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The conciliatory potential of social media in the current political dispute. The case of Facebook

Abstract: This text is a continuation of the analysis of the attitudes of politically engaged users of the Facebook, conducted between 13.12.2020 and 25.01.2021 on a sample of 220 respondents. The first statistical conclusions and the full description of the methodology were published in the issue 1/2021 of *Przegląd Politologiczny* (Pawlak, 2021). In this text, I focused on the interpretation of the open part of the questionnaire, in which the respondents expressed their own ideas and forecasts regarding the possibility of ending/mitigating the conflict. While the data from closed questions could be treated as coming from a group representative of politically engaged Facebook users in Poland (although this condition was more of an added value than the intention behind the research), the material containing answers to open-ended questions is no longer of this nature. This is due to the fact that 43.6% of the respondents left this section unanswered. The analysis presented here prompts reflection on the conciliatory potential of social media, which I consider to be an important platform for political debate in the 21st century.

Key words: democracy crisis, political culture, slacktivism, social media

Introduction

The classical approach to political science treats political culture – despite the anthropological origins of this phenomenon – primarily as a psychological orientation towards social objects. The subject of interest here is therefore the assessment and attitudes of citizens towards the political system, as well as the entire mechanism of introducing individuals to this system. It is not difficult to resist the impression that in the reality of the media societies of the 21st century, emotions are at the fore of the political dispute. Much more often they are negative emotions: in scientific terminology and in journalism, the terms “conflict management,” “emotion management,” “crisis management,” “tribalism” etc. are more and more often used to describe the mechanisms and phenomena of the media space. This condition is visible especially in relation to virtual space and the intensified political dispute taking place within it. The emotional nature of the dispute was additionally exacerbated by the SarsCOV-2 pandemic that broke out in the spring of 2020 (Janc, Jurkowski, 2020).

The analysis presented here is a pretext to reflect on the potential and role of social media in contemporary public debate. The analysis itself seems to provide arguments supporting the thesis about the possibility of ending the crisis of political debate and democracy. Also, its broader interpretation in the perspective of technological determinism allows for a positive prognosis. Modern information and communication technologies (ICT) can be considered, on the one hand, “co-responsible” for the eponymous crisis,

but on the other hand, they contribute to the interest in politics of more and more users, including mostly young people. Media technology – especially Web 2.0 – thus creates a field of political socialization of great importance. According to the classic terminology proposed by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, this state can be considered a significant support for a participatory type of political culture in which citizens have real opportunities to influence the shape of the political system and they do so by participating in many ways in political phenomena (Almond, Verba, 1989). Political activation of social media users – expressed by their increasing involvement in public issues – supports a higher form of development of political culture. In addition to strictly virtual participation,¹ the strengthening of the participatory political culture is also expressed in the increasing voter turnout (Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza, 2021). The activity of citizens in co-creating the political system is observed both at the local and central level.

The issue of political culture occupies an important place in the theory of politics, has been and is still studied by representatives of political science, ranging from the aforementioned pioneers through such researchers as Arend Lijphart, Michael Baun, Daniel Franklin, Peter Reichel, Jürgen Gebhardt, Ronald Inglehart, Kazimierz Biskupski, Władysław Markiewicz, Jerzy Wiatr, Marek Sobolewski and many others. More or less at the turn of the first and second decades of the 21st century – that is, shortly before the emergence of the problem of the crisis of democracy – most of the phenomena in this area seemed to be settled. Thus, an inevitable, albeit regionally diversified, evolution towards an ideal participant model was forecasted quite optimistically. The direction of these changes was – in my opinion – correctly predicted, but their nature seems to be rather revolutionary. I understand this revolution as a reaction to rapid changes in communication systems – so it is to a large extent technologically determined. This phenomenon is considered in the area of political phenomena, parallel to changes of a cultural and sociological nature.

The above-mentioned optimism about the gentle evolution towards a participatory type of political culture was in line with the paradigm of general evolution towards a consolidated democracy that was linear and essentially one-sided. Such thinking coincided (and was partly also an effect) with the enthusiasm related to the vision of the development of the information society, also known as the knowledge-based society, the knowledge society, the information society, etc. This positive thinking, which appeared more or less at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, was largely related to the end of the bipolar division of the world into two rival political, military and economic blocs. And what seems important, this thinking can also be observed in the reflection on the changes in the area of media models towards the liberal model, as mentioned by Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini (Hallin, Mancini, 2007), but also in the whole range of positive forecasts arising just before and immediately after the end of the Cold War.

