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Political marketing in the times of big data

Abstract: Academic considerations on the topic of political marketing very often boil down to discussing the political history of the 20th and 21st centuries, while failing to account for the significant changes in the range of instruments used to implement election strategies. However, the academic discussion about political marketing as an applied sub-discipline should take into account some mechanisms for accomplishing specified tasks. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to fill this gap and try to examine the influence of the tools based on big data on the broad picture of what we name marketing activities in the field of politics. We would like to present readers with our hypothesis that the profound changes in this area that were particularly noticeable in the election and referendum campaigns in 2016 may provide a premise to identify a new paradigm in the discussion on the use of marketing strategies in political communication. It would be based on the Internet combining the function of a communication channel and a source of data about voters. This information is next used for marketing purposes. It should be emphasized that this mechanism that has been used in the field of commercial activities for almost a decade, in the field of politics produces completely new and potentially dangerous consequences for citizens.

Key words: political marketing, big data, political communication, political campaign

Introduction

The history of political marketing is actually the political history of the United States from the 1950s. This can be confirmed by the outcomes Donald Trump's presidential campaign in 2016 produced both in the US and globally. The breakthrough nature of this campaign, and the experience of Brexit, have inspired this attempt to describe a new period in the development of political marketing and to review our perception of its earlier stages in terms of the technological possibilities of communicating with the electorate and identifying their expectations. The attempts to systematize the evolution of political marketing are made with reference to the dominant medium, or the possibility of surveying the political market at any given period of time. We believe that we are entering a new era characterized by the combination of a communication medium with a source of data enabling opinion surveys to be conducted. There has emerged a two-way information channel whose throughput has not been estimated so far. Information that had to be obtained from respondents in the past (and that was frequently subjectively distorted) has currently been replaced by the data provided by their activities in social media and other online behavior. Big data, a large volume of data for analysis, whose size should be maximized in order for it to gain informative value (Tabakow, Korczak, Franczyk, 2014, p. 141), makes it possible to obtain voter profiles that are considerably more precise and reliable than those resulting from their statements in opinion polls. Then experts design the algorithms that create marketing messages which are individually adjusted to differ-

ent online recipients. This paper is an attempt at demonstrating that these innovative elements are sufficiently significant to allow us to talk about a new stage, leading towards a changed paradigm of marketing solutions present in politics.

How has political marketing, which emerged from commercial marketing tools, gained such an enormous influence? Political programs, rational arguments and truth no longer matter and have given way to the increasingly advanced technological possibilities of identifying voter expectations and adjusting messages to fit them. In order to answer this question, we suggest that four stages in the development of electoral campaigns can be distinguished.

New media, new marketing?

The United States was the first country that applied those marketing techniques that had been commercially tested before in political communication, and is where they have achieved the highest level of sophistication. In other countries, in Europe and elsewhere, the development of political marketing was delayed by several years, or even several decades, as was the case of Central and Eastern Europe. This pertained to the adaptation and application of marketing tools both for the purpose of market analysis and the implementation of strategies and running campaigns professionally (Mazur, p. 14). The application of marketing methods always strongly relied on the development of the media in a given country. M. Kolczyński believes that it is impossible to talk about electoral candidates having full access to the potential offered by the mass media without the presence of strong and competitive commercial media, television being the most important one (Kolczyński, p. 136). Talking about the 'Americanization' of electoral campaigns has become synonymous with their professionalization on the one hand and mediatization on the other. The transfer of marketing methods and techniques from the commercial market to electoral campaigns was the result of seeking efficient methods to manage the activities of political actors in the competitive market of politics.

Many scholars believe that the main reason for the changes in the communication process caused by the application of marketing methods in politics is the development of the mass media, primarily television. The turn of the 1940s witnessed an enormous technological progress in televised transmissions. Societies grew richer and the number of TV sets people had at home increased. In 1950, ca. 9% of US households were in possession of a TV set, whereas by 1962 over 90% had them (*Television Facts and Statistics*). It is commonly agreed that the 1952 presidential campaign in the US marked the beginning of 'modern' political marketing. Dwight Eisenhower's election campaign staff employed Rosser Reeves, an expert in TV commercials, who designed a series of TV spots titled "Eisenhower answers America." Reeves matched pre-recorded statements by the candidate with questions asked by ordinary US citizens who were invited to the studio for this purpose. The purpose of these recordings was to convince the electorate that the program of the Republican politician was superior to that of the Democratic candidate, Adlai Stevenson, and to advertise his personal virtues. Dwight Eisenhower's election campaign made use of methods formerly applied for commercial advertising campaigns. Election campaign teams turned to seasoned advertising agencies with experience in the

commercial market to perform the tasks of the electoral campaign. Eisenhower's victory was the outcome of an extensive survey of the political market. The campaign messages concentrated around such matters as corruption, inflation, taxes and the Korean War. At the time of the election, nineteen million people had TV sets, accounting for ca. 40% of households (Kolczyński, pp. 129–130). Another productive idea involved focusing on short advertising forms and buying the prime time. The campaign Reeves had planned was relatively short but extremely dynamic. It took three weeks during which all the scheduled activities were completed. The time was well used and conveying the message was the focus. The content was concentrated and broadcast with appropriate frequency. Long speeches were avoided and the political program was presented by means of advertising spots of 20–60 second duration (*ibid.*, p. 130).

