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Society on the web. Overview of trends in the use and development of social media and the Internet during the COVID-19 pandemic

Społeczeństwo w sieci. Przegląd tendencji w użytkowaniu i w procesie rozwoju mediów społecznościowych oraz Internetu w czasie pandemii COVID-19

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic forced numerous changes in many areas of human life. Society faced the challenge of adapting to the new reality. Due to the restrictions, people stayed at home and many aspects of their everyday lives moved to the Internet. Direct communication was largely replaced by remote communication, the use of digital tools increased, and social media developed and become the main ways of communication between families, members of the academic community, work colleagues, and brands with their clients. The Internet played a more significant role in maintaining interpersonal relationships than ever before. In this paper, the author reviews trends in the usage and development of social media and the Internet during the COVID-19 pandemic, with particular emphasis put on the case of Poland.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19 PANDEMIC, SOCIAL MEDIA, INTERNET

STRESZCZENIE

Pandemia COVID-19 wymusiła liczne zmiany w wielu obszarach życia ludzkiego. Społeczeństwo stanęło przed wyzwaniem zaadaptowania się do nowej rzeczywistości. Ze względu na obostrzenia ludzie zostali w domach, a wiele aspektów ich codziennej działalności przeniosło się do internetu. Komunikacja bezpośrednia została w znacznym stopniu wyparta przez komunikację na odległość, wzrosło użycie narzędzi cyfrowych, nastąpił rozwój mediów społecznościowych, które stały się kanałami komunikacji rodzin, zbiorowości akademickiej, środowisk pracowniczych czy różnych marek ze swoimi klientami. Internet jak nigdy dotąd odegrał znaczącą rolę w utrzymywaniu stosunków międzyludzkich. W artykule autorka dokonała ogólnego przeglądu tendencji w użytkowaniu i w procesie rozwoju mediów społecznościowych oraz internetu w czasie pandemii COVID-19, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem tych kierunków w Polsce.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: PANDEMIA COVID-19, MEDIA SPOŁECZNOŚCIOWE, INTERNET

INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus pandemic was prominent in 2020 and the first quarter of 2021. On November 17, 2019, the first cases of the SARS COVID-19 virus were recorded in the Chinese province of Hubei. The virus then spread throughout the country and via international air-traffic quickly became a global threat. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that COVID-19 could be called a pandemic. The lockdowns that many countries introduced caused people to move many aspects of their lives online. One of the manifestations of this was the social internet campaign #stay at home, in which Internet users shared their experiences from home life with others and thus encouraged others to stay in isolation. Society faced the challenge of adapting to the new reality. During the pandemic, the emphasis of communication shifted from face-to-face (F2F) direct communication to distance communication, which is manifest in the exponential increase in the use of digital tools across spheres of social activity, particularly in education and office-based work. Social media have developed to become channels of communication involving clients, distance learning, home-office and, above all, virtual meetings with family and friends. There has also been an increase in the digitilization of health protection services. Spiritual life has also moved online. Dispensation from participation in Holy Mass meant that many Catholics benefited from the digital transmission of services on parish Facebook profiles and on YouTube channels. Mediatization of various spheres of human life has become extremely visible. It is even hard to imagine today's world without the Internet – especially in times of global plague.

The aim of this article is to show not only how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the use of the Internet and social media, but also to identify the steps Polish broadcasters took to meet the needs of their audiences, including health protection, interpersonal contacts, practicing faith and information transfer. To achieve this, the study primarily analyzed the activities of social media networks of the globally dominant Meta conglomerate[1], i.e., Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. As a complimentary strand of research, the study analyzed the most popular (most downloaded) mobile app in 2020 – TikTok. However, it is worth noting now that while this article provides an overview, we do not fully know the social consequences of this period of networking relationships. That will require a study after the restrictions on social activities have ceased.

