Section of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) invited scholars from throughout Europe and beyond to the interim conference focused on solution-based political communication research. Being hosted at the Weizenbaum Institute for the Networked Society in Berlin — one of the largest institutions for digitalization research in Germany — the conference examined what studies in political communication can do for the societies facing numerous contemporary challenges. In particular, possible topics for submission included (but were not limited to): digital platforms, political campaigns and advocacy efforts; traditional and new media influence on political attitudes and behavior; strategic communication shaping public policy and decision-making processes; political communication, civic engagement and democratic participation; the intersection of political communication and data analytics; and the role of communication infrastructures in fostering social cohesion.

The ECREA Political Communication Section conference received 152 individual and 1 joint panel submissions. In total, 122 submissions were accepted, and 116 papers were presented by scholars from 23 countries in Europe, Australia, Asia, and America. The conference opened with the keynote lecture on "Communicating the Future: Solutions for Environment, Economy and Democracy" by W. Lance Bennett (University of Washington, Seattle).

Overall, researchers from Poland presented their findings in several panels, including a session on 'Threats and Solutions' organized by a research group conducting a project on "THREATPIE: The Threats and Potentials of a Changing Political Information Environment". Agnieszka Stępińska and Denis Halagiera from the Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań have been participating in that project since 2020. The European research team shared findings on: "Public perceptions of disinformation and platforms' affordances: The role of media use and previous knowledge", "The Perception of Social Cohesion and Media Use in Society: A Comparative Study", "Third person perceptions about detecting misinformation and fact-checking habits. Evidence from an 18-country survey", "Does selective exposure reduce belief accuracy? Evidence from survey and passive meter data across five Western democracies", and "Combating misinformation

with Media literacy. An experimental study on the framing effects of media literacy messages”.

The THREATPIE team organized a roundtable with representatives of the main stakeholders (journalists, politicians, and NGOs): Tabea Rößner (German Member of Parliament, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen; Chair Committee on Digital Affairs), Michał Chlebowski, (Programming Standards Manager at Polish TVN Grupa Discovery), Jan Nicola Beyer (Digital Democracy Research Coordinator at Democracy Reporting International), and Isabelle Wirth (European Media Project Manager at AFP).

Scholars affiliated to Polish universities were also either presenters or co-authors of papers on crisis communication (“Populism and government crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic: A comparison of four countries” by Beata Klimkiewicz and Katarzyna Vanevska from the Jagiellonian University) and populist communication (“From the ideological underdog to communication mainstream: The impact of the populist style on social media campaigning” by Yunis Mir, University of Warsaw).

The conference was accompanied by the business meeting of the ECREA Political Communication Section. In 2023 there are as many as 400 members of this section, including scholars representing Central and Eastern European countries: Ukraine (17), Poland (14), Serbia (14), Czechia (12), Romania (12), Lithuania (5), Bulgaria (4), Slovenia (4), Albania (3), Croatia (3), Latvia (3), Hungary (2), Russia (2), and Slovakia (1).

The ECREA Political Section conference was preceded by a one-day workshop “Communicating through the Noise: Science Communication for Early-Career Scholars”. It was a hands-on opportunity for early-career researchers to learn how to effectively communicate their research to diverse audiences. The workshop covered both traditional media (i.e., journalists) and new media (e.g., YouTube) with a focus on why science communication is important, when it is appropriate, and how to reach target audiences effectively. As many as 27 PhD candidates from 16 universities in 12 countries (Austria, Czechia, Germany, Israel, Italy, Norway, Poland, Romania, Switzerland, Spain, Sweden, and Turkey) participated in the event. The workshop was organized by YECREA Political Communication Section representatives: Emilija Gagrčin and Cristina Monzer.

*Agnieszka Stępińska*

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**Marcus and Derettens**, OÜ have, since 2006, been English language editing scholarly texts (n=963), mostly published as either research articles in peer review journals or chapters in edited books. All of the clients work at higher education institutions, in either media and communication studies or earth sciences. Clients are mostly located in Central and Eastern Europe. For more details and contact email see [www.derettens-english-language-editing.co](http://www.derettens-english-language-editing.co)

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