Unfortunately, a number of political and economic phenomena in the second decade of the 21st century and now,² have revealed the fact that the socio-political reality is

¹ This term is used to describe the transfer (sometimes limitation) of social and political activity to the virtual space. Slacktivism refers to a wide set of activities related to various fields of social activity: these activities are primarily electronic in nature, although their effects and/or causes are often real (Christensen, 2011).

² The Arab Spring (or rather its consequences), Russia's invasion of Ukraine, political instrumentalisation of the media, the financial crisis of 2007–2009, etc.

not as stable and predictable as, for example, the apologists of the information society concept described her. The genesis of the democratic crisis is multidimensional, but its technological aspect has already been described by some information society theorists. They pointed to some negative or dark sides of the ICT revolution. Fritz Machlup wrote about the problem of the accumulation of unnecessary information, useless knowledge (Machlup, 1972); Marshall McLuhan talked on the problem of relieving media recipients of the necessity of critical thinking by developed media stimulating a whole range of senses at the same time (McLuhan, 1964); Peter Drucker described the ineffectiveness of classical power systems in the face of technological progress (Drucker, 1942); Alan Touraine drew attention to the inevitable minimization of the human factor in the production process and to the conflict accompanying the transformation of society from the industrial type to the post-industrial type and further – to information type (Touraine, 1977); Daniel Bell predicted the coming problem of managing complex, advanced information societies, and saw the solution to these problems in the so-called “intellectual technology,” today called artificial intelligence (Bell, 1973); Heidi and Alvin Toffler warned of the chaos and conflict related to the advent of the Third Wave society – that is, a fully computerized society (Toffler, Toffler, 1996); James Beniger predicted the emergence of the problem of extensive control as a necessity and a threat that may be accompanied by social objection (Beniger, 1989) etc.

Empirically tangible verification of these predictions was possible only after the popularization of both the Internet and the entire media architecture known as Web2.0, especially all social media. First of all, it is necessary to point out two researchers who, in the first decade of the 21st century, made a cross-sectional analysis of the achievements of the concept of the information society, supplementing it with a diagnosis of the current state: Manuel Castells and Ian van Dijk (although, of course – they are not the only ones – because the pantheon of researchers of this issue is very extensive). It was then that the basic features characteristic of both modern communication systems and, consequently, their users were established: entertainment, superficiality, viscosity, differentiation, non-linearity, standardization, contextual ambiguity, increasing mercantilism, polysemy, fluctuation, information overload, increasing dynamics, globality, fragmentation, acceleration and increasing instrumentalization of the media for economic purposes (advertising), and for political purposes (propaganda) (Dijk van, 2010; Castells, 2013).

The consequence of this state of affairs in the area of political culture is, among others, the so-called slactivism – that is, to put it as briefly as possible, the expression of civic activity in a primarily virtual dimension. An example of this is the manifestation of political orientation as the main (though not the only) activity in social media. The phenomenon of slactivism also supports the emergence and dissemination of the so-called information (filtering) bubbles. According to the concept of the information bubble, the algorithms organizing traffic on the web (both in the area of search engines and, above all, social media), force us into bubbles of people with similar interests and views. We ourselves, as it were, naturally place ourselves in these bubbles, looking for specific information and avoiding others, closing ourselves to other views and radicalizing at the same time within our own environments.

As a result of all these features, conditions and phenomena, the political debate, both in the public and individual dimension, is being degraded, vulgarized and aggressive

(hate, fake news etc.). But bringing much of this debate online – compounded by the still present pandemic – resulted in an interesting phenomenon. Namely, an increasing number of previously passive citizens (especially the youth generation) began to actively participate in the political dispute, engaging in a virtual exchange of views – often in the form of a digital quarrel. Of course, there are negative aspects to this phenomenon, but the very fact of political activation (the tangible proof of which is the progressive increase in voter turnout) seems to reinforce the thesis about the growth of the “participatory” type of political culture.

Following this process, the virtual masses enter the political dispute in digital form. Virtual crowd, based on the principles of electronic mediated communication, is certainly characterized by an increased level of aggression, often using a simplified or even infantile message (Pawlak, 2018, pp. 152–156). But the very fact of political interest and commitment – even if it is limited to a form of slactivism – can be assessed positively. However, the question remains: does this increase in the aggression of the political dispute will translate or already translates into physical aggression in a non-virtual reality? After all, examples of such real political motivated aggression are already noted. But on the other hand, you can counteract with the question: whether the level of real aggression would not have been even greater if it were not for this “virtual valve” which perhaps allows to discharge it? Will electronic empowerment of a participatory type of political culture end the crisis of democracy? Or maybe it will be just the opposite? Well, one cannot give an unequivocal answer, but one can certainly put forward a thesis that political culture – as a concept developed within the framework of political science or sociology – is currently experiencing a kind of renaissance and there are many indications that its cognitive potential is still far away from exhaustion.