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[1]   Facebook's change of name occurred on 28.10.2021

SOCIETY ON THE WEB

The Internet is a space where people can fulfill most of their needs. It is also a place where communication between them takes place when F2F meetings are not possible. It has become both a global communication network and a part of social life, which Manuel Castells (2003, p. 313) explains as being "because as long as you want to live in society, here and now, you will have to deal with a network society. We live in the Galaxy of the Internet". Researchers dealing with types of society point out that the term network society is used interchangeably with others such as information society, digital society or technological society. However, as Mieczysław Muraszkiewicz (2005) shows:

> Where the net really rules, hardly anyone uses the term information society, the meaning of which has been significantly expanded, blurred and acquired ideological features since it appeared permanently in the politicians' dictionary. We prefer to use the term network society, following Manuel Castells, which emphasizes the way of communication (paragraph 6).

Ewa Radomska states that in the network society "both access to information and communication technologies and the ability to use them play an important role" (Radomska, 2019, p. 118). This society is knowledge-based and uses available e-services, both private and public, draws online from entertainment and cultural goods, and uses online educational materials. The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the use of this concept. The Digital 2021 – Global Overview Report is the latest iteration of an annual report created by *We Are Social* and *Hootsuite* (see Kemp 2021). The report indicates new trends in the way the Internet is used around the world. Researchers are aware that because many countries could not update their data during the pandemic, the trends of 2021 may be understated. According to the report (Kemp, 2021), as much as 5.22 billion people, (66.6% of the global population) used a mobile phone at the beginning of January 2021, and the number of mobile users increased by 1.8% during the year. Over 4.6 billion people use the Internet, which equates to an increase since 2019 of 316 million (7.3%). In Poland, the comparable increase was 4.4%, or 1,3 million for a total of 31.97 million. The top ten uses of the Internet in 2020 were: (i) information searches (63%); (ii) keeping in touch with family and friends (56,3%); (iii) news and current affairs (55.6%); (iv) how to do something (51,9%); (v)

entertainment – videos, TV and movies (51.7%); (vi) find new ideas (47.6%); (vii) search for products and brands (46.4%); (viii) access to music (46.3%); (ix) filling up spare time and general browsing (44.4%), and education and study related activities (42.6%) (Kemp, 2021). By contrast, a Polish Central Statistical Office (GUS) survey done in 2020, showed that 68.5% of people used the Internet as a source of information about COVID-19 and 60% used it for e-mails, reading online newspapers or magazines and searching for information about goods and services. Interestingly, while there was an increase, compared to 2019, in users of 9 of the 16 categories GUS asked about, and there was a decrease in 5 categories: (i) searching for health-related information; (ii) watching videos from user-generated services; (iii) putting your own content online; (iv) playing computer games, downloading game files; (v) and selling goods or services at auctions (GUS, 2021).

An interesting perspective of using the Internet by users was also presented by Rovetta and Bhagavathula (2020) who analyzed the behavior of Internet search engines with coronavirus related search terms and the circulation of fake news during four pandemic months. Rovetta and Bhagavathula found that countries with more COVID-19 cases had more inquiries about the virus. They also discovered that whereas the most frequently searched terms on Google related to the coronavirus were: 'coronavirus', 'corona', 'COVID', 'virus', 'corona virus' and 'COVID-19', there was wide-spread use of 'coronavirus ozone', 'coronavirus 5G', 'coronavirus laboratory', 'coronavirus conspiracy' and 'coronavirus bill gates'. The number of searches for tips and cures for COVID-19 increased in the wake of speculation by US President Donald Trump about a 'miracle cure' (Rovetta & Bhagavathula, 2020). The pair also expressed the hope that those responsible for media and healthcare regulation would remain vigilant and reduce the spread of online disinformation. These studies show that the phenomenon of infodemia is a big problem on the web. Conspiracy theories are replicated, and misinformation and fake news are rampant. Fake coronavirus messages disseminate at lightning speed online, causing chaos and panic. Technology broadcasters are fighting this phenomenon by removing certain materials or publishing WHO advertisements free of charge. Experts also appeal to media recipients to responsibly and reliably approach the issue of their published content. This issue, as one of the trends in the use of the Internet during a pandemic, undoubtedly constitutes an interesting research problem.