This new form of electoral campaign was primarily caused by the emergence of a new medium whose influence grew from year to year, although primarily in the area of commercial marketing at first. Yet the experience accumulated when shaping consumer needs started to radiate to political communication right away. The electoral campaign designed by Eisenhower's team was innovative and effective enough to make the following competitions between different candidates increasingly media-related. The importance of television grew in line with the number of TV sets, but it was also important that political leaders were used to the old forms of communicating with their electorate. In the 1950s, electoral campaigns primarily supported the traditional forms of marketing, where candidates tried to win voters' support in direct contact and by means of well-tested visual and audio advertising media. It is typically emphasized in the literature on the subject that, at this stage, the campaigns were still about political parties, while candidates only promoted the program of their respective parties. This limited the possibility to create their own image and, to some extent, forced them to be more responsible for what they were saying. Yet television rapidly gained importance as a medium of political communication and envisaged the beginning of a brand new era. Therefore, this stage could be named the *pretelevision* one. 1960 marks the breakthrough and the beginning of televised debates. The famous Nixon-Kennedy debate, which is a landmark in the history of political marketing, demonstrated the superior influence of image and non-verbal communication (peripheral route) over verbal messages (central route) that appeal to rationality to a greater extent (Petty, Cacioppo, 1986). Televised political debates and created pseudo-events symbolized this period, where the primary goal of the campaign was to appeal to voters' emotions. The negative commercial "Daisy," televised during the 1964 presidential campaign by the Democrats, marked a milestone. The spot was broadcast once only and appealed to the emotions that had already been raised in voters who were to be alerted that the election of Barry Goldwater would increase the risk of a nuclear conflict. The commercial had an electrifying impact. Not only did it end the chances of the Republican candidate but also concluded the first stage in the development of modern political marketing. Long and mundane television messages were replaced by short spots able to generate or reinforce the emotions of voters.

The period when political candidates became more like TV presenters is usually named the stage of candidate-oriented campaigns. It took around thirty years and was characterized by the advancing process of the personalization of politics. The political program was replaced by the political image of the candidate in the campaign. It has to

be remembered, however, that creating this image would have been impossible without television. Television imposed completely new standards of political communication, where the importance of form prevailed over content. Perhaps, this period symbolically culminated in 1980, when the role of the candidate for the office of President was given to Ronald Reagan, a former actor whom the cameras loved and who gracefully 'seduced' his audience-electorate without imparting too much information about his political program. The process of the personalization of politics intensified in the 1980s. It meant not only the identification of individual political actors with political groups, parties and organizations, but also the treatment of persons in the highest public offices as symbols of the State or nation.

Television became not only the dominant mass medium but actually defined the standards of political communication. Candidates who were not photogenic, or faced problems with non-verbal communication lost the chance of attracting attention, let alone winning the support of voters. This exceptionally important period in the development of political marketing can be called the *television stage*, because television became crucial in the development of processes defined as the personalization or mediatization of politics. The significance of the candidate's image in the electoral message is something obvious today, but it should be remembered that it follows from the fact that the possibilities offered by the increasingly modern television overwhelmed political communication.

In the mid-1980s, the concept of addressing television commercials at mass consumers was abandoned. The prevailing view was that the efficiency of commercials depends more on addressing a specific message at the right segment of the electorate rather than implementing the catch-all principle. This is not to mean that television played a less prominent role in the communication between politicians and voters than before, but it became technically possible to process the feedback, obtained in the form of survey results and focus group studies, in more and more detail. The identification of voter expectations supplemented the activities aimed at shaping the political image of candidates. Voter-directed campaigns emerged. The power of this new strategy was demonstrated in 1988, when George Bush Sr. defeated his democratic competitor Michael Dukakis, having acquired better awareness of American voters' fears that let him corner his political rival and stigmatize him as a politician who could not guarantee the security of American citizens. This stage in the development of marketing took ca. 25 years and can be named the *survey* period. Surveys became an idol, governing the strategies of electoral campaigns. They made it possible not only to identify the main issues in the campaign narrative, but also categorize the recipients of electoral messages more distinctly. Yet in order to make it happen, the surveys of the political market had to be assisted by the growing technological potential of data processing and addressing selected recipients with messages. Computers became an indispensable tool to run political campaigns.

The 1990s were the time when the Internet entered election campaigns, especially for the purpose of contacting voters, recruiting volunteers and organizing their meetings, as well as fundraising. Internet communication with voters revealed its efficiency as early as at the beginning of the 21st century. A good exemplification of how the tools related to the Internet could be used is provided by the campaign of Howard Dean, who managed to collect millions of dollars from 2003–2004 and exerted a significant impact on the electoral competition (Płodowski, p. 31). Another step was marked by Barack Obama's

presidential campaign in 2008. Organized by Joe Rospars, it actively involved thirteen million voters online (Makarenko, 2009). The extent to which Obama's team used the Internet brought the campaign to a new qualitative level. Interestingly, contacting web users largely served the purpose of winning individual donations for the campaign, which translated into winning voters both symbolically and in terms of finance, but did not offer too much potential to learn more about them.

