

Media landscape of Poland - from a distance

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Introduction

This short essay is intended for a foreign reader who has no deep knowledge of Polish history, culture or politics, but is interested in the Polish media system, as well as in recent trends in the Polish media, and seeks a broader understanding than a Wikipedia page can offer. It is meant for scholars and students of mass media who need a basic introduction to the largest media market in Eastern Europe – Poland.

Located between Germany and several former Eastern bloc nations, Poland has been a member state of the European Union since 2004. It is a nation of about 38.5 million people sharing one language, Polish, and a relatively homogenous culture (about 87% of the population is Catholic; religious minorities include Russian Orthodox, Protestant, Buddhist and Islamic communities).¹ Estimates vary, but according to the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, one should add to the home population at least 18 million Poles living abroad.² The Polish diaspora

has historically been very significant in the formation of the nation's language and culture, and with the rise of the “new” online media, it can be expected to play an even greater role.

As this is a general overview, we refer to only a few major publications in English (listed in the bibliography) that can guide a motivated reader towards more in-depth research.³ These authors tend to focus on the “old” media – printed press and broadcasting. In recent years, the “new” online and social media have been growing very fast in Poland, so we intend to cover their brief history, too. But even a quick look at the Polish Internet reveals that recent media trends need to be explained against the background of the postwar history of Poland. The contemporary Polish media system functions within a framework shaped by the process of transformation from authoritarian communism to liberal democracy, and it is impossible to understand without some

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knowledge of that transformation.

Therefore the text consists of three parts: the postwar communist authoritarian system (1944-1989), the transformation from authoritarian communism to liberal democracy (1989-2004) and recent trends

People' s Republic of Poland: an authoritarian communist media system (1944-1989)

At the end of World War Two, the Soviet Army defeated the Nazi Germany troops and forced them to retreat from Poland, but imposed a new kind of occupation on the "liberated" territory. The Polish communist state, called People's Republic of Poland, was founded on July 22, 1944 under Soviet auspices.⁴ PKWN (Polish Committee of National Liberation, a communist organization which in cooperation with the Soviet Army took over the rule of Poland) published a manifesto in which it promised democratic freedoms including the freedom of press and information, but with one restriction, namely: "these freedoms cannot serve the enemies of democracy" (quoted in: Goban-Klas 1994: 51). As one Polish media scholar has observed, "Who were those enemies? Who had the right to designate them? These questions were left unanswered, although in practice the job was done by the security apparatus." (Goban-Klas 1994: 51). The leading role of the Polish United Workers' Party (founded in 1948) was

including the rise of the "new" online media (2004-2013). As is often the case in media studies, we are drawing on the sources and data provided by several disciplines: history, political science, sociology and economy.

enshrined in the constitution proclaimed in 1952, and Soviet military bases would remain in the Polish territory (especially in the Western part) until the early 1990s. Throughout the communist era, Poland was a member of the Warsaw Pact (a Soviet-led military alliance) and the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (an international organization promoting economic exchange and cooperation between the nations of the Eastern bloc). An authoritarian media system was consolidated by the 1950s, and with some changes, remained in place until the 1980s.

Soon after taking over the power, the communist authorities introduced a system of censorship. In 1947, the Main Office of Control of the Press, Publications, and Public Performances (Główny Urząd Kontroli Prasy, Publikacji i Widowisk, GUKPPiW) was founded. The office was to prevent "(a) subversive activities against the Polish state, (b) disclosure of state secrets, (c) infringement

of the international relations of the Polish state, (d) violation of law and decency, and (e) misleading public opinion by spreading untrue news" (quoted in: Goban-Klas 1994: 61-62). In the following years, the degree of censorship was steeply increasing, reaching the point where "even wedding invitations, business cards, and rubber stamps did not escape the office's control" (Goban-Klas 1994: 63). Information was controlled both by persuasion and by coercion. Strictness of censorship fluctuated later on, but it is more or less correct to say that it peaked in the Stalinist era of the 1950s, and then gradually relaxed until the declaration of martial law of 1981 (about which more later) when it was once again taken more seriously. The censorship system lasted until the late 1980s and the populace was kept under control by hiding vital information. In 1986, for instance, the majority of Polish people were herded outdoors on May 1 to attend compulsory May Day celebrations, unaware of the Chernobyl disaster that had happened on April 26 and produced a radioactive cloud reaching Polish territory. The mainstream media revealed the reality of the disaster only after the news had been released by Western European media and leaked to the Polish public. In general, however, political control of information in Poland was looser than within the Soviet Union, and some limited interaction with the West was allowed.