INNOVATIONS INTRODUCED BY FACEBOOK

Social media have benefited from the coronavirus pandemic, because it has enabled them to become privileged channels of interpersonal communication. Numerous stories, live broadcasts or virtual meeting places allowed people to stay in touch despite their physical distance. The weakening of social ties and subsequent alienation have decreased due to new technologies, including social media, which have also played a significant role in customer communication for companies and brands. These platforms have significantly developed their sales tools and became crucial elements for remote working (enabling employers to communicate with their employees) and education, where teachers, in Facebook groups communicated with students as well as parents.

As with the growth in Internet use, there was an increase in the number of users of social media. In January 2021, 4.2 billion people, or more than half the global population, used social media, which is an increase of 13% since January 2020 (Kemp, 2021).

Image 1. Increase of global social media users over time.

Source: https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-global-overview-report
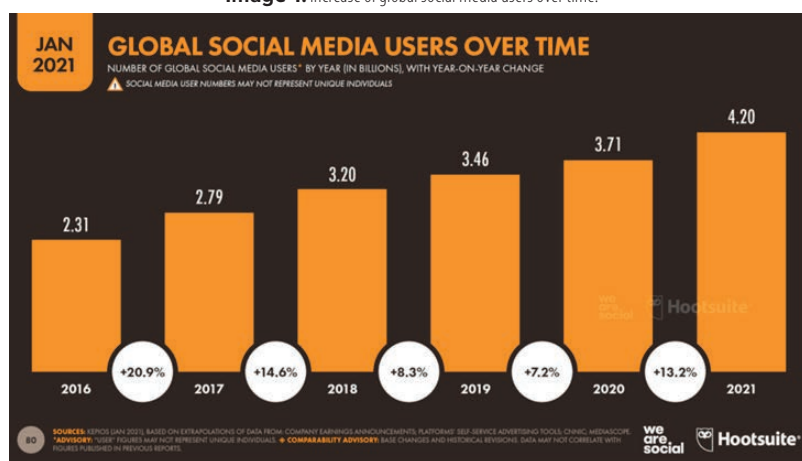
On average, more than 1.3 million new users the world over joined social media every day (see Image 1. In Poland, the number of users increased by 2.5 million during the pandemic up until January 2021 to almost 26 million. Most people use a multitude of social media, like Facebook, YouTube, Whatsapp, Messenger and Instagram. The five most common reasons for using social media are: (i) are being up to date with news and current events (36.5%); (ii) searching for fun and entertaining content (35%); (iii) filling

free time (34.4%); (iv) staying in touch with friends (33%); and (v) photo and video sharing (27.9%) (Kemp, 2021). These data show that social media is one of the main sources of information for most users, and at the same time remains a form of entertainment and a kind of relaxation. In the context of considerations regarding the process of social media development during the pandemic, fundamental questions should be asked concerning improvements, if any, that Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp introduce during the epidemic? And the changes, if any, that the three sites made to protect user health?

As Facebook reported, its team has been working to make the apps run smoothly while prioritizing health-related functions. An information panel was created on Facebook, which collated news and links to check and verify articles on the coronavirus. After adding the panel to their Facebook wall, the user receives information directly in their newsfeed. The World Health Organization health alert was launched on WhatsApp. On March 16, 2021, it was reported on Instagram that in order to help people find reliable information, the website was introducing a global information center on COVID-19. It also introduced the stories sticker, which directly connected people to the news center, but above all was an expression of support for others. Notifications directing users to the news center were also displayed at the top of the user feed. In order to mitigate any potential network congestion associated with the large number of active Facebook users, the bit-rate for videos has been reduced in some regions. In line with the principles of crisis management, Facebook eventually ran tests to help improve services (Kang-Xing, 2020). However, the main purpose of the platform was to facilitate people-to-people contact, provide users with access to verified and reliable information, remove harmful content, and fight coronavirus disinformation by supporting fact-checkers. Facebook also introduced new pandemic-related advertising rules. The platform checked the content of published ads with the possibility of blocking, if advertisers tried to use fear of COVID-19 infection to sell products. Facebook clearly defined which ads are allowed and which are abusive. It allowed the possibility of promotion with temporary restrictions: disinfectants for hands, disinfection wipes and non-medical masks. However, in such cases, the advertiser had to meet the basic conditions: the ad history was supposed to be at least four months and the account could not appear as previously not meeting the conditions for placing the ads. Additionally, advertisers were only allowed to advertise these products in their home country. This concerned China, Indonesia, Israel, Cameroon, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Thailand, Turkey, Ukraine and Vietnam. On the other hand, advertisements

