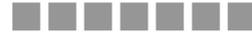


Internet media as the digital public sphere: Possibilities and problems



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ABSTRACT: This article tries to diagnose possibilities and limitations of the online media as a digital agora — a virtual space for citizens’ deliberation which could potentially strengthen and enhance democracy in Poland, as well as in other Central European countries. Considering the key features of the public sphere indicated by Habermas (inclusiveness, rationality, autonomy, lack of hierarchy), the analysis focuses on three problem areas. The first one includes the impact of digital exclusion upon availability of the digital public sphere for citizens. The second part of the study is devoted to rationality and interactivity of online discourse. The last part of the analysis addresses the impact of the relative anonymity of online communication on the equality and autonomy of citizens’ deliberation on the internet.

KEYWORDS: digital public sphere, civil deliberation, citizens’ online discourse, digital exclusion, relative anonymity of online discourse.



INTRODUCTION

While analyzing the impact of new media upon the development of civil society, the function of remarkable facilitation of citizens’ public presentation of their opinions on social issues seems very important. This type of activity may take various forms, from commenting on news sites, through participating in online debates, up to running own websites devoted to selected aspects of public life. In each of the aforementioned instances, internet users may actively contribute to the public opinion understood as citizens’ common judgment of public affairs which influences authorities and their decisions.

This article tries to diagnose possibilities and limitations of the internet media as a digital agora — a virtual space for civil deliberation¹ which could potentially

¹ Some researchers, when examining the notion of the public sphere, link it closely with the concept of “civil deliberation”. Among the advocates of this position is Baciak (2006, p. 139), who defines public sphere as “the arena of citizens’ communication where democratic deliberation takes place”. A similar approach is presented by Gimmler (2001, pp. 23–30), who recognizes the following

strengthen and enhance democracy in Poland, as well as in other Central European countries. The starting point for this analysis was the concept proposed by Habermas (2007), who points out the five basic conditions under which the public sphere performs the function of a mediating construct between the needs of society and state institutions, through the use of public opinion. The first condition set by Habermas (2007, pp. 111–112) concerns the need of debate openness for each citizen interested in sharing his opinion on public issues. As the key feature of the public sphere, Habermas (2007, p. 395) also acknowledges the rationality of the deliberation that takes place within it. In order for this condition to be met citizens participating in a discussion on public issues need to justify their positions by means of rational argument, which, in turn, during the debate, should be subjected to critical judgment of other debaters.

For the proper functioning of the public sphere, the German researcher also recognizes the necessity of ensuring its egalitarian and autonomous character. Habermas (2007, pp. 109–110) refers the criterion of egalitarianism in public sphere to a situation in which participants abstract from the uneven social status of their interlocutors. The concept of public sphere's autonomy, according to Habermas (2007, p. 401), is seen as excluding it both from the influence of state institutions as well as individual commercial interests. Habermas claims that the proper functioning of the public sphere also requires providing it adequate legal guarantees. Among them, he mentions the freedom of opinion and expression, the freedom of press, the freedom of assembly and association, the transparency of action of state bodies and the citizens' right to information (Habermas, 2007, pp. 184–186).

The fast development of new information and communications technologies, particularly the internet, undoubtedly constitutes theoretical, methodological and practical challenges to the Habermasian model of bourgeois public sphere. According to van Dijk, in the era of network society the connection between public sphere and a particular state or physical location is diminishing as:

[...] members of an organic community or a nation are no longer tied to a given territory to meet each other and build collectivities. (1999, p. 164)

A similar approach is presented by Keane, who claims that a conventional model of unified, spatially-integrated public sphere functioning within a nation-state framework transforms into a:

basic requirements for the functioning of a "deliberative public sphere": equality of participants in a debate, full disclosure of its procedures, temporary suspension of relations based on power and domination as well as ensuring the freedom to choose the topics to be discussed (cf. Juchacz, 2002, p. 148). The category of civil deliberation ought to be portrayed differently from the concept of public discourse of citizens on political issues as the latter does not have a normative character. Its existence can be found in every communicative reality one comes across, regardless how it is described and evaluated (Baciak, 2006, p. 141).