The most powerful medium in communist Poland was broadcasting. National public radio had existed in Poland since 1925 and was revived after the war, and television broadcasts started in 1953. The fact that television was introduced just a year after the new constitution illustrates the high priority given by the authorities to this useful propaganda tool. Under the communist rule, both radio and television were owned and controlled by the state. National television (Telewizja Polska) consisted of two channels: Channel One carried news and commentary on the current events (international political events were always interpreted with a pro-USSR bias), and some entertainment, and Channel Two was supposed to promote culture (under the rubric of "culture", more freedom of expression was allowed; the same applied to the printed press, especially magazines). Broadcasting was under the power of the Party-affiliated Radio and Television Committee that regulated all programming. In private conversations, one often heard the remark that "television lies," but still, most people watched it for news and entertainment. As for entertainment, programming included sports, nascent film production, films and serial shows from the other countries of Eastern bloc, and a limited number of Western films (mostly old). Television theatre and cabaret, as well as nascent film industry, produced some works

of high artistic value in spite of censorship. National radio had three channels: One for news, Two for culture (classical music etc.), and Three for youth music (launched in 1962 and quite popular with the young until the 1980s).

All newspapers were controlled by the state, more specifically by communist party organs or local governments (also heavily influenced by local communist party cells). The Party considered these also an important propaganda tool. The press readership was low and the general public did not hold printed media in high esteem. According to a common joke, in the People's Republic of Poland there could be a shortage of toilet paper, but never of newspapers. As all media funding was controlled by the state and centrally distributed, advertising hardly existed. It was out of place anyway in an economic system where most goods, even daily necessities, were scarce. Throughout most of the communist era, most citizens stood in lines to purchase homogenous products in stores run either by the state or by local cooperatives. However, unlike some other communist countries, Poland avoided famine; some branches of industry were well developed and employment was universal. The communist era had its glimpses of prosperity, but by the 1980s the centrally planned, state-controlled model of economic development resulted in a situation where

the government was in massive debt, and the average monthly pay (in Polish zlotys) was the equivalent of about 20 dollars.

We use this last piece of information to illustrate how much (or rather, how little) Polish media audiences in the communist era knew about the outside world. Formally, it was possible to go abroad if one applied for a passport and went through the official screening procedures. However, the average person, even if he or she got a passport, could not afford to travel beyond the Iron Curtain. Limited academic exchange was allowed, and some historians claim that in the long run, the American policy of funding scholarships for young communist party elites enhanced political change. But for an average citizen, information about the outside world was scarce and often outdated. Members of the intelligentsia (a relatively large group of college-educated, but economically weak people that emerged in communist societies due to free higher education and to some extent, carried on traditions of the pre-communist intellectual elites) learned about the world from old books, films and accounts of those who had travelled abroad. Alternative sources of information (other than official state propaganda channels) included elder family members (communist Poland, although industrialized, kept some characteristics of a rural society such as strong family ties),

underground press and books (basically forbidden, but controls were lax), and books and press smuggled into the country from the West. In more educated families, children learned two versions of history: one at school and the other at home (school lessons in modern history were permeated not only with the Marxist worldview but with a pro-Soviet political bias, too).