for the COVID-19 test kit were forbidden, with the simultaneous indication that advertisements promoting test venues or promotion of services offered in hospitals or testing points were allowed. The sale of vaccines was completely forbidden, however, advertisements informing about access to vaccines were allowed (Zasady zamieszczania reklam…, 2020).

Another solution introduced by Facebook during the pandemic was the launch in March 2020 on the Business Resource Hub platform, whose purpose was to provide support to all companies directly or indirectly affected by the pandemic. It contains reliable information, tips, tools and materials supporting the management of the enterprise (e.g., guides selected for industries such as restaurants and cafes, retail, beauty salons and spas).

To facilitate communication for users, Facebook has also introduced an innovation to group conversations – the so-called Rooms. They can be created from Messenger, Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram. Up to 50 people can join an open room on Messenger using a link, even without a Facebook account. The Rooms do not have any time limits. It is also worth adding that on Facebook, following the example of Instagram, only the 'follow' option was left – while the option to 'like' was removed.

To sum up, Facebook as the dominant actor in the sphere of social networks during the coronavirus pandemic introduced many solutions whose main goal was to protect the health of users and maintain the continuity of interpersonal relations. Special information centers and WHO alerts have been launched on Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. To facilitate the contact of recipients, Rooms were created that simplified communication for a larger group of people. Additionally, in order to stop the spread of false information to some extent, the content was subject to increased verification. It was similar to the case of advertising, where Facebook introduced new – more stringent – rules for advertisers. These innovations meant that Facebook not only did not lose from the coronavirus pandemic, but one can talk about its development and its benefits.

PANDEMIC APPLICATION – TIKTOK

Tik-Tok is an application that has spread very quickly among social media users around the world. It is especially popular among teenagers aged 10–19 years, but during the pandemic it was also used by celebrities and influencers in other age groups. In 2020, it was the most downloaded application. Tik-Tok has branches in Los Angeles, New York, London and Tokyo, and from

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January 2021 also in Warsaw. The number of application users is growing every month. At the beginning of 2021, nearly 1 billion people were actively using the application in 100 different languages. There are 100 million users in Europe. It is worth considering what factors influenced such popularity?

TikTok's history is linked to two other apps: Musical.ly and Douyin. Musical.ly is an application that allows you to create 15-second videos with lip sync with music. It was founded in 2014 by Alex Zhu and Louis Yang. In the ensuing years, it developed mainly in the United States. In September 2016, the Douiyn app for creating short films was created, which a year later began its expansion under the name TikTok. In November 2017, ByteDance – founded in March 2012 by Zhang Yiming in Beijing – bought Musical.ly, and a year later merged it with TikTok by transferring all profiles (What is TikTok? 2021). As stated by the app's originators, the mission of TikTok is to inspire creativity and bring joy. It is an application where users can create short videos on any topic and share them with others. In principle, they are similar to music videos. As Ryszard Tadeusiewicz (2021) claims "this platform is based on the principles of artificial intelligence and uses machine learning techniques in order to maximally adjust the delivered content to the preferences and needs of each specific user". The algorithms in this case are responsible for voice and language processing. The images viewed by users are enriched with music selected by artificial intelligence. The deepfake technique may be a disturbing phenomenon in this regard. The word "deepfake" means the use of machine learning algorithms combined with face mapping technology to digitally manipulate people's voices, bodies and faces. "This technology is developing so rapidly that it is becoming more and more difficult to say what is false" (Wasiuta, Wasiuta, 2019, p. 21). In March 2021, a fake video recording appeared on TikTok with a person confusingly looking like the actor Tom Cruise. Although the recording was removed, its appearance aroused a lot of emotion and discussion. Image manipulation using new technology can be disastrous, especially when it appears in applications used mainly children in their teens. Referring to the controversy aroused by TikTok, one cannot fail to mention the conflict between its owners and Donald Trump. In 2019, the US government launched an investigation after officials expressed concern that the app could pose a security risk to Americans due to the way TikTok stores and handles user data. It was suspected that the Chinese government was spying on American citizens. On July 31 2019, the US President Donald Trump told reporters that he would ban TikTok from operating in the country. On August 3, 2020, he issued a regulation to block and remove this application from both Apple and