The beginning of the fourth stage can be associated not only with the 2016 presidential campaign in the US, but also with the referendum campaign on Brexit in the UK, which preceded it. This unfolding stage is of particular interest here. Over the last two years, a change seems to be occurring with reference to big data, that is a vast amount of scattered data. Individually examined such data does not inform us about the world, but when collected and analyzed it displays regularities and makes it possible to design a highly precise profile of relatively small groups. Donald Trump's campaign demonstrated to the whole world the potential offered by a mass analysis of individual data generated by the traces of our online activities, especially in social media. The development of social media and the illusionary anonymity they offer allowed scattered information about us to be collected. Surveys show that what people do online is consistent with what they are like in reality (Żakowski, 2017, p. 26). Watching the online activities of Internet users helps to precisely define their opinions, attitudes and intimate features. "Instead of using survey forms, where the answers do not necessarily have to be honest, digital traces can be examined, such as emails, search history, visited websites, and so on" (ibid.). We would like to pay attention to this period in the development of political marketing. We believe that the time of big data started then. We are analyzing a reality which is changing dynamically, leading to a question whether modern political marketing is undergoing a qualitative change, related to the use of the new technologies of collecting data on voters, and the possibilities of generating individual messages to them; and whether confirming that this change is taking place translates into the need to describe a new stage in the development of political marketing campaigns. Is the use of big data for the purpose of gaining an increasingly efficient influence on voters dangerous as such, or are we more concerned that the possibilities big data offer will be used by those political options we deem to be potentially dangerous or unpredictable when elected? Finally, is there a relation between the rise of populist movements and new forms of political marketing; or rather, as has been the case so far, the tested and effective techniques of commercial marketing have been adapted to political marketing, following the logic of technological progress?

Political marketing after the big data revolution

Many marketing novelties, whether in the field of politics or elsewhere, are based on the 'promotion of marketing as such'. New terms replace old ones, thereby creating the impression that we are witnessing a revolution in this field, whereas it is rarely the case.

A similar approach can be seen in the case of marketing techniques in social media. Such trends as viral marketing, storytelling, remarketing and other fancy names seem secondary, although they suggest a new paradigm in the sales strategy of services and

products (including political products).¹ It is true, however, that the scale of these phenomena has changed due to the Internet becoming increasingly socialized, making them easier to be observed by both ordinary people and those who study these phenomena.

Political marketing experienced a clear revolution when the promotional function of social media was combined with their potential for collecting and processing an enormous amount of scattered data (big data) to make inferences on its basis. This information is obtained by virtue of reverse marketing, where people seek products rather than the other way round, and the Internet is the main search tool (Sharma, Sheth, 2004). The data web users voluntarily or unconsciously leave behind offer an invaluable source of information on a practically unlimited range of topics. A majority of the issues web users are concerned with is either related to politics or provides a significant source of information to design political marketing strategies. The former can be exemplified by web users' opinions on different political actors and their activities, their approval or disapproval, declarations to take part in different political events, and so on. A commentary posted on social media to a statement made by a politician illustrates such an information unit (Fig. 1).

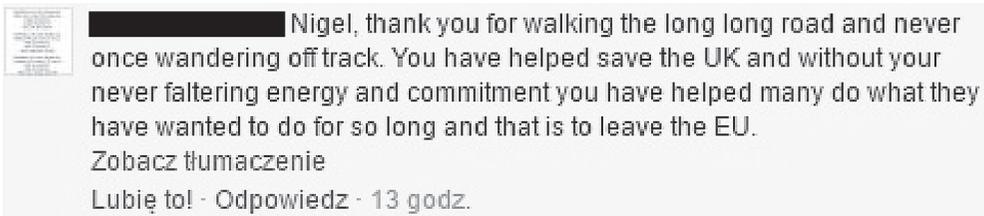


Figure 1. Commentary to Nigel Farage's statement posted by a Facebook account owner

Source: Facebook, May 23, 2017.

The latter concerns the data that makes it possible to determine political preferences on the basis of demographic, geographic, psychographic and behavioral aspects. Web users frequently provide such information directly (for instance their age) when setting up their accounts on social media. Other information, such as whether or not they have children, can be inferred by means of an algorithm that collects scattered data (such as interest in child products in online stores, searching for soothing music for babies and so on). The 'fetish' of marketing data allows all this information to be correlated with political preferences and thereby to target appropriate advertising content at the right recipient.

Recently, this approach has been tested in the firing range of commercial activities (Graczyk-Kucharska, 2015). The changes in political marketing naturally 'follow' the innovations emerging in the promotion of goods and services. Those innovations that can be adapted, after some time, become adapted to the specific requirