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COMMUNICATION IN SOCIAL NETWORKING WEBSITES. DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL BONDS OR POLARIZATION OF POLITICAL VIEWS?

Abstract:

New media are frequently used for presenting views and developing desired socio-political opinions. The social networking websites are becoming an objection towards the use of media messages as tools of persuasion and manipulation. However, they are not playing that role exhaustively. The article discusses the process of developing social capital in social networking websites, against the background of social relationships based on trust or lack of trust. Partnership and cooperation are becoming important tools of democracy, with which there are constructed the social bonds which mobilize the users of media networking websites to undertake political activities. The developed social bonds constitute a source of discussion groups concentrated around joint views. In turn, in the light of lack of trust, that division into groups leads to alienation and the resulting polarization of views. Polarization tendencies in the social networking media limit their informative character. At the same time, they cause a situation when, in the social networking area of the Internet, different socio-political activities are ignored or blocked. Media education is to counteract such tendencies. Under the European law, the European countries have been obliged to develop media education both in education, and through social educational programs. The current condition of media education in Poland was presented.

Introduction

The essence of media communication is the development of the activity of senders and recipients of media messages in compliance with the fundamental values, such as truth, well-being and beauty. However, mass media, and currently – mainly new media, have the power to promote not only positive values, but also harmful, destructive, and even criminal ones. In a modern, democratic society, there exists the need to selectively and critically perceive media messages, in order to recognize the factual and ideological, overt and hidden contents of messages. "The senders do not assume the responsibility for the level of knowledge of their recipients, and they even often benefit from their ignorance, and formulate the message so as, without violating the borderlines of professional ethics and while maintaining the appearance of objectivity in providing messages, to execute one's own economic, political and social objectives, thus mainly affecting the public opinion and its leaders" (Ogonowska 2003: 28-29). Therefore, many media messages are produced for the current needs of presenting the views and developing the public opinion that is desirable for the sender. Therefore, it is necessary to manage the special reinterpretation of media messages, to lead to an in-depth intellectual reflection and recognition of the essence of the analyzed social phenomena. In this way we express the protest against perceiving the media messages solely as tools for persuasion and manipulation and against the commercial concept of information as goods (Dziadzia 2008: 44-45). Social functioning in media surroundings may be described as relationships between stakeholders (Freeman 1984, Newcombe 2003) which are mainly designated within the three attributes of social relations: power, trust and control. The relations at the level of each attribute are strictly and mutually determined by relationships of increasing ↑ or decreasing ↓ the level of significance and impact. These relationships are illustrated in pic. 1. It is visible here that the power↔control relationship is simple and reflexive, i.e. if you increase one of these attributes, the other one will also automatically increase. This means that the possession of more power allows you to have more control, while an increase in control expands the scope of your power. An opposite relationship is connected with trust (the trust↔control and trust↔power relationships). An increase in trust reduces the level of control and power, while a decrease in trust causes an increase in power and control. "Lack of power makes it impossible to exercise control, and the relationships may then only be based on trust. When you do not have power, the attempt to exercise control may face rejection from the controlled entity (Gasik 2013: 2). The conclusion is that trust constitutes the main factor that develops the democratic communication at various levels of functioning of the society. Trust in

social networking websites is especially significant, because it is not easy to implement the power↔control there (mainly, but not only, due to the anonymity of the Internet users).