Google stores. However, just a month later, Judge Carl Nichols temporarily blocked this order (Fung, 2020).

However, the potential of the application is noticed by more and more companies and personal brands, such as X-com or Ziaja. In March 2021, TikTok launched a new feature that allows users to purchase in-app products for a sponsored hashtag challenge. It also introduced the ability to filter comments for users over the age of 16 and a 'hint' tool, encouraging you to reconsider posting a comment that may be negative and offensive. In this way, the app wants to promote mutual positivity.

It should also be added that TikTok was used during the election campaign in Poland. On March 30, 2020, President Andrzej Duda, who was running for re-election, placed an invitation on TikTok for students to take part in the e-sport tournament Granantanna Cup organized by the Ministry of Digitization and ESL. He started his video with the words: "Is this Tik-Tok? Am I on a Tik-Tok?". This video was to persuade young people to stay at home and choose electronic sports, as evidenced by the tags accompanying the video: #zostanwdomu #zostanciewdomu #koronavirus #coronavirus #koronaviruswpolsce. The appearance of the President on TikTok sparked a lively discussion on the Internet. In relation to the prevailing epidemiological situation, many criticized this way of campaigning, however, experts in the field of political marketing concluded that it was a good move that could contribute to winning the votes of young people.

The coronavirus pandemic, as with Facebook, has contributed to an increase in the number of TikTok users. This application has become a form of creative home time spending, making it the most downloaded application during the pandemic. Despite raising a lot of discussions and controversy, its potential in interpersonal communication is noticeable among users, as well as in the contact of famous brands with their potential customers.

INTERNET AS A SOCIAL SPACE

The coronavirus pandemic has accelerated the development of not only social media, but also many industries related to new technologies. Due to the overview nature of this article, only selected areas of everyday life in which a perceptible digital change has occurred will be briefly presented.

One of the most important values in human life is health. During the pandemic, terms such as telemedicine and telehealth were often used in the media interchangeably. However, as experts point out, telehealth is a broader

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concept than telemedicine. Telemedicine defines the use of technology to treat patients, while telehealth provides both health education, diagnosis and treatment (Różnica między telemedycyną a telezdrowiem, 2018). There is no doubt, however, that the pandemic accelerated the computerization of medical practices, as doctors around the world offered 'remote consultations', which were held over the phone or via videoconferencing platforms. The aim of this solution was the safety of patients who did not have to go to the clinic. Many experts in the field of medicine admit that the pandemic caused a significant number of people who had negative attitudes to new technologies used in medicine to change their minds. Training and educational projects were also conducted for people who, for any number of reasons, have experienced digital exclusion for their age (Patient Empowerment 2020: Pandemia przyspieszyła informatyzację medycyny, 2020). It should also be added that health applications were created for consistent communication. In Poland, the apps are '*kwarantanna domowa*' and '*STOP COVID-ProteGo Safe*'. Detailed information can also be found on the websites gabinet.gov.pl and pacjent.gov.pl. Between January and December 2020, the website was visited by over 17 million users compared to 1.5 million in 2019. The Internet Patient Account subpage also recorded a record increase in 2020 rising from 850,000 to the current 4,7 million patients. Many patients also use the e-prescription subpage (Internetowe Konto Pacjenta pomocne w pandemii, 2020). There is therefore little doubt that the Internet was a helpful tool to the medical services during the pandemic.