In many Central European countries a spectacular popularization of the internet has been observed in the last decade. Between 2004 and 2014, the percentage of households having access to the internet in Poland increased threefold — from 26% to 75% (Berezowska et al., 2010a, p. 75; Berezowska et al., 2014, p. 108). Since 2006, the percentage of internet users increased from 34% to 63% (Berezowska et al., 2010b, p. 88; Berezowska et al., 2014, p. 117). In the case of Poland, financial or infrastructural problems no longer constitute the main reason for the absence of access to the network. More important are the so called soft barriers, especially of competence and motivational character. As many as 87% of Poles who are not internet users are convinced that they are not losing out because of this fact (Toczyski & Kustra, 2012, p. 29).

The rapid expansion of the number of network users in Poland was not accompanied by equally rapid growth of their competence in the use of ICT. The data released by Eurostat (2012, p. 3) allows for a conclusion that in this respect the skills of Polish citizens — similarly, in fact, to those of all other citizens of the new EU member states — differ adversely from the average for countries of the Community. Limited IT competences, together with the lack of sufficient motivation for their improvement, translate to a relatively incomprehensive way of using the possibilities offered by ICT. Almost one third of Polish computer users see entertainment as the most important purpose of their use (Batorski, 2009b, p. 305). In comparison, one fourth of Polish internet users had never used the web to obtain information useful for work or study, and more than one third had never searched the websites of public institutions (Batorski, 2009b, p. 308).

While evaluating the possibilities and limitations of online media as a public sphere, the fact that a significant percentage of Polish internet users limits itself to the passive use of network resources can be regarded as particularly unfavorable. Almost two-thirds of Polish internet users had never run their own website, and almost half of them had never taken part in an ongoing discussion within a group or discussion forum (Council for Social Monitoring, 2014). One should bear in mind that although publishing one's own content on the internet in most cases can be classified as a way of participating in social life, such activity may not always be perceived as a form of participation in public life. For example, most of the blogs run by Poles are devoted to their private lives and they mainly serve the purpose of establishing and maintaining contact with other people. The subject of only every third such website is focused on the presentation of the author's views on public topics of significant interest to the local community, the country or the world (Zajac et al., 2007, p. 8).

These data suggest that for the majority of Poles who use the internet, it does not constitute a tool that would enable them to participate in public life and to influence its shape. Such a diagnosis is confirmed by a survey on the perception of the internet as a source of political power which was conducted within the frameworks of

communication. A single most popular local and national discussion was chosen from each of these categories, with the accepted criterion being the number of posts that have been published within a given debate, as of August 1st, 2010. As a result of the presented research material selection procedures, proper analysis covered 1532 posts — 569 published within local debates devoted to Łódź and 963 published during national discussions.

The basic unit of analysis was constituted by a single statement published on the forum. Each such comment was attributed with 17 parameters, described in the four sections of the adopted coding sheet. The first section of the sheet gathered information about the author's name, his status (registered or unregistered user of the forum) and the length of the comment measured in characters with spaces. The next three sections of the coding sheet took the form of a series of closed-ended, dichotomous questions, with mutually exclusive variants of answers — “yes” or “no”. The aim of the questions from the second section of the coding sheet was to determine the level of rationality among the analyzed debates by indicating whether the participants justify their positions, use the verifiable facts, refer to external sources of information or propose solutions that could — according to them — help solve the discussed problems. The third section of the coding sheet was designed to verify whether the debaters refer to the opinions and facts presented by their interlocutors, search for new information on the discussed issues or answer the questions raised during the debate. The purpose of the questions from the last part of the coding sheet was to diagnose the level of culture of discussion by indicating whether the participants use in their comments vulgar expressions and *ad personam* arguments.

The obtained results warrant the utmost care in assessing the potential of online discussion forum as a place of citizens' deliberations on important issues of public life. The study showed a low level of rationality among the analyzed debates. Nearly one third (29%) of the statements were not at all related to the discussed topics. Only one in nine statements comprised a position relating to the subject under discussion, and supported by any logical or factual argument². Only 0.3% of the comments proposed solutions that could — according to their authors — help in reducing or eliminating the discussed problems. The average discussion length of 350 characters with spaces, which roughly corresponds to three medium extended sentences, testifies to the fact that the more extensive and insightful analyses of the discussed issues were among the few and far between. Another weakness of the analyzed local online debates was also the fact that they failed to expand the par-

² At this point it has to be stressed out that the subject of the analysis did not concern the validity of the position itself nor the quality of arguments supporting it. Thus, it should be observed that although a significant part of the argumentation recorded during the course of the study was formally correct, it had little to offer to an ongoing discussion or simply repeated the points that were already mentioned before.

ticipants' knowledge with regard to the presented issues. Among the statements that had been published during the course of discussions, only 1.2% of the comments introduced some new facts, while no more than 1.5% referred to external sources of information.