One interesting leak in the state-controlled information system was foreign language education. The first foreign language every schoolchild had to learn was Russian. However, later into the communist era, German and English were allowed in some schools as a second foreign language. If the students were motivated, they could learn quite a lot about societies that spoke those languages. Student exchanges with East Germany were promoted. In the case of English there was no communist English-speaking society to refer to, and some knowledge of the English-speaking countries, capitalist as they were, eventually got through. Also, Western radio channels in Polish—the BBC (from 1939), the Voice of America (from 1942) and the Free Europe (from 1952)—operated until the 1990s and provided alternative news channels. Communist authorities installed jamming stations in an effort to prevent listening, so using those channels took some perseverance; but most of the time, the content got

through the noise. In general, people were very interested in every bit of information from abroad, whether it came from illegal sources, books, letters, or stories passed on by relatives and friends. We could describe Poland of the 1980s, as we remember it, as “an information-hungry society”, keeping in mind that (a) we lived in an educationally privileged intelligentsia environment, and (b) for the Polish people of that era, the “outside” world, the West, was a dream and a better world we secretly aspired to. Consequently, we were more interested in it than a Western European person of the same generation probably was in our world.

The picture would be incomplete without one more alternative source of information, possibly the strongest competition to the state – the Catholic Church. In the twentieth century, Poland was about 90% Catholic; the Church as an institution enjoyed high authority in the nation and social respect. Obviously, the official materialist worldview of communism, hostile to all religion, was irreconcilable with the strong position of the clergy. However, the Party leaders did not want a violent clash with the Catholic majority so their policy of erasing religion more often took the shape of persuasion than coercion. This resulted in hard-won compromises, but without getting into details we can safely say that in Poland institutional religion survived, in spite of

official state-promoted atheism. Unlike in other communist countries, the churches flourished and people attended them on a regular basis. Some “cultural activities” sponsored by the Church (such as students’ clubs, Catholic intelligentsia clubs, small dramatic societies) became an outlet for independent political movements, and played important roles in the formation of the anti-communist opposition. There are several possible explanations for the surprising fact that the Catholic Church not only survived but also thrived in communist Poland, and discussing them is beyond the scope of this essay. Some historians point to diplomatic talents of charismatic Church leaders such as Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński (1901-1981) who sought compromises with the communist authorities, but defended his high moral

The transformation (1989-2004)

1989 is usually perceived as a symbolic date when the communist party of Poland ended its rule. However, the process of transformation from authoritarian communism to liberal democracy began earlier, in 1980, when the “Solidarność” (Solidarity) labor movement coordinated massive strikes in main industrial cities. The strikes forced the communist authorities to negotiate with workers angered by a combination of economic crisis and lack of

ground (he was imprisoned between 1953 and 1956). Another prominent representative of the Polish clergy of that generation, Karol Wojtyła, became the most mediagenic Pope of the century, John Paul II (1920-2005, in office 1978-2005). His pilgrimages from the Vatican to Poland turned into huge media events difficult for the communist authorities to control, and became a factor in the country’s peaceful political transformation. It is ironic that since that transformation, the clergy has lost some of its moral authority, but again, explaining the reasons is not within the scope of this text. The Catholic Church remains a major institution in Poland to this day, more than in other European countries, and one important reason is its history under the communist rule.

freedom. On August 31, 1980, an agreement was reached between the Polish United Workers’ Party and shipyard workers in Gdansk: non-communist “Solidarność” labor unions became legal. Some of the communist leaders decided, however, that this peaceful movement could be squashed by military force, and on December 13, 1981, they declared martial law. This period lasted until 1983. It resulted in the delegitimation of “Solidarność” and imprisonment of its

leaders, harsher censorship, and restrictions on public gatherings. Lech Walesa, the leader of the movement, was granted a Nobel Peace Prize in 1983 (because he was not allowed to leave the country, his wife accepted it on his behalf).⁵

By 1985, perestrojka and glasnost in the Soviet Union changed the political climate in all of Eastern Europe and raised new hopes for reform. Democratization of the political system in Poland was achieved through a series of negotiations between the communist party and opposition leaders known as the "Round Table talks" (February 6 - April 5, 1989). The point was reached where reform-oriented members of the ruling party and the moderate wing of the opposition could meet each other halfway. The moderate wing of the opposition in that context meant leaders with left-wing credentials (in many cases, ex-communists themselves). Radically anti-communist (right-wing) activists of "Solidarność" were kept away from the strategic decision-making process, and would raise issues with the conditions of the compromise later. Freedom of speech, understood as the possibility for the various political forces to gain access to all media, was guaranteed during the Round Table talks (one important keyword back then was "pluralism", meaning that the information monopoly of the Party would be broken). On May 8, 1989 "Gazeta Wyborcza"

(The Election Newspaper), the first legal opposition newspaper, was published with a circulation of 150,000 copies.