Figure 1. Schematic relationship: Power↔Control↔Trust
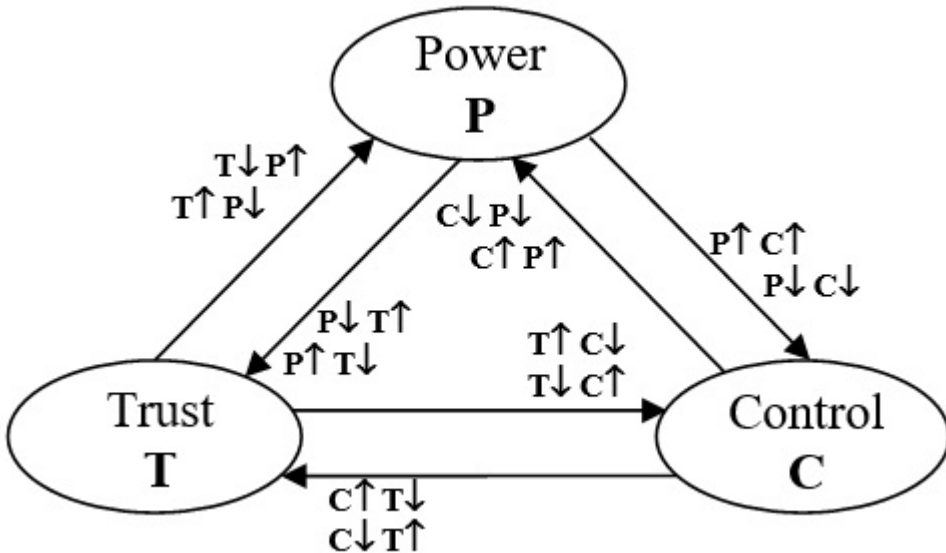
Source: own elaboration

Through identification with the contents presented in the media, a person socializes by developing its social personality (Kowalczyk 2009: 79). Trust and resulting positive interpersonal behaviors within the area of personal communication culture, constitute the essence of partnership in the social media networks.

Development of social bonds through partnership and cooperation

The researchers who deal with the issues of partnership, usually refer to the notion of social capital. Robert Putnam, the person who coined the term 'social capital' at the collective level and promoted it (1995a), believes that its most significant property is trust and mutual values functioning in a community. He said: "social capital refers (…) to such properties of society organization as trust, standards and relations that may increase the effectiveness of a society by facilitating coordinated activities" (Putnam 1995b: 258). According to Pierre Bourdieu, social capital constitutes a "capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of

possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition." (Bourdieu, Wacquant 2001: 105). James Coleman (1988) specified the notion of social capital as also including the institutions considered to constitute public goods which a person perceives as its own resources that increase their benefits from cooperation and exchange of information. In modern times, the Internet has become such a specific institution with its possibilities of social communication via new media (according to Paul Levinson (2010) it constitutes new new media). And although Levinson himself indicated practical difficulties with indicating a model example of social networking websites, he considers one of their properties to be a strong argument that allows to classify them as social media (Levinson 2010: 174). It is the voluntary involvement of the communication participants and the unification in the joint practice of using the given medium. It is a process of self-organization that may occur at many levels of social presence/ media richness, and with the use of various, numerous tools of self-creation available online (audio, video, graphics, text, etc.). That heterogeneousness of the categories of social networking media is visible in the classification proposed by Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein (2010: 62) in table 1. It is visible that the Internet provides broad communication opportunities, broader than regular communication in the real world. In turn, the models of communication in cyberspace are more diverse. Of the six categories of social media, it is the social networking sites and virtual social worlds that constitute the media of the highest level of social presence and self-presentation. It follows from the research conducted by PMR Research (Kawik 2012) that at the beginning of this decade over half of all the Poles made systematic use of social networking websites (over 70% of people aged 18-24).

Table 1. Classification of Social Media by A.M. Kaplan and M. Haenlein

| | | Social presence/Media richness | | |
		Low	Medium	High
Self- presentation/ Self-disclosure	Low	Collaborative Project (e.g. Wikipedia)	Content communities (e.g. YouTube)	Virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft)
	High	Blogs	Social networking sites (e.g. Facebook)	Virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life)

Source: Kaplan, A.M., & Haenlein, M. (2010:62).