Analysis

The collected statements were divided according to two criteria: character and tone. This way I created additional variables. The first one is composed of three categories denoting the nature of an utterance: aggressive, conciliatory, and neutral. The variable tone divides users’ statements into optimistic, pessimistic and neutral. In the second case, the basis for categorizing the observation was not its style, but the possibility of ending the crisis it expressed. An aggressive comment according to the first variable may therefore be positive as to the tone in the second variable, although there were few such cases: e.g. postulating radical solutions assuming that they will bring the end of the crisis. Of all the statements, 25% were aggressive, 57.3% conciliatory and 17.7% neutral. Optimistic opinions as to the possibility of reducing the tension in the public debate constitute 34.7% of statements, pessimistic opinions 33.1, and neutral opinions in this respect – 32.3%.

The most aggressive statements refer to both confrontational/war rhetoric (“this is war”) justified by the impossibility of changing the system in a constitutional way. The impossibility of dialogue is also emphasized here, as well as unequivocal dissatisfaction with the actions of the government and statements of official agents:

“This is war! All rights must be taken from the fascists and the Nazis!”

These statements seem to express a certain level of frustration resulting from a sense of lack of own agency in relation to the political system, with a simultaneous keen interest in participating in political processes and phenomena. There are also ideas of radical system solutions involving the banning of political parties and/or religious associations:

“To ban the Catholic Church to ban right-wing parties in Poland”;
 “The time of normal conventional methods is over. The solution to the dispute must be the liquidation of the right-wing groups and the banning of the church”;
 “Outlaw PiS and KK³”.

Interestingly, there are also answers referring to undemocratic methods of resolving a political dispute, coming from people declaring respect for constitutional rights and freedoms in the earlier segments of the survey. In addition to postulates to ban selected political parties, they also contain concepts of armed uprisings and/or population displacement.⁴ There are only 14 cases of this type of statements, all of them come from respondents who describe their political orientation as left-wing:

“dissolve PiS, put their the electorate out of the country, or let them form their own republic somewhere in the east”;
 “You have to cut off the far right side of any possibility of poisoning people’s brains. It’s good that TT and Fb cut Trump. It is a pity that it is only now”;
 “SHOOT”.

Neutral statements form a fairly homogeneous set and consist of voices expressing both the lack of knowledge/ideas for solving the crisis and the lack of hope for a solution. There are also statements that can be interpreted as negating the existence of the problem and/or lack of interest in the problem. These are usually short statements:

“Nothing happens”;
 “Time will tell”;
 “Do my thing”;
 “That’s the million dollar question”.

The largest group are conciliatory statements, which can be divided into two sub-groups: one of them contains postulates formulated in a positivist spirit and referring to the necessity of “grassroots work,” education, dialogue, and a substantive dispute. There are also appeals for gentleness and forbearance. The second group of opinions – more often specific to the right-hand side of the political spectrum – pin their hopes on broadly understood magical activities, i.e. in an appeal to force majeure. There are also statements that combine the properties of these two subgroups. Characteristic and – in my opinion – positive for the condition of democracy and political culture seems to be the fact that a significant part of conciliatory statements is substantive. They are more extensive than aggressive and neutral statements, and are supported by the involvement of the respondents in the problem of resolving the dispute. Interestingly, the conciliatory

³ PiS – Polish acronym for the Law and Justice party; KK – Polish acronym for the Catholic Church. Authors note.

⁴ It is worth remembering that, in the light of international law, forced displacement/displacement of people is a crime against humanity (Bierzanek, Symonides, 2005).

ideas also come from people who, in the previous survey questions, signaled the possibility of restricting constitutional rights to political opponents:

- “We absolutely must settle our affairs, come to some form of national agreement. But we have to do it ourselves – here in the country. No one from the outside will sincerely want our good, no one from the outside will sincerely help us. Whoever thinks differently must learn to read, read and read again”;
- “Education, education, education from the cradle, meaningful social programs to solve the problems that cause social polarization”;
- “Work at the grassroots level. Making the society aware of how important it is for everyone to respect the principles of a democratic state, in particular personal rights and freedoms”;
- “Act, educate, pray.”

