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'More Social' Means 'More Flawed': How New Media is Contributing to the Breakdown of Polish Democracy

Abstract: It is no coincidence that anti-democratic changes in the recent years in Poland occurred alongside the rapid development of social media. Technologically advanced methods of discourse management (e.g., behavioral targeting) have successfully exploited the poor understanding of social media mechanisms among Poles[1] (Drzewiecki, 2010) and created a fertile ground for undermining liberal democracy. Social media have endangered public debate by facilitating the spread of hate speech, fake news, deep fakes, trivialization of public discourse, astroturfing,[2] and the use of bots for propaganda purposes. It seems that in the young and unstable Polish democracy, the combination of anti-democratic forces and dynamic development of social media poses a unique threat to the development of society.

Key words: social media, democracy, flawed democracy, media, fake news, populism

Introduction

In October 2021, the Washington Post reported that it had accessed an internal report by Facebook which showed that it contributed to the polarization of the political scene in Poland, reinforced social divisions and even triggered a 'social civil war'. As if that was not enough, it admitted that the platform's algorithms allowed the strengthening of the far-right movements in the country (Morris, 2021). This unequivocally confirmed the words of whistleblower Francis Haugen who publicly spoke in the broader context of the social networking giant's activities – the influence of social media on public opinion and politics is toxic, and the corporation itself knew it very well (*The Facebook files*).

The journalistic investigation unequivocally confirmed what media researchers have been concerned about for years. The almost uncontrolled, rapid growth of a new type of media is taking place in the conditions of an ultra-capitalist, globalized world economy,

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[1] A telling statement in this regard was made by the Polish Minister of Education and Science, Prof. Przemysław Czarnek, who saw no difference between the spying functions of Pegasus software and remarketing activities on the Internet (Chudy, 2022).

[2] Astroturfing is the practice of masking the sponsors of a message or organization (e.g., political, advertising, religious or public relations) to make it appear as though it originates from and is supported by grassroots participants. (McNutt, 2010).

with regulations that for years have been extremely lenient on transnational technological corporations. This is now becoming one of the fundamental causes of the global crisis of already highly mediatized politics. This process seems to be characteristic of the 2010s and 2020s, breaking the previously dominant narrative (also in academia!) about social media as a panacea for the lack of social consultation in Western democracies and the opening of public opinion to all citizens as long as they have access to the Internet and have a Facebook account (Wilhelm, 1999; Baciak, 2006; Lakomy, 2013 and others). The primacy of profit as the overarching corporate goal and the longstanding disregard for signals about social media algorithms as catalysts for extremism and polarization quickly changed our outlook on social media – not as an opportunity but as a threat that impairs democratic relations (Bertot, 2019; Olaniran, Williams, 2020).

If one considers that democracy has four fixed pillars (sovereignty of the people, political pluralism, tripartition of power, and the rule of law) (Sozanski, 2014), then one must also – following the architectural analogy – assume that there are factors that can fracture these pillars. Below, we list those that, in our view, have the hallmarks of democracy disruptors and at their core rely on social media as tools for violating democratic foundations:

Table 1

The destructive impact of social media on the pillars of democracy

Disruptive factor	Impact on the pillars of democracy
Emotionality of messages	Political decisions made under the strong influence of public opinion are a negation of pluralism. Political actors cease to have a creative function in the formation of ideas, guided only by the current analysis of online content, which does not necessarily reflect the 'will of the people' and is usually an extremist distortion of it; the tripartite division of power virtually ceases to function when decision-making is reduced to succumbing to media mediated emotions (Sigillo, Sicafuse, 2015).
Low level of legal culture and digital competence of citizens	This stems from the failure to apply the law in the online sphere, where the source of the message is usually unknown (meme creators remain elusive). Technological corporations operate in a legal vacuum (Can a Polish citizen sue Facebook in a Polish court?). The rule of law is becoming an illusion. Meanwhile, the existing regulations, as well as the principles of how social media functions, are not clear to citizens.
Social media as the only source of information	Can a citizen functioning in an information bubble and deprived of access to various sources of information be considered capable of making sovereign decisions and autonomous choices? Is a nation composed of such individuals sovereign or incapacitated by the functioning of a defective media system?
The association of social media and populism	A media in which extremist, emotional and populist content is promoted in a systemic way (as it usually has better reach) overtly contributes to a reduction in the level of pluralism of opinion and diversity of ideas.