In the global terms, the number of users of Facebook exceeded 1/7 of the world population (Williams 2012). Therefore, social capital is reflected in the self-organization of people and mobilization to voluntary cooperation for the purpose of obtaining mutual and joint benefits. The concept of social capital formulated in this way assumes that it comprises positive aspects. Currently it is believed, that a necessary condition for the proper functioning of a social group, is transferring the emphasis from the mechanisms of power and control to mechanisms of cooperation and partnership which develop social bonds within the groups and organizations concentrating on joint interests. A diagram of such relationships is presented in pic. 2. The character of bonds between the new attributes of social relationships is transformed into three simple proportionalities with positive change dynamics: cooperation↔partnership, trust↔partnership and trust↔cooperation. An increase in any of these social attributes causes an increase in the remaining ones.

Figure 2. Schematic relationship: Cooperation↔Partnership↔Trust
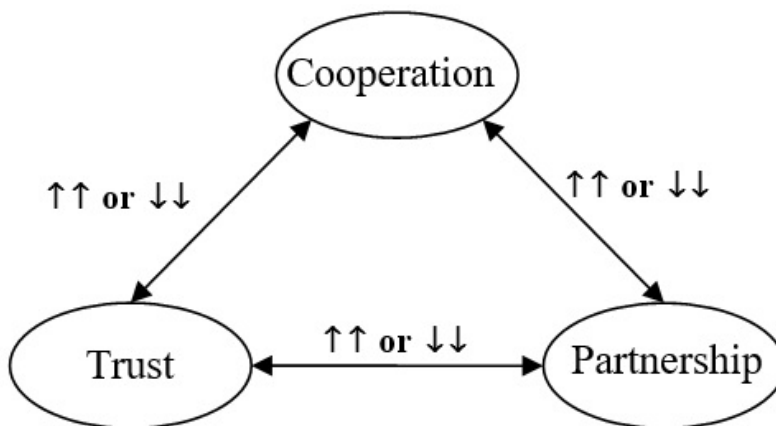
Source: own work

That type of relations are the source of positive feelings and assume the form of positive feedback that may lead to gradual increase in the well-being of a social group. The purpose of developing social bonds continues to be the promotion of the attitudes of civil involvement not only in one's own surroundings, but also within the broader surroundings, and even the global ones. In that way, partnership and cooperation in social networking websites are becoming important tools of democracy (development of social capital) that exceed the field of social communication characterized in the second half of the 20th century as an area of entertainment during leisure time (persuasive effects on the audience).

The development of online communication technologies also affects the feeling of freedom, and the increase in the level of trust. At present, most inter-personal contacts which are necessary for developing social bonds within social capital, are transferred to the Internet. Since the beginning of this decade, the interpersonal relations in Poland, the activity via the Internet is higher than direct activity (Czapiński, Panek 2011: 284). It follows from the research by Beata Komorowska (2015: 113) that currently over 85% young people (primary, lower and higher secondary school students) concentrate on the activities in social networking websites, although, unfortunately, as many as 21% of them (mainly primary and lower secondary school students) declare they don't know the opportunities of using the Internet. It follows from it that social networking websites constitute a prospective form of interpersonal contacts, and that's why they've generated the interest of specialists in pedagogy, sociology and politics. What is emphasized is mainly the integrative function of those means of social communication and lack of hierarchical systems of subordination. Thus, the social media possess the conditions for developing new forms of political involvement and alternative flow of information, which could not exist in the traditional media (Kazanowski 2008: 96, Majorek 2010: 144).