The name of the newspaper was related to its first task: campaigning in advance of the first semi-free election in postwar Poland. The election was held on June 4 (coincidentally, the day of the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing). 99% of opposition politicians who had been allowed to run were elected to parliament. On October 28, Joanna Szczepkowska, a popular actress, spontaneously announced on television: "People, communism in Poland is over!" In 1990, the Polish United Workers' Party was dissolved and in 1991, truly free elections were held. Several new political parties emerged from the opposition movement as well as from the old communist elites. In 2004, Poland joined the European Union and this event was widely celebrated as a happy end to the democratization process started in 1989.

The combination of internal and external factors (the final breakdown of the centrally planned economy model glasnost in the Soviet Union; a growing sense of crisis among the communist elites) led to a peaceful transformation. A new constitution was enacted in 1997, guaranteeing freedom of speech (it pronounced the totalitarian methods and practices of Nazism, fascism and communism illegal; Chapter 1, Article

13). However, political compromise also left some controversies in its wake. Attempts to purge former communist officials were clumsy and incomplete. As a result, many former Party activists have remained in positions of power, especially in the media, business, and academia.

The transformation of the Polish media system after the 1989 breakthrough was closely correlated with the transformation of the whole country. Within several months a competitive press market sprang up, and when the Broadcasting Act (1992) came into force, the process of establishing and forming a dual media system based on the coexistence of public and commercial media was initiated (Pokorna-Ignatowicz 2010:40).

Ryszard Filas identifies five stages in the first decade of Polish media freedom. His classification helps to systematize key events in the transformation period. The stages are:

1. Impetuous enthusiasm demonstrated by new editors and broadcasters; compulsory conversion of communist era media (May 1989 – July 1991)
2. Ostensible stabilization and grass roots movements in the press and the radio (mid 1991- end of 1992)
3. An overt battle over the media market, particularly its electronic segment (the beginning of 1993 – August 1994)

4. Development of the market, sparked by the first licencing procedure and the expansion of German periodicals (September 1994 – December 1996)

5. New fragmentation of the media market and progressing specialization (1997-2000). (Filas 2010:30)

The national broadcaster, TVP, was declared public under the new broadcasting law (1992), and a new controlling body, the National Broadcasting Council (Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji, KRRiT), was created. This new law, the Broadcasting Act (Ustawa o Radiofonii i Telewizji), and its subsequent amendments provided the framework for the post-1989 media system. It followed the promulgation of the new Polish constitution, which defines the National Broadcasting Council as one of the principal state bodies. The council advises policymakers on electronic media, specifies the mechanisms and principles of their functioning, reviews projects, supervises broadcasters, and regulates terms and conditions of licence fees. Members of the body ought to be completely apolitical, are not allowed to belong to any political party or trade union, and may not hold any public office that does not harmonize with the authority of the Council. Until December 2005 the National

Broadcasting Council consisted of nine designated members (four of them were appointed by the Sejm, the lower house of parliament; two by the Senate, the upper house of parliament; and three by the president). The term of office was six years. A chairman of the council was appointed by the president until 1995, when an amendment gave this power to the council members. This amendment, approved by the Polish parliament, was triggered by the attempts of President Lech Walesa to manipulate the contents of broadcasts.

The Broadcasting Act defines public radio and television as constituting an important component of the dual public/private media system. Legislators who designed the Polish public media system followed the example of the contemporary French model, and therefore public broadcasters were incorporated, although the State Treasury retained possession of 100% of their shares.