The conducted analysis has also revealed that the nationwide online debates were characterized by a low level of interactivity. Statements that contained any form of reference to posts of other discussants constituted less than a fourth of all the comments posted during the course of the debate. The users' lack of interest in entering a dialogue with other debaters can also be proven by the fact that most of the people participating in a debate have shared their views only once. In all of the analyzed nationwide debates each of the discussants published on average less than two statements.

The citizens' short-lasting interest in participating in the investigated discussions is also reflected in the rapid extinction of the latter. Nearly three quarters (73%) of posts published during the course of debates fell within the first 24 hours from the time they had been initiated. The very short duration of the examined debates, together with a low level of their rationality and interactivity, considerably reduced the discussants' chance to revise their views on the discussed problems of public life. Not a single participant of the debates admitted during their course to have modified his position, under the influence of some other disputant's statement.

It should be noted that another weakness of the scrutinized debates was their very limited social range. Even in the most popular of the analyzed nationwide discussions, which was dedicated to transport infrastructure, only 243 people participated, i.e. 0.036% of the total population of Poland. One of the factors that could discourage internet users from taking part in debates might have been the prevailing poor level of culture of discussion. While vulgarisms in the analyzed statements appeared only sporadically (in about 3% of them), as many as every sixth comment contained an *ad personam* argument.

The presented results urge to caution in assessing the potential of the internet as a place of rational and interactive citizens' debate on the problems of public life. It seems reasonable to conclude that a vast majority of the otherwise very few participants of the investigated debates, has seen in them an occasion for spontaneous expression of their arbitral opinions, and not a chance to have their own arguments and ideas regarding the discussed public problems judged by other discussants. In this respect, the results of the presented analysis seem to support the position of those scholars who, with far-reaching skepticism, evaluate the possibilities offered by online media in the area of stimulating citizens' deliberation (cf. Downey, 2001, pp. 604–610; Wilhelm, 1999, pp. 154–178; Resnick, 1998, pp. 48–69).

The above, very critical assessment of the level of rationality and interactivity of online debates on public issues is, however, a subject to significant change, should

the analysis be focused on discussions devoted to local problems. The study positively verified the hypothesis, according to which local debates should have a higher level of rationality, because their participants speak on topics related to their nearest social environment, and therefore better known to them. The comments published during the analyzed local discussions were less often without any relation to the discussed problems as was the case with debates concerning national issues (17% vs. 29%). They were also three times more likely to include a position that would be supported by rational argumentation (33% vs. 11%).

Partially correct was also the assumption that the higher competence of the local debates' participants in regard to the discussed problems, together with the usually weaker ideological dimension of the latter, ought to foster interactive dialogue and more cultured discussion. Despite the fact that no essential differences in the quality of manners prevailing in the investigated national and local debates were noted, the latter were indeed characterized by a higher interactivity. Almost half of the posts published during local debates contained some direct references to the previous statements of other debaters, which was more than twice as many as in the case of nationwide discussions. The study has also clearly showed that citizens are more likely to participate in discussions concerning local matters, because, more frequently than the national debates, they touch on the problems that directly affect their daily existence. The percentage of Łódź residents who decided to vote their interest in the analyzed local discussions, which concerned the problems of their city, was more than a dozen times higher from the percentage of Poles participating in debates on the same issues, but in national terms.

EQUALITY AND AUTONOMY OF CIVIL DELIBERATION ON THE INTERNET

The issues of equality and autonomy of citizens' discourse on the internet are to a large extent shaped by the relative anonymity of online communication. At this point it should be noted that the internet does not provide absolute anonymity. On the contrary, virtually every user activity on the network, from posting comments on discussion forums to sending a request to a web search engine, leaves behind the so-called digital footprint. Regardless of this fact, however, it can be assumed that for the average internet user in most cases it is difficult to identify who is who in online discourse, provided that somebody does not reveal his identity.