The research conducted by Canadian sociologists indicated that the media activity on the Internet has a positive effect on the development of social bonds. Communication via the new media increases the mobilization connected with general and local political activities (Hampton, Wellman 2000: 74-81). As characterized by Kinga Jaruga (2013: 58): "With regard to the processes of political communication, this is the situation, in which a voter, who used to be a passive recipient of political messages, is gaining the opportunity to create, on its own, the contents adapted to its own needs and preferences, to comment and to filter the contents of the messages delivered through political fanpages". That is why what has priceless informative value, is the possibility to monitor the activity of the website participants, for example by entering the threads of the conducted discussions (in our considerations we disregard morally questionable methods, such as using spyware). It was noticed by the political partier during the last elections. During the electoral campaign, the parties perfectly understood the role of social media in the development of voters' opinions, and became more active online. It is illustrated by the value of the advertising value of activity of political parties on Facebook in the last quarter of 2015, visible in pic. 3 (Zając 2016). However, as visible in the latest analyses conducted by Kamil Rakocy (2016: 23), almost 80% of Facebook users fail to participate in the political discourse (which does not mean that they are not politically active outside Facebook).

Figure 3. Value of the advertising equivalent of Facebook communication in Q4 of 2015
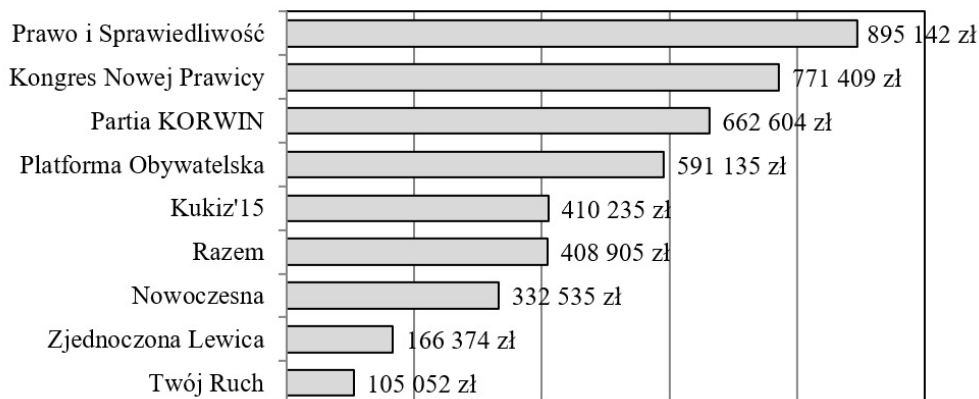
Polarization as the side effect of division into groups

The concept of social channels assumes there exist benefits of the operation of channels for a person, an organization or the socio-political surroundings, i.e. for the common benefit. However, there exist certain limitations here. For example, negative collective activities, despite the high level of solidarity and mutual trust in executing a joint objective, do not constitute a form of social capital, because their objective is not to increase the well-being of others. Also the transient character of many network undertakings makes permanent cooperation impossible, so it is not conducive to the development of communities or their social capital. Internet forums are usually characterized by narrow subjects, associated with similar interests, age, sex, profession or, more and more often, physical proximity. In that manner, there are created numerous community groups whose main objective is to exist. The contacts within such groups are one-dimensional, and their participants "(…) assume that they will not meet each other in real life, despite the fact that they share similar interests. If any feeling of »belonging to a group« is to develop in those groups, it is only thanks to the dynamics of network communications" (Wallace 2001: 81). Patricia Wallace (2001: 82) draws the conclusion that "(…) conformism constitutes a key element conditioning the self-existence of network groups, especially the ones, whose existence is strictly limited to the Internet". Lack of the physical presence of members of a group, and the possibility to maintain anonymity, do not debilitate the natural tendency for conformism, while trust supports and consolidates it. This means that group members declare the readiness to undertake activities, at the same time expecting that the group, as a whole, is going to

operate in the manner that is beneficial for them. For a network discussion group to develop positively, it requires all its members to follow the basic standards in effect in the group. In order to enforce obedience and conformism in the group, there exists increased social self-control that limits the autonomy of a person, and forces independent persons to either accept the group standards or leave it. The prestige of belonging to a network group, and its elite character, also constitutes the elements of discipline enforcement. The persons who do not belong to the group, are treated by it not as sources of new knowledge, but as threats to its own cohesion (Działek 2011: 105). That is why the access of strangers to discussion groups is difficult, and the risk of rejecting them is relatively high.