As Katarzyna Pokorna – Ignatowicz has it: “National television became a lasting element of western liberal democracies in the second half of the twentieth century as an implementation of the media’s social responsibility theory.” (Pokorna-Ignatowicz 2010:40⁶) This theory evokes the ideal of media as a mediator between the government and society. Realization of this model requires joint action from society, broadcasters, and the state. Broadcasters

are supposed to execute the principles of the social responsibility model. Mass media should defend their independence both against politicians and big business entities, which can also try to influence broadcasters. The most complicated issue is the role of the state. It ought to honor freedom of mass media and not interfere with them. On the other hand, the state is expected to create a favorable environment for functioning of the social responsibility model (Węglińska 2007: 19).

Polish lawmakers decided that Polish public media would be financed through licence fees, advertising and other commercial activities. Such a model requires transparency and is described in relevant sources as a mixed model. Public radio and television were supposed to commit to the “remit” (mission). Unfortunately, the “remit” was not precisely defined which opened doors for potential abuse of the concept.

While legislators struggled to establish an appropriate model for the broadcasting system, new, non-communist newspapers were founded. The first one, “Gazeta Wyborcza,” founded in 1989, remains a leading opinion daily to this day. Its editor-in-chief, Adam Michnik, a charismatic opposition leader, is highly respected by both the Polish intelligentsia and European intellectual elites. Michnik proved himself a very effective businessman, too, and his

newspaper would later become a center of the Agora multimedia conglomerate. New commercial and religious broadcasting networks were founded (to be treated in the next section).

The press market was radically transformed after 1989. The first post-communist government, under Tadeusz Mazowiecki, completely altered the system of press distribution. Censorship was renounced in 1990 and a licence system of press publishing introduced. The legal liquidation

of the Labor Publishing Cooperative “Prasa – Książka – Ruch,” the national editors’ cooperative, in 1990 replaced it with Ruch Ltd, a sole-shareholder company of the State Treasury under the Ministry of Industry. Initially press enterprises were purchased by journalist cooperatives, private individuals and banks. Later on, they were taken over by international media groups such as Hersant, Orkla, Axel Springer, Bauer, Burda, Pasauer Neue Presse, etc. (Krajewski 2009:41).

Recent trends: the beginning of the new millennium (2004-2013)

Soon after the transformation described above, Poland, the largest media market in Eastern and Central Europe, began to attract foreign investment. Polish print media have become a part of British, German, French and Norwegian media groups, and are subject to EU regulations. Currently, the press is almost completely privatized and foreign ownership is high, especially in the local press, general interest magazines and women’s magazines. There are more than 300 newspapers, most of them local or regional, –a dozen national. The best-selling Polish daily is “Fakt,” a tabloid controlled by Axel Springer, a German media group (sales: 346, 916).⁷ The leading opinion dailies - “Gazeta Wyborcza” (center-left orientation; the second biggest selling daily; sales: 210,

164) and “Rzeczpospolita” (“The Republic” (center-right orientation; sales: 64, 149)— belong to Polish media groups Agora and Gremi Media, respectively (until recently, “Rzeczpospolita” was owned partly by the Polish government and partly by the British firm Mecom). The third biggest-selling daily is the “Super Express” tabloid (sales: 159, 206). The main business daily is “Dziennik – Gazeta Prawna” (Daily – Law Newspaper; sales: 51, 071). However, fewer than 30% of Poles read any kind of newspaper.⁸

Since the transformation, television has remained the main source of news for most Poles, and the national public broadcaster TVP (Telewizja Polska) still has the largest share of the TV audience. It also operates regional services and a satellite network, TV

Polonia, targeted at expats. Ever since the transformation, TVP has been in constant crisis because of political partisanship and an ineffective system of subscription fees (only about 30% of households are liable to pay fees and total subscription fees cover only about 15% of the TVP budget; the remainder is covered by advertising and other sources; KRRiT 2011, 2013⁹). In 2010, the broadcasting law of 1992 was revised and management was streamlined, but TVP came under stronger control by the ruling party (two government officials instead of one in the governing bodies of both its radio and television operations). One of the fundamental features of the Polish media system is a high politicization level of public media. According to Katarzyna Pokorna – Ignatowicz, problems with the independence of public media in Poland are not caused by “defective law or introduction of an untested system but by political conditions, which resulted from the very beginning in more or less secret attempts to influence and control public television.” (Pokorna –Ignatowicz 2010:42). Each chairman of TVP until now has had distinct and recognizable political affiliations.