Source: Own elaboration.

We want to base our article on methods of source analysis, indicating the paths of research that are relevant to the social media-related threats to liberal democracy. At this stage of research on social media and democracy, we think there is a clear need for a meta-level discussion in this area. A comparative analysis of our findings and the works of other researchers should allow us to establish the risks placed in the wider context of political science and the studies on media and social communication.

First threat: emotionality of the message

Political content presented in social media is usually highly emotional. Although psychologists nowadays do not treat emotions as a factor that interferes with rational evaluation or the process of making political decisions (Marcus, 2008), their influence is unquestionable. They may, for example, activate the so-called peripheral track of information processing, in which an individual changes their attitude under the influence of peripheral factors, such as the appearance of the sender of the message or the number of arguments, rather than the quality of the argument used. Such change is rapid and the resulting attitude is highly labile (Aronson, 2006). Manipulating an individual's emotions is also easier than presenting fact-based argumentation, hence the popularity of highly emotional messages among populists (Breeze, 2019). Emotions spread quickly, which, when combined with the nature of social media, creates an explosive mix. At the same time, it is important to remember that emotional and rational processes cannot be separated. They are interrelated and influence each other. According to Lodge and Taber, "For better or for worse, affect and cognition are inseparable and perhaps inescapable. Where, when, and for whom this inexorable linking of feeling and thinking will facilitate good decision making, and when it will lead to systematic departures from a rational course of action, are important questions currently unanswered." (Lodge, Taber, 2012).

Research conducted by J. Weismueller, P. Harrigan, K. Caussementa and T. Tessitore led to conclusions that social media users are less likely to share content in which argument quality is more prevalent than emotions compared to content in which emotions are prevalent (this is confirmed in the findings of previous research conducted in this area (e.g., Akpinar, Berger, 2017; Tellis et al., 2019). According to these researchers, "it is somewhat concerning in a political context in which the content that voters consume can potentially decide who they cast their electoral vote for, which can lead to severe negative consequences for our society." (Weismueller, Harrigan, Couusnment, Tessitore, 2021). The second finding is that content with positive emotions is shared more often, which may be somewhat surprising in light of previous data indicating people's tendency to give negativity greater weight and how dominant negativity is in political discourse on social media (Vaish et al., 2008; Vosoughi et al., 2018). According to the authors, this may be due to the fact that the study included influencers whose main function is entertainment – an escape from official information channels focused on negative content.

Our research, based on the opinions of young Poles, shows that "contact with mass media does not always translate into greater knowledge about politics, but it certainly forms emotional orientation, especially towards politicians. This is especially observable in the context of social media. That is why, when using social media, it is worth naming those emotions and revealing whenever they are intentionally used for the purpose of individual political goals." (Pawełczyk, Jakubowski, 2019).

Second threat: low level of legal culture and digital competence

The problem of legal culture and digital competence has not escaped Central Europe, especially Poland. However, we believe that, unlike stable liberal democracies, new democ-

racies are more susceptible to the negative impact of social media which has the potential to destroy the social fabric. To use pandemic terminology, so widespread in our everyday life, Western societies have managed, over the many decades of post-war times, to develop certain mechanisms that make the democratic organism immune from the adverse influences of the media system. These include institutions of civil society, which help in forming appropriate attitudes, and in education, including the area of responsible media use (Kanižaj, Lechpammer, 2019). We know that third sector institutions (associations, foundations, think tanks) are neither as numerous nor as influential in Poland as in many countries of the so-called 'old EU' (Salamon, Sokolowski, 2018). The result is a society less educated in specialized skills such as media competence, but also less engaged in actively counteracting the negative effects of the media in its current form. Secondly, Polish schools are failing in preparing young citizens for challenges associated with social media and generally have low achievements in media education and digital competencies. It seems that this problem has been aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Cicha, Rutecka, Rizun, Strzelecki, 2021).