The search for areas of trust is a characteristic feature of the modern society, and it results from lack of socio-political transparency that generates more and more uncertainty and risks in interpersonal relations and institutional contacts. Similar phenomena take place in cyberspace. Certain online groups are trusted or not, thus developing a specific culture of trust/distrust. Piotr Sztompka (2001: 321) wrote: "various forms of trust and distrust create a complex balance of functionalities and dysfunctionalities, both for the society and its members". In the area of social networking media, in all the aspects of communication among the group members and among various groups, trust or distrust may also appear. Trust is a catalytic medium of the processes of development of social bonds. Lack of trust suppresses the dynamics of development of social bonds within a group, and the social mobility of its members. It is dangerous for the virtual groups corrupted with distrust, because there develops a vicious circle of aversion that leads to mutual alienation (Krzyminiewska 2003: 225), which, in turn, leads to polarization of views (e.g. political ones). Polarization in social networking media is additionally strengthened and consolidated with the so-called majority illusion effect (Zając 2016), which logically results from the character of the social networking media themselves. A user of such a group selects the acquaintances that are similar to them, share similar views, even though they do not know one another in person. They develop a zone of activity with those acquaintances, are surrounded by them in the group, which eventually leads to the misleading conclusions that the majority of users share their convictions. Social networking websites are becoming a two-way mirror, or a polarization filter, through which you only notice the persons sharing your own political views. The polarization tendencies of perceiving the reality via the virtual social networking websites reduce the informative character of those media. The inclination to establish relationships and search for information within the area limited only to the group of people sharing our own views results in a situation when, within the social zone of the Internet, the activity of the persons with different socio-political views, are ignored, or even blocked.

As a conclusion – a lifesaver or media education

The potentially large opportunities of participating in the virtual exchange of views both at the local and global levels, made the social networking tools of online communication applicable in the development of the state – citizens relationships. Politicians perceive the significant scale of the involvement of Internet users of such websites as MySpace (2003), Facebook (2004) or Twitter (2006). In the light of the political apathy of citizens, noted for many years, such forms of online activity, especially among young people, are perceived as a source of refreshment of the obsolete image of democratic procedures (Cwalina 2001: 409). A voter ceases to be a passive recipient of political messages, and becomes an active participant in the political discourse. They also have the possibility to independently create the contents adapted to their own preferences, to comment and filter the contents of messages. The direct activity of politicians in that discourse, but also the analysis of political attitudes in virtual communities, the use of hidden forms of political marketing and manipulation, are aimed at increasing the popularity of a political party among the network users who are usually unaware of the majority illusion effect. Jaruga (2013: 58-63) presented an interesting analysis and review of various forms of manipulation of the awareness of the Internet users exercised through social networking websites.

The gigantic influence of the social networking media on the manner of thinking, valuating and behaving of users, requires the development of the ability to analyze the messages correctly, i.e. critically. For the purpose of developing the suitable methods, in 2006 the European Commission established a Media Literacy Expert Group, upon the initiative of which there were produced two important documents that presented media education for cooperation of the European countries:

1. Communication of the Commission of European Communities of 20 December 2007 entitled "A European approach to media literacy in the digital environment".
2. The new audiovisual directive adopted on 11 December 2007 which emphasized the need to develop media education in Europe.

In that way, the European countries were obliged to develop media education both in education, and through social educational programs. The audiovisual directive even recommended the organization of domestic social campaigns with participation of all the media (recital 37 of the directive).