Education and office-based work were aspects of everyday life significantly influenced by the pandemic. National lockdowns caused school educators from March 12, 2020 to switch to providing online – distance or remote – learning. Also, many employers recommended their employees to work remotely. "Education during the pandemic changed 180 degrees the process of preparing classes by teachers and sharing and delivering content to students. The educators' task was to find the appropriate source of communication" (Piechowska, Romanowska, 2020, p. 33). As a result, the demand for webinar and videoconferencing software increased significantly in the digital market. Microsoft Teams became the primary communication tool between teachers and students. On this platform, you can create separate teams with their own chat, task list or file storage. You can also share your screen in real time, assign, monitor, and evaluate tasks and plan your class schedule. Other applications used in education, but also in professional work, are Zoom and Google Meet. The latter is part of the Google G Suite package, which integrates with other Google services.

The Internet was also helpful in Poland in spreading and practicing the Catholic faith. After the church hierarchs introduced dispensation from participating in Holy Mass, many parishes opted for online broadcasts. This phenomenon was especially intensive during the Christmas and Easter holidays. Many parishes also broadcast the Lenten retreat. Initially, many new YouTube channels were created, and requests for subscriptions appeared on parish social media accounts due to the limited availability of live streaming for mobile devices. However, in April 2020, YouTube lifted the requirement of 1,000 subscribers for religious entities. In a report published in "*Religions*", the researchers found that during the coronavirus pandemic in spring 2020, 40.8% of parishes in Poland conducted online broadcasts, of which 18,9% were on YouTube, 18,7% on Facebook, and less than 5% used an independent streaming source for broadcasting. Although religious institutions in other countries did use transmission platforms, like Skype, Zoom and Periscope, the Catholic church Poland did not practice this method. Nevertheless, researchers did find in the analyzed period of the pandemic, there was a dynamic increase in the use of new technologies in the Polish Church, at a hitherto unprecedented level (Przywara, Adamski, Kiciński, Szewczyk, Jupowicz-Ginalska, 2021, p. 1). During the European Schuman Festival, which took place in the spring of 2020 in an online form, the debates decided that the Church in Poland, after the congregations returned to the churches, should not give up the use of new technologies in their evangelical work.

The pandemic also influenced the work of cultural institutions. The imposition of lockdowns and social distancing caused the temporary closure of theaters, cinemas, museums, art galleries, community centers were closed, and concerts with the participation of the public were forbidden. Cultural life like education, medical practices and the retail sector moved to the web but as Czyżewski et al. (2020, p.26) explain the outcome was a negative experience:

> Creators and institutions built up communication with audiences via the web fairly quickly, but it turned out that most of the material is qualitatively, artistically and technically poor, and excess content can cause Internet fatigue. The omnipresent ‚streamosis' is not a chance for culture, but only a confirmation of the powerlessness of many creators and the inability to use the potential of the network.

This statement shows that that virtual reality, with the exception of online live concerts, is a poor substitute environment for the transmission of

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cultural communications. Musicians who were unable to tour during the pandemic organized their performances online, often combining with a charitable fundraiser. In Poland, TVN and the TVN Foundation "Nie jesteś sam" organized on April 4, 2020, the "*Koncert dla Bohaterów*", in which 35 Polish artists took part. It was a thank you to all the health professionals for their contribution in the fight against the coronavirus. The concert raised more than PLN 4 million, which TVN donated donated to the fight the coronavirus. However, the loudest concert on the web was the concert „One World: Together At Home" organized by Lady Gaga, which raised $127 million for the World Health Organization. Another Polish charity event was the nationwide Hot16Challenge2, initiated by the rapper Karol 'Solar' Poziemski, which permitted each nominee was to record a 16-line verse within 72 hours and nominate other performers. The aim was to raise money for the medical staff on the siepomaga.pl website and to support the fight against the coronavirus. The event was attended by singers, journalists as well as politicians, including President Andrzej Duda. During the concert, 1,349 songs were played, there were 3,869 nominations, and the recorded songs were viewed 496,699,730 times (Beef z koronawirusem, 2021). Theaters also moved their performances online to streaming platforms like YouTube, with mixed results. Museums introduced virtual tours of their exhibits.