Another issue is of legal and regulatory nature. The negative impact of new media on the shape of Polish democracy has been strengthened by two converging factors. The first is an undeveloped legal culture and rule of law necessary to properly regulate the issue of how the media influence citizens' opinions and how they operate on the Internet. This deficiency owes much to a lack of political imagination and a certain disregard for the Internet as a peripheral medium. Now that this peripheral medium has turned out to be of central importance, it is already too late to prevent damage. It is significant that the most important laws we have that are supposed to regulate this were initiated at the EU level, not in Poland (e.g., the General Data Protection Regulation). Similarly – political demands and voices calling for taxation and regulation of monopolies of large technological corporations have their origins in the European Commission and not in the Polish government.[3] For now, these voices have not resulted in any specific policy, but this is still much more than what the Polish state has done; it completely backed away from the idea of a digital tax on the day of the American Vice President's visit to Poland (Rozwadowska, 2019).

Rapid technological development and regulations that do not keep up with them have created an almost wide-open door for legal loopholes that 'under normal conditions' would be quickly blocked by the state. This was quickly noticed by digital giants who took full advantage. In this respect, the anarchic freedom of social media, which is destroying democracy, is somewhat reminiscent of the wild capitalism of the early 1990s in Central and Eastern Europe. Weakness of the state will always translate into tacit consent for the development of pathological mechanisms, including social and political relationships built through social media.

Third threat: social media as the only source of information

Democracy undoubtedly requires well-informed citizens, whose decisions, such as who to vote for, should be based on rational grounds. However, do social media, which seem to provide access to a wide variety of sources, improve citizens' knowledge?

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[3] In December 2021, the European Commission presented a proposal for a directive guaranteeing a minimum effective tax rate for the global activities of corporations, including technological corporations (Ciechanowicz, 2021).

A large-scale study carried out in 17 European countries on a sample of 28,317 people showed 5 types of attitudes in searching for/acquiring political information by citizens, revealing a relationship between the way an individual searches for information and their level of political knowledge (Castro, Strömbäck, Koc-Michalska, 2021). These 5 categories include news minimalists, social media news users, traditionalists, online news seekers and news hyperconsumers. News minimalists (17%) include those who seldom watch the news and use very few news outlets and platforms. The second group are social media news users (22%) who view slightly higher levels of inadvertent news than minimalists and are frequently exposed to news through platforms like Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. Traditionalists (19%) prefer traditional and public services and compared to the previous two groups, watch TV more often, as well as listen to the radio and read newspapers. They are mainly male, older, well educated, interested in politics and trust the media. The fourth group are online news seekers (32%) – they are also exposed to news and tend to actively use various news outlets and online platforms, are mainly women, skeptical of the media and not very trusting of it. The last group is hyperconsumers of news (10%) – relying on 6 to 7 news outlets and more than 3 social platforms. In Poland, 8.9% of respondents belonged to the news minimalists category, 15% to traditional and public services, 17% to social media news users, 42% to online news seekers, and 17% to hyperconsumers. A similar structure of the share of each type of political knowledge source has been found in Italy, Romania and Spain. Further analysis showed that a higher level of knowledge is observed among traditionalists and online news seekers, while no correlation has been noticed between being a hyperconsumer of news and their level of political knowledge. In addition, the acquisition of political knowledge by those categorized as social media news users was found to be severely limited. These results thus confirmed the findings of many other researchers that "people usually learn very little about political or socially relevant issues by following social media platforms like Facebook" (Boukes 2019; van Erkel, van Aelst, 2020).