Regardless of their political orientation, most respondents express themselves conciliatory. The neutral position is most often taken by the respondents declaring apoliticality, the least frequently by the central respondents. Aggressive opinions are most often observed in the group of left-wing and center-oriented respondents, and the least frequently in the group of apolitical people. This may result from the character of parliamentary democracy, which assigns the opposition a critical/controlling function towards the government and/or the parliamentary majority. Thus, the opposition striving to take power is naturally the party that criticizes the government’s policy (in whole or in some of its aspects). The side of the political spectrum conditioned in this way more often uses confrontational methods. These conditions promote personalities with a certain degree of aggressiveness (Wiatr, 1999). These kind of “political gladiators” activates the opposition electorate with their charisma and radical slogans (Milbrath, Goel, 1977).

Due to the size of the study group and the nature of the variables, I used the contingency coefficient as a measure of the strength of the relationship, along with the estimation of the statistical significance of the obtained results. The value of the coefficient is 0.332, which in the case of social sciences should be interpreted as a moderately high result (Górniak, Wachnicki, 2013). This result is statistically significant ($p = 0.018$). Therefore, it can be assumed that the nature of the statements of the surveyed group is moderately strongly related to the political orientation of the respondents.

Table 1

Character of statements * Political orientation

		Character * Political orientation				
		% z Political orientation				
		Political orientation				Total
		right	left	center	apolitical/ other	
Character	Aggressive	11.4%	38.9%	27.8%	5.9%	25.0%
	Conciliation	71.4%	46.3%	61.1%	58.8%	57.3%
	Neutral	17.1%	14.8%	11.1%	35.3%	17.7%
Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Elaboration based on own research.

Optimistic statements most often assume the possibility of lowering the level of the political dispute, sometimes reaching a compromise and even (although these are few opinions) reaching an agreement:

“It used to be worse. The problem will resolve itself now and it will be fine. I’m an optimist”;
 “For there to be consent, you must do exactly what people have been doing for hundreds of years, but without war”.

Pessimistic statements express the lack of possibility of reconciliation, or even a departure from aggression. These opinions are most often fatalistic, deterministic and sometimes sarcastic:

“Idiots must die, although I don’t know if the next generation will be better”;
 “You have to go to war”.

The lack of significance of the result of the contingency coefficient ($p = 0.054$) indicates no relationship between the tone of the statement and the political orientation of the respondents. The columnar profile of the crosstab reveals that the group of analyzed comments is divided more or less evenly into optimistic, pessimistic, and neutral. Although there are differences between the groups distinguished according to their political orientation, they are not statistically significant.

Table 1

Tone of statements * Political orientation

		Tone * Political orientation				
		% z Political orientation				
		Political orientation				Total
		right	left	center	apolitical/other	
Tone	optimistic	37.1%	27.8%	38.9%	47.1%	34.7%
	pessimistic	20.0%	48.1%	33.3%	11.8%	33.1%
	neutral	42.9%	24.1%	27.8%	41.2%	32.3%
Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Elaboration based on own research.

Discussion

Despite the confrontational nature of the current political debate, its participants often declare their willingness and need for conciliation. Even users expressing radical attitudes (e.g. declaring in their earlier responses a desire to deprive political opponents of constitutional rights and freedoms) try to find some systemic way to solve the crisis. In this case, the necessity of education, self-control and emotion-free dialogue were most often mentioned. A large proportion of the respondents distanced themselves from the problem or denied its existence, pointing to the fact that conflict is an inherent element of politics. An analysis of the postulates of Polish slactivists as to the ideas of solving the crisis allows us to assume that a return to a standardized public debate (not necessarily an agreement) is possible.

In the perspective of technological determinism, the aggravation of public debate and the increasing participation of citizens in the virtual field of this dispute can be interpreted as a consequence of the profound changes that have occurred in communication systems over the last 30 years. The fundamental importance here, however, is not so much the emergence of the Internet, but the Web 2.0 media created on its basis. Information society theorists warned against the crisis consequences. The current crisis did not appear overnight either: depending on specific local conditions, its individual symptoms were recorded almost from the very beginning of the ICT revolution. In the early phase of a relatively small cross-linking, in the 1970s and 1980s, the problem was primarily theoretical and prognostic. At the beginning of the 1990s, the American agency, the National Science Foundation, which manages the Internet, lifted the restrictions related to the use of the Internet for commercial purposes, which resulted in both the rapid development of the Web itself and its significant commercialization. Although the seeds of media based on the creation of networks/friends can be found in early network services (e.g. USENET⁵), only the emergence and popularization of social media at the beginning of the 21st century accelerated the global process of participation in political culture.