The anonymity and text-based nature of online public debates make them generally much more egalitarian than face-to-face discussions, with their reduced level of social dominance and increased contributions from low-status participants. Since the vast majority of panelists cannot be linked with social position occupied by them in offline reality, the content of their comments becomes the sole determinant of their influence. The latter should be understood in this context as the

ability to attract the interest of the audience, to initiate new topics of discussion and to promote one's viewpoint.

However, it should be taken into consideration that in the case of most online forums, after some time, a specific alternative hierarchy is developed. In some cases, it is only informal and based on the current activity of individual users: the quantity of published comments, the quality of the arguments raised, and the presented culture of discussion. On many forums outstanding interlocutors gain additional privileges of a symbolic nature (e.g. special marking of their profile) or real nature (e.g. the right to establish new sections of the forum). It should be noted that the granting of special rights to some forum users often does not depend on special recognition of their activity, but is the result of arbitrary decisions of the site administrator. Referring to this problem, some scholars state that the online discussion forums are by no means free from relations of power and domination, because the administrators and moderators can determine the main topics of debate, decide on the presence or absence of particular problems, as well as interfere with the content of the published comments (cf. Baciak, 2006, pp. 143–144). According to this concept, in online discourse the so-called gatekeepers play a similar role to traditional symbolic elites, targeting and narrowing the classic public debates.

While it is undeniable that the administrators and moderators of particular forums actually have the opportunity to influence the ongoing debates, the consequences of this phenomenon should not be exaggerated. As observed by Gimmler (2001, p. 33), pluralism of the internet is based on its rhizomatic, open system structure that functions without one isolated center, and is not organized in a hierarchical manner. While analyzing the possibility of top-down control of online citizens' discourse, we should take into account the huge number and diversity of existing websites, as well as the lack of significant technical and financial barriers in setting up new ones. When considering these factors, it seems reasonable to assume that the administrator's attempt to introduce too much control over a particular forum of discussion, would sooner or later lead to the transfer of the debate and its participants to another communication platform. This phenomenon can be illustrated by the example of the situation that took place in the Polish internet media after the presidential plane crash on 10th April 2010. The vast majority of national portals blocked or significantly limited the opportunity to comment on the disaster and the earlier public activity of its victims. In this situation, internet users who wanted to speak critically about the presidency of Lech Kaczyński or were opposing the idea of burial of the presidential couple in the Wawel Royal Castle in Cracow moved their discussions to Facebook.

Another factor that might interfere with the equality of citizens' online discourse is the fact that some of its participants try to reinforce the importance of their statements by invoking their alleged education or social position. It would be an exaggeration to claim that such a practice is always objectionable, although it

definitely remains at odds with the Habermasian principle of suspended hierarchy. The fundamental problem, however, is that should any of the panelists choose to disclose some personal information about their position or qualifications, the other interlocutors would have a very limited chance to verify the accuracy of such data. Thus, the lack of identification of participants in an online debate, although it flattens the hierarchical nature of the relationship between them, at the same time it facilitates unfair claims concerning competence or qualifications. In contrast to the participants of classic debates, online forum users can never be certain whether their interlocutor, who presents himself as a professor, company owner or a local politician, is actually who he claims to be.

The anonymity of online debates has also a negative impact on the culture of discussion, which significantly undermines rational deliberation on public issues. According to Holmes (1997, pp. 26–45), a sense of anonymity inclines the participants in online debates to feel free of any responsibility for their comments. The correctness of this observation can be confirmed on the basis of the results of the Polish edition of the World internet Project survey in which two-thirds of respondents agreed with the statement that the anonymity of the internet allows people to transgress social norms (Toczyski & Kustra, 2012, p. 63). The large scale of this problem has also been proved by the author's research on deliberative potential of online debates in Poland, during which one out of six of the analyzed comments involved *ad personam* arguments.