Thus, it can be said that today one of the main sources of knowledge in Central Europe is the Internet, including social media. The format that most strongly attracts the attention of young audiences, e.g., from Poland, is memes (Jakubowski, 2021), which are hardly a format suited for forming a rational opinion. A. Malewska-Szałygin emphasizes that brevity in memes is taken to the extreme, where even complex problems are presented in a simplified and one-sided way. At the same time, the power of the image combined with words is definitely greater than the words themselves (Malewska-Szałygin, 2017, p. 21). As J. Jakubowski points out, "[…] young people who are becoming politically socialized on the basis of internet memes can have serious problems as adults seeking their place in the reality of modern democracy. This may result in their susceptibility to manipulation, extremism and their inability to interpret the increasingly complicated political reality [...]." He also claims that the elements of entertainment and the simplification of form and content in new media formats can result in "the processes of tabloidization, trivialization and so on, which are negative from the point of view of the formation of civic attitudes" (Jakubowski, 2021).

Memes also strongly engage emotions, thus reinforcing individuals' political identities and making it difficult to understand members of a different social group. This can build barriers that are difficult to overcome in real life.

It can be expected that we will see an intensification of trends that are already noticeable today as there is an increasing proportion of people who use the Internet, especially social media, to acquire knowledge about politics. This way of accessing political information does not deepen political knowledge, does not lead to the rational setting of political attitudes, and may have a negative impact on the quality of political decision-making by citizens, or lead to their withdrawal from the political sphere. We should also remember that the use of social media further locks us into information bubbles, which can also exacerbate political polarization and make it more difficult to build consensus around controversial issues. In the long run, this can pose a serious threat to democracy – the quality of its functioning and even its survival (van Aelst et al., 2017; Jakubowicz, 2013).

Fourth threat: the association of social media and populism

In many Central and Eastern European countries (including Poland), the political scene began to undergo dynamic reconstruction in the 2000s. New parties and movements, often of a populist or extreme right-wing nature, sprouted from parties and circles sticking to the strict socio-political divisions formed during the Revolutions of 1989. Their rise in popularity coincided with the development of social media, in which these new political movements saw a chance and an ally (Jakubowski, 2017). In Poland, the best example of this type of 'marriage of convenience' between populists and social media was in the extreme right-wing politician Janusz Korwin-Mikke and his parties (Lipiński, Stępińska, 2019).

It was not until the late 2010s and early 2020s that technology corporations began to take a firmer stance. First, Facebook deleted the account of Janusz Korwin-Mikke (November 13, 2020), then of his party Konfederacja (January 6, 2022). However, this happened years after extreme, nationalist and populist politicians had found their way into the Polish parliament in 2015, capitalizing on the preference of social media algorithms for posts with extreme and highly emotional content (Stetka, Surowiec, Mazák, 2019).

Thus, it can be concluded that social media overtly contributed to flooding Poland with the 'fourth wave of populism' (Stępińska, Lipiński, Hess, Piontek, 2017). It seems that one of the main reasons for this is the synergy of populist strategies in the process of populist political communication and social media. We present this juxtaposition in Table 2.

Table 2

Populist communication strategies and respective features of social media

Populist ideological factor/style	Features of social media supporting populist strategies
1	2
Referring to the category of "the people"	Social media as 'the media of society,' of the people
Anti-elitism	Generating content independently of mainstream media which are a part of the elite
Stammtisch (German for society gathered around a table)	Textual and visual simplification of messages and their emotional nature
"Heartland"	Online community as a "homogenous and virtuous society"

1	2
Anti-party-ness	Potential for general and open criticism
Negation of political correctness	Limited gatekeeper function
Cognitive emancipation	Multiple sources facilitate access to more extended/complex knowledge of politics
The principle of 'more leadership, less participation'	Websites are constructed so as to facilitate the personalization of politics and emergence of a star-like online system
The strategy of extraordinary personality	Image creation potential
Close relations with pop-culture	Pop-culture's interference in the language of the Internet

See more: Jakubowski, 2017.