Changes in communication processes determine changes in culture (and vice versa, although in this case the first relationship is more resonant). From this perspective, the current crisis of democracy and political debate can be understood as a global – regionally differentiated – social effect of changes in ICT. Despite a number of decidedly negative phenomena, such an approach seems to be a good prognostic for the future condition of democracy. In addition to explaining the origins and nature of the current crisis, it can be understood as a temporary situation, which should be followed by a return to systemic stability, in conditions of an enhanced participatory type of political culture. The role of social media in tackling the democratic crisis is particularly important. In addition to the assumed natural silencing of the confrontational style of the debate (which in my opinion will be done objectively), the conscious involvement of institutions (including the media) and individual users is also of great importance. Observation of social media reveals that their users increasingly understand the need to verify information sources (Kupiecki, Chłoń, Bryjka, 2020). Therefore, we observe more and more attempts and demands for such verification. The users themselves (on either side of a political dispute) also act as verifiers. Correction of specific information – as eg out of date, taken out of context, manipulated or untrue – is becoming more and more common also within one's own "information bubble."

The activities of institutions specializing in verifying the truthfulness of information and the credibility of its sources are also becoming more and more common. At the same time, these institutions are more often present in social media and – interestingly – they try not to identify with the ongoing ideological and political dispute. An example is the social project FakeHunter, operating since 2019, as well as a number of representatives of the so-called the creative sector: most often single entrepreneurs or micro-entrepreneurs (bloggers, youtubers, instagrammers, etc.), professionally earning money by verifying information. This task is more and more commonly dealt with by a number of online influencers who initially started their careers as reviewers (an example can be YouTube

⁵ User Network: the worldwide newsgroup system established in 1979.

channels: Kastan Day, Nicholas Renotte, SATSifaction etc.). It is also worth mentioning about innovative technological solutions emerging in response to the problem of fake news, such as applications for fake news detection with machine learning (Paialunga, 2021). In the media reality of recent years, it is a kind of curiosity: these media and applications satisfy the need for the most objective information possible, developing an increasingly distinct segment. Perhaps the emergence of specialized solutions heralds a breakthrough for the ICT space characterized by political struggle and propaganda? These solutions use the important – seemingly neglected in recent years – authority of objectivity. These projects are increasingly present in the field of social media, making a positive contribution to moderating the public debate.

To overcome the crisis of democracy, it is also important to increase the share of the so-called human factor: I mean all kinds of social media content administrators, supported by developed algorithms. It also seems necessary to clearly establish the rules, objectives and mechanisms of such control. Today, social media is too important communication space to be left out of systemic control. On the other hand, arbitrary and often completely automated control often results in absurd or harmful phenomena (e.g. deleting accounts of journalists, politicians, social activists, users, while endorsing the official propaganda media of authoritarian regimes). Finally it is worth to note that the study the analysis of which is presented here, was conducted in the area of the most politically engaged slactivists (often called haters or trolls by their opponents), engaging in a regular and sharp digital political dispute. The analysis reveals that even in these radical environments functioning within hermetic bubbles, there is potential for discussion and awareness of the need for conciliation. Moreover, democracy itself contains an element of a dispute, as Chantal Mouffe figuratively put it: “a democratic consensus can only be presented as a conflict consensus” (Mouffe 1999, p. 4).

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Pojednawczy potencjał mediów społecznościowych w bieżącym sporze politycznym. Przypadek Facebooka

Streszczenie

Niniejszy tekst jest kontynuacją analizy postaw zaangażowanych politycznie użytkowników portalu społecznościowego Facebook, przeprowadzonej w dniach 13.12.2020–25.01.2021 na próbie 220 respondentów. Pierwsze wnioski statystyczne oraz pełny opis metodologii zostały opublikowane w numerze 1/2021 „Przeglądu Politologicznego” (Pawlak, 2021). W tekście tym skoncentrowałem się na interpretacji części otwartej kwestionariusza, w której respondenci wyrażali własne wyobrażenia i prognozy dotyczące możliwości zakończenia/łagodzenia konfliktu. O ile dane z pytań zamkniętych można było traktować jako pochodzące z grupy reprezentatywnej dla zaangażowanych politycznie użytkowników Facebooka w Polsce (choć ten warunek był raczej wartością dodaną niż intencją przyświecającą badaniu), o tyle materiał zawierający odpowiedzi na pytania otwarte nie ma już takiego charakteru. Wynika to z faktu, że 43,6% respondentów pozostawiło tę część bez odpowiedzi. Przedstawiona analiza skłania do refleksji nad koncyliacyjnym potencjałem mediów społecznościowych, które uważam za ważną platformę debaty politycznej w XXI wieku.

Słowa kluczowe: kryzys demokracji, kultura polityczna, slacktivism, media społecznościowe