The inability to determine the real identity of debaters may also adversely affect the autonomy of network discourse. This threat is associated with representatives of public institutions and political parties who secretly try to participate in public debates and influence their course. The fact that such a risk is not just a potential, can be proved by the example of a secret instruction to the Young Democrats, the youth organization of the Civic Platform — one of the main political parties in Poland. This document, disclosed in 2008, assumed the creation of a group for network monitoring, whose members were supposed to:

[...] add comments supporting Civic Platform to the dozen of biggest Polish portals [...]. (Mieśnik, 2008)

Although the political parties are reluctant to reveal the scope of such operations, a growing demand for this kind of services may be evidenced by their increasing presence in the PR agencies' offers. Representatives of the latter do not hide that politicians ask them to monitor online forums, initiate new topics of discussion and to influence ongoing debates (Manys, 2010, p. 3). Such practices are, however, by no means the exclusive domain of political parties. On online forums secretly operate numerous representatives of various types of business entities and interest groups (Grynkiewicz & Miączyński, 2009, p. 28; Lubelska, 2009, pp. 96–97; Tyszka, 2009).

The situation when debaters hide their actual institutional affiliation may constitute a significant threat to the autonomy of the online civil deliberation because it undermines the key feature of the public sphere — the assumption that individuals take part in a debate as citizens who are a part of public opinion, and not as representatives of lobbies, state institutions or political parties. Especially dangerous is the fact that — with the exception of the most evident cases — internet users are usually not able to tell whether their interlocutor is actually a private person commenting on a public issue, or whether it is a politician, local government official or employee of a PR agency. This situation has a negative impact on the level of trust between panelists. In online debates analyzed during the author's research, allegations concerning the true identity, or institutional affiliation of particular interlocutors occurred very frequently.

CONCLUSIONS

Summarizing the hitherto presented deliberations, it seems reasonable to recognize the validity of the hypothesis, according to which online civil discourse in Poland does not meet the conditions indicated in the Habermasian model of the public sphere. The rapid expansion of the number of network users in Poland during the last decade was not accompanied by equally rapid growth of their competence in the use of ICT. Limited IT competences, together with the lack of sufficient motivation for their improvement, translate to a relatively incomprehensive way of using the possibilities offered by ICT. While evaluating the potential of online media as a digital public sphere, the fact that a significant number part of Polish internet users limits itself to the passive use of network resources should be regarded as particularly unfavorable. Another weakness of the citizens' online discourse in Poland is its low level of rationality and interactivity. In light of the conducted quantitative content analysis of the selected online debates, it seems reasonable to conclude that a vast majority of the participants of the investigated discussions has seen in them an occasion for spontaneous expression of their arbitrary opinions, and not a chance to have their own arguments and ideas judged by other citizens.

While analyzing the possibilities and limitations of the internet media as a digital public sphere, one always has to, however, relate them to the deliberative potential offered by other discussion forums functioning within a given community. When considering the restrictions in citizens' access to the digital agora, that result from the competence and motivational dimension of digital exclusion, one needs to remember that the online discussions have still many more participants than the traditional ones. Mindful of the risks in respect to the participants' equality in online civil discourse, it is worth taking notice that the latter is still of much more of an egalitarian and inclusive character than most of the discussions which are

organized by scientific or socio-cultural institutions. Finally, when criticizing the level of rationality and interactivity of the online civil discourse, one cannot forget that the above-mentioned reservations, in the case of many Central European countries, to a large extent can also be referred to the other areas of social dialogue, including the mass media discourse and parliamentary debate.

There is no denying that the vast majority of participants in online debates on public issues limit themselves to spontaneous, usually one-time expression of their arbitral opinions. However, this cannot be the reason to ignore that there is a minority of debaters which is genuinely interested in gaining additional knowledge on the topics concerning important social problems, and who also wish to subject their arguments and ideas to critical judgment of other discussants. It is worth remembering that several years ago the opinions and proposals of that group of citizens, in the majority of cases, would not have gone beyond the conversation circle among friends and family. In this respect, the online media really bring a new quality in the development of citizens' deliberation.

One should, of course, take into account the fact that the very specifics of online communication — especially its conciseness and evanescence — do not necessarily support the in-depth analysis of the sometimes very complex social problems. In many cases, the active participation in online debates can, however, prove to be the first step towards more systemized forms of citizens' involvement in public life, especially on the local level. At this point it is worth referring to the example of Łódź. In 2006, a group of active participants in online debates that were dedicated to the problems of the city formed GPO — an informal social movement, which aims to improve the quality of the local public space. In 2009, a part of the group sympathizers decided to deepen and formalize their public activity by starting a non-governmental organization called Fenomen, that aimed at promoting the social, economic and cultural development of Łódź.

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