Therefore, media education is to be an important element of preventing manipulation in the media, especially to develop the ability to correctly perceive the contents of media messages, enriched with critical reflection. As Bogusław

Dziadzia (2008: 180) emphasized on multiple occasions, it constitutes an objection to the perception of media messages as tools of persuasion and to the reduction of information to the value of commercial goods. In Poland, for a short period of time, in primary schools there was functioning the educational path of reading and media education with a separate subject called media education, but it was removed from school teaching quite quickly. In December 2009, at the order of the National Broadcasting Council, the TNS OBOP company conducted research into media education[1]. It turned out that the majority of participants (73%) expects school, as an institution, to prepare children and youth to perceive the media, and half of the participants (52%) imposed that obligation on family. A significant number of respondents (62%) approves of introducing a new subject in school – media education. The justification of that attitude may be the opinion that in Poland a few can make creative use of the media (34%), and there are people who are not prepared to do it at all (12%). Therefore, social feelings are consistent with the EU law that recommends school media education as a separate obligatory subject[2].

The Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 2012 regarding the basic curriculum for preschool education and for the general education in the respective types of schools, did not contain a separate subject of media education[3]. Its program was entered in various subjects and lessons at each stage of education, in accordance with the *distributed contents* model that is dominating in Europe. In that form, media education is executed in two ways. One takes into account various aspects of media upbringing, the other consists in executing the process of media education (Strykowski 2008). Media education is not present as a school subject of general education, but the listed functions indicate that it is possible to conduct education in that scope while teaching other curriculum contents aimed at achieving the objectives of early school education. The difficulty consists in that the majority objectives of education, at all stages, do not directly indicate the need to teach media education or to equip the students with

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1   See the detailed research analysis published by Piotr Drzewiecki. Document available online: http://presscafe.eu/archives/52

2   See the position of the European Parliament regarding that issue: *Resolution of the European Parliament of 16 December 2008 on the ability media literacy in the digital environment* (2008/2129(INI)). Official Journal of the European Union C 45 E of 23 February 2010. Document available online: http://www.nettax.pl/serwis/imgpub/duuec/2010/45E/ce04520100223pl00090014.pdf

3   See full text: *The Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 2012 regarding the basic curriculum for preschool education and for the general education in the respective types of schools*. Journal of Laws of 2012, item 977.
Also: *The Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 30 May 2014 amending the regulation regarding the basic curriculum for preschool education and for the general education in the respective types of schools*. Journal of Laws of 2014, item 803.

media competences. At the same time, there is indicated the need to use the IT and communications technologies in the process of educating children. The core curriculum determines the scope of work of teachers but, as Grzegorz D. Stunża wrote in an annex to the report entitled *Digital Future*, "it is constructed in such a way that in many instances it quite generally indicates the need to make use of the media, or encourages to reflect on using technologies, while giving the teachers not only the opportunity to freely interpret the recommendations, but also to make the independent decision on the potential scope of application of the guidelines included in the core curriculum" (Stunża 2012: 3). Therefore, teachers can trivialize the assumptions of the core curriculum, and execute its recommendations only to the minimum degree, or disregard and omit them completely. The reason for such state of things consists in psychological factors, i.e. mainly the unwillingness of the teachers[4]. That is why such placement of media education causes the assumed solution to be criticized. There appear various new proposals of including media education in the program of teaching various subjects: arts, technical education, history, mother tongue, librarianship, cultural studies, social studies, information technology, or the proposal to establish new ones, such as the subject entitled Communications Anthropology proposed by Marek Sokołowski (Sokołowski 2004: 9). In the current system of formal education, such concepts are difficult to accept or execute. Only the concept of joining media education with information education, is supported by many media researchers, such as Bronisław Siemieniecki, Janusz Morbitzer, Stanisław Juszczyk, Wacław Strykowski, Maciej Sysło, Mariusz Kąkolewski (Siemieniecki 2008: 139). Will media education be revitalized while implementing the announced reform of basic/lower secondary education? The faster the political decision-makers understand such a need, the better, because it seems that the education in that scope seems to be inevitable.

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4   See the detailed results of the research into that issue in: Jasiewicz (2012: 44-46).

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