The National Broadcasting Council (KRRiT) is still heavily influenced by the government and its apolitical nature is a claim rather than reality. All the revisions of the Broadcasting Act so far have had a political

context. Presently KRRiT consists of five members: two designated by the Sejm, one by the Senate, and two by the president.

In 2011 and 2012, the broadcasting law was revised again to comply with EU regulations. New legal provisions such as limitations of product placement, protection of children, and regulation of video-on-demand services were introduced. At the beginning of the new decade, about 70% of TVP funding came from commercials (Dobek-Ostrowska 2012) and about 43.7% of programming was entertainment (mainly American films; KRRiT 2010). In 2011, TVP had a 37.2% share of the TV advertising market, more than major commercial stations Polsat (26.5%) and TVN (28.1%) (KRRiT 2011).

The leading commercial networks, Polsat and TVN, share the market with TVP. Their programming content is mostly entertainment using formats imported from Western Europe and the US. TVN has also become known for its TVN 24 news channel modeled on CNN (available on cable TV only). Polsat has a digital pay-TV platform and since 1999, it has also been present in the Baltic states. A digital pay-TV platform, Cyfra Plus, was launched in 1998 by France's Canal Plus. Broadcasting media belong mostly to Polish capital groups (foreign ownership is limited by law to 33%, although these limits do not apply to investment originating within the EU¹⁰). The digitalization of terrestrial TV

broadcasting was completed by July 31, 2013. In future, digital terrestrial TV is expected to offer up to 30 channels, but there is an ongoing public debate about how they should be distributed.

In 2012, the National Broadcasting Council was accused of discrimination against the Catholic “Telewizja Trwam” broadcasting network. The network was denied access to the digital multiplex on the grounds of insufficient financial documentation. Telewizja Trwam, launched in 2003, is a part of a media group built around the Radio Maryja (“Holy Mary”) Radio, a Catholic broadcasting station founded in 1991 which is conservative, controversial, and very vocal politically. The group, led by an energetic priest-businessman, Fr. Tadeusz Rydzyk, also publishes a daily newspaper, “Nasz Dziennik” (circulation: 100, 000 according to the publisher). By June 2013, about 2.5 million people had signed a petition supporting the right of Telewizja Trwam to be included in the digital multiplex. The Helsinki Foundation of Human Rights appealed to the National Broadcasting Council for more transparency in the process. In July 2013, the Council revised the decision and Telewizja Trwam was granted access. However controversial, the “Radio Maryja” group has won itself a considerable audience by a combination of clearly targeted conservative content, modern technology, and effective

organization practices.

Public Polish Radio (Polskie Radio, 4 channels) reaches just over half of the population. It relies more heavily on subscription fees than does TVP (70%; KRRiT 2012). It has produced a lot of high quality content, but struggles financially. There are more than 200 radio stations throughout the country. The most popular ones (RMF FM, Radio Zet, Radio Eska) are commercial.

The commercial Internet was introduced into Poland in 1993. Broadband penetration is still below the European average. Poland had about 25 million Internet users in 2012, accounting for 65% of the population, while the EU average was 73%¹¹, but this indicator has been growing very fast. In 2011 Poland experienced the world’s highest growth of year-on-year Internet subscriptions (5%), to reach 21.8 m. fixed wired broadband subscriptions.¹² Most Poles own at least one mobile phone. The number of smartphone users is growing. Approximately 25% of Polish people use smartphones. However, the Internet is still accessed mostly through personal computers (about 80%).¹³

Three of the most popular Internet portals over the years have been: Onet, Wirtualna Polska and Interia. The owner of Onet.pl is ITI Group, a huge media group that also owns TVN – one of the major commercial broadcasters.