Social media as a communication tool seems to have been created especially for those who negate democratic values. At the same time, their actions are strongly determined by the opportunities provided by new types of media. This combination seems to be yet another disruptor of the fragile democratic traditions in Central and Eastern Europe. The practice of the ruling parties (PiS, ANO, Fidesz, SMER) and the high social media activity of the populist opposition politicians provide ample evidence that this threat is not only theoretical.

Conclusion

We have shown the four main threats from social media that have contributed to the democratic crisis in Poland. They have created a significant barrier to looking at politics through the prism of a rational, cool analysis of reality, and promoting highly personalized messages lined with negative emotions, lies (and their equivalents in the form of fake news or post-truth), and conflict.

Social media is increasingly replacing traditional media such as radio, television, and newspapers (*We are social*, 2022). This is especially true for the younger generation, which has grown up with the development of the Internet, but also for older generations who increasingly find political news online (Castro, Strömbäck, Esser, Van Aelst, de Vreese, Aalberg, Cardenal et al., 2021). However, societies of young European democracies may be particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of the observed changes due to the low level of digital education; one of the aforementioned four threats to democracy that intensifies the scope and strength of the impact of the other three. Lack of adequate competence in the field of online content can make it difficult to defend oneself against fake news or highly emotional messages, thus creating ground for the development of populist and extremist attitudes. This can be particularly dangerous in societies where democracy is still weakly rooted, such as Poland and other Central and Eastern European countries.

We realize that it is not possible to catch up with many years of legal, educational or political problems in a short period of time. It will require the determination and involvement of many political circles, NGOs and social authorities. However, we need to take the first steps now, at a time of turmoil caused by the COVID-19 pandemic or the recent Russian invasion in Ukraine, as destabilization will probably only intensify

existing problems. Although the destructive influence of social media on public opinion is only one of the elements adversely affecting the quality of democracy, their influence on our opinions, attitudes and actions is unquestionable, with each citizen of Central and Eastern Europe spending on average about two hours daily on social media (*We are social*, 2022). As we can see, more often than not, this influence is a threat to democratic principles, standards and values.

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"Bardziej społeczne" oznacza "bardziej wadliwe": jak nowe media przyczyniają się do upadku polskiej demokracji

Streszczenie

Antydemokratyczne przemiany w Polsce zbiegły się nieprzypadkowo z wejściem na nowy poziom rozwoju mediów społecznościowych. Zaawansowane technologicznie metody zarządzania dyskursem (np. poprzez targetowanie behawioralne) współistnieją z niską wiedzą Polaków na temat tego jak funkcjonuje świat *social media*[4] i niechęcią do zdobywania wiedzy na ten temat wśród polskich rodzin (Drzewiecki 2010). Staje się to żyznym gruntem dla rozwoju negatywnych zjawisk z punktu widzenia demokracji. Hejt, fake news i *deep fake*, trywializacja i banalizacja, astroturfing, wykorzystywanie botów w celach propagandowych… można w nieskończoność wymieniać niebezpieczeństwa związane z wpływaniem działań w *social media* na debatę publiczną. Stawiamy hipotezę, że w przypadku demokracji tak młodej i chwiejnej jak Polska, połączenie antydemokratycznych wizji państwa z tak dynamicznym rozwojem mediów społecznościowych stanowi wyjątkowe zagrożenie dla rozwoju społeczeństwa.

Słowa kluczowe: media społecznościowe, demokracja, media, populizm

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[4] Znamienna pod tym względem była wypowiedź polskiego Ministra Edukacji i Nauki prof. Przemysława Czarnka, który nie widział różnicy między szpiegowskimi funkcjami oprogramowania Pegasus a działaniami remarketingowymi w internecie (Chudy 2022).