All aspects of everyday life have undergone significant digitization during the coronavirus pandemic. The new technologies of digitization can improve communications when the communicative environment is abruptly altered, by for example lockdowns and social distancing. Digitization has ensured the provision of health care services, school curricula and higher education courses, the pastoral care provided by the Catholic Church and enabled office-based work and cultural life to continue on-line and contributed to maintaining social distancing. However, digitization is a poor substitute for direct human communication.

CONCLUSIONS

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Internet has become the main environment of interpersonal communication. The social restrictions of lockdowns and social distancing, introduced to stop the spread of the coronavirus have pushed many aspects of everyday life to transition to the web. Public institutions, international organizations and governments of individual countries also used the Internet to disseminate information on the

functioning and adaptation to the new reality. Digital technologies and software have been applied on a large scale, which prior to the pandemic was only used by a small part of the population, such as videoconferences, webinars and remote learning, mainly using Microsoft Teams, Zoom or Skype. In addition to IT companies, media giants also strengthened their positions by introducing many new solutions. Social media introduced some innovations aimed at facilitating the users' access to reliable information, as well as their contact with others. A major beneficiary of adapting to the constrained social environment by embracing the oppprunities offered by digitization was the Catholic Church. Parishes maintained their evangelical work and pastoral care by broadcasting online mostly of Masses on Sundays and Holy Days. The Internet enabled culture broadcasters to transmit their content and medical practitioners to maintain health services.

However, it should be remembered that the importance of the Internet and social media in the context of the pandemic should not be considered solely in terms of its positive aspects. The ongoing duration of the pandemic and the smart-phone fulfilling constant need for self expression by Generation Z whom Parker and Igielnik (2020) describe as "digital natives who have little or no memory of the world as it existed before smartphones" has raised awareness of the addictive allure of both digital technologies and social media and its effect on mental health.

Petra Schuhler and Monika Vogelgesang (2014, p. 17) believe that the phenomenon of "network addiction" should be treated "not only as a bad habit that has crept into our lives (…), but as a serious mental illness that affects our relationships with other people, our life energy, and above all, our self-esteem". Nevertheless, sociologists and medical practitioners were aware of 'network addiction' before the pandemic. Abusive use of the digital media, spending long hours working, playing and socializing on computers, tablets or smartphones has deepened this social crisis. During the pandemic, sociologists and psychologists have repeatedly called for digital hygiene to maintain a healthy balance between the use of and over exposure to technology and mental health. Another negative phenomenon related to the Internet and social media during the pandemic was the infodemic, which the WHO (2021) defines as:

> infodemic is too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak. It causes confusion and risk-taking behaviours that can harm health. It also leads to mistrust in health authorities

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> and undermines the public health response. An infodemic can inten-
> sify or lengthen outbreaks when people are unsure about what they
> need to do to protect their health and the health of people around
> them. With growing digitization – an expansion of social media and
> internet use – information can spread more rapidly. This can help
> to more quickly fill information voids but can also amplify harmful
> messages. (https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic)

Anti-vaxxers and a broad community of coronasceptics posted misleading content that spread panic and chaos. This behavior challenged media broadcasters to take steps to stop the spread of online disinformation. Therefore, in observing the trends in the use and development of social media and the Internet during the COVID-19 pandemic, it should be stated that while they played a significant role in interpersonal communication, they also produced a raft of negative effects. Let the words of the Polish Nobel Prize winner Olga Tokarczuk – initially published in the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and then published on April 1, 2020 in Polish, on her Facebook profile – serve as the conclusion of this article. Tokarczuk foretells:

> Our children will come out of quarantine addicted to the Internet, and
> many of us will realize the futility and sterility of a situation in which
> we are mechanically and by the force of inertia. (…) Before our eyes,
> the civilization paradigm that has shaped us for the last two hundred
> years is blown away like smoke: that we are the masters of creation,
> we can do anything and the world belongs to us.

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