The most popular sites in terms of real

users as of July 2013 were: Google.pl – 18 m., Allegro.pl (an auction site) – 16 m., Facebook – 14.9 m., onet.pl (Polish news and entertainment portal) – 13.4 m., YouTube – 13.8 m. and wp. pl (Polish news and entertainment portal) – 13 m.¹⁴

Social media are very popular with Polish Internet users. Nasza-klasa.pl, a Polish equivalent of Facebook, was launched in 2006 and has about 8.5 m. active users (July 2013). Facebook has 14.9 m. users in Poland. Twitter, with 1.5 m. users (2012), is still niche, but popular among youth, celebrities, and politicians trying to boost their image. One of the sites on the rise is <http://demotywatory.pl>, with access growing by a million monthly – a Polish version of the American site www.despair.com, mocking the “motivation industry”. The site displays funny pictures with subtitles created by users, mostly parodies of motivation posters hanging in corporate offices. It entertains users with black humor, irony, and sometimes political satire. It is a commercial, online advertising-based site, targeted at young men. The administrator sets restrictions on brutal language and pornography, but is tolerant of chauvinistic content. Like in many other social media, the business model is based on user-generated content and “sharing”, as well as competition between users, who play the game according to a set of rules imposed by the administrator.

Despite some structural weaknesses related to the country’s post-communist heritage and economic crisis in the EU, online and social media have been growing fast in Poland. One driver of that growth is the relative youthfulness of the population – the last baby boom in the country happened in the early 1980s, hence there is a large generation of “digital natives” in their late 20s and early 30s. Most of this generation is also well educated, with one or more college degrees. For those of them who emigrated after the opening of the EU job markets, social media are a way of keeping in touch with the home country. A big part of this generation took to the streets and mounted online campaigns in 2011 and 2012 to protest against ACTA (Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement), which in the Polish context was perceived as an equivalent of the American SOPA legislation. The agreement, signed in January 2012 by the Polish ambassador in Tokyo, was criticized for violations of privacy and the secretive law-making process, and interpreted as a joint attack by government and business on “cyber-freedom”. Polish government websites were hacked, proving vulnerable in case of a cyber-attack. Demonstrations brought thousands of (mostly young) people onto the streets, and resulted in no less than 500, 000 voices of protest online (mainly on Facebook).¹⁵ As a result, this unpopular legislation was reconsidered

and renounced by the Polish government, and rejected by the EU Parliament in July 2012.

The picture of the Polish media in recent years would be incomplete without a mention of a “disaster marathon” media event that traumatized the nation on April 10, 2010, when 96 high-profile passengers, including the president, died in a plane crash in Smolensk, Russia. The disaster was very symbolic because of the historical background (the Polish delegation were on their way to Katyn, site of the massacre of Polish officers by the Soviet Army in 1940). The government entrusted the investigation of the accident to Russia; the families of many victims felt it was negligent and have kept seeking justice ever since. The late president, Lech Kaczyński, and the current prime minister, Donald Tusk, came from opposing parties (the president, formally non-partisan, was connected to the center-right “Law and Justice” and the prime minister to the more liberal “Citizens’ Platform” which has had the majority in Parliament since 2007), and had long been in conflict over issues concerning national security, energy policy and policy towards Russia, among others. The opposition party, led by the brother of the late president, immediately started making political capital out of the national mourning while the government made it clear that a friendly relationship

with Russia was their priority. At the time of this writing, the investigation has been prolonged and the question whether the disaster happened due to an accident, an assassination, or some massive security incompetence has yet to be answered. What can be said for certain is that the tragedy shook many people as it revealed basic dysfunctions in the state, which was unable to locate responsibility for the security of its highest officials. One outcome was a polarization of political debates in the mass media.

The controversies over the presidential plane crash resulted in several significant shifts in media environments. A few journalists who raised the possibility of assassination, and had been critical of the government before, resigned or were dismissed from their “old” media posts (the most conspicuous reshuffling of personnel took place in the “Rzeczpospolita” daily in 2012) and focused on “new” media activities such as video blogging. The opposition has gone online and started publishing new magazines. Some political debates no longer possible in the mainstream press or television have shifted to “new” media. The Polish political blogosphere had always been more prone to right-wing tendencies than the “old” media, and as a result of recent events, online opposition has consolidated and shifted towards the far right. Radical right wing

sites such as: www.niezalezna.pl, <http://vod.gazetapolska.pl>¹⁶ have become an outlet for harsh criticism of government policies. These opposition online media are not produced by amateur activists, but by professional, experienced journalists. Video bloggers have been exploiting the memories, imaginary and vocabulary of the “Solidarność” movement of the 1980s, positioning themselves as “lonely wolves” of the “underground” and “independent” media fighting against the “regime”. The National Broadcasting Council has expressed concerns about “abuses of freedom of speech on the Internet” (KRRiT 2013).

Confrontational language aside, two preliminary conclusions can be drawn from a quick overview of the latest developments in the Polish media system. Firstly, the Polish government, skillful in PR strategies

using “old” media, has been lagging behind in the “new” online environments (this was dramatically exposed in the ACTA issue). Secondly, there seems to be a commercial potential in the new online dynamics of the anti-government opposition and its shift towards the political right; paid online “independent” television channel Telewizja Republika announced it would be available on cable from October 30, 2013.¹⁷ Anti-government “new,” but often politically conservative, media seem to be winning some economically viable audiences in Poland. It remains to be seen whether their journalists will effectively defend their professional independence and contribute to the public debate, or become exponents of extreme nationalism and its cynical manipulation by market forces.

Notes

- ¹ Central Statistical Office (Główny Urząd Statystyczny), 2013, http://www.stat.gov.pl/cps/rde/xbcr/gus/P_population_in_poland_size_and_structure_30-06-2013.pdf, last access: 15.01.2014.
- ² Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych), 2013, <http://www.ms.gov.pl/resource/b8b3993a-2df7-408b-a4c4-20b7ef465d34:JCR>, last access: 15.01.2014.
- ³ For a comparative media system analysis tracking back to the early modern beginnings of Polish press, see Dobek-Ostrowska 2012; for a comprehensive history of the postwar communist media system, see Goban-Klas 1994; for an extensive research of Polish journalism in the communist era and beyond, see Curry 1984, 1990, 2007.
- ⁴ Applebaum’s *Iron Curtain*, although not an academic book, provides a sweeping historical narrative of how the communist system was consolidated in the early postwar years in Poland and other Eastern European countries, and deserves attention as a highly acclaimed Western journalist’s interpretation of the formation of the communist propaganda system in Poland.
- ⁵ At the point of this writing, Walesa remains an influential and controversial figure in Poland. While many consider him a national hero, several accusations of cooperation with the security apparatus and pro-Soviet bias during his presidential term (1990-1995) in post-communist Poland have been raised.
- ⁶ All citations from the Polish sources translated by the authors.
- ⁷ Newspapers’ sales according to: ZDKP-ABC Poland (Związek Kontroli Dystrybucji Prasy), <http://www.zkdp.pl/>, last access:

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- ⁸ "Poland country profile", http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country_profiles, last access: 31.10.2013.
- ⁹ KRRiT (National Broadcasting Council) annual reports available at: <http://www.krrit.gov.pl/krrit/sprawozdania/>, last access: 30.10.2013.
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Media landscape of Poland - from a distance

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Abstract

This short essay is meant for scholars and students of mass media who need a basic introduction to the largest media market in Eastern Europe – Poland.

The contemporary Polish media system functions within a framework shaped by the process of transformation from authoritarian communism to liberal democracy, and it is impossible to understand without some knowledge of that transformation.

Therefore the text consists of three parts: the postwar communist authoritarian system (1944-1989), the transformation from authoritarian communism to liberal democracy (1989-2004) and recent trends including the rise of the “new” online media (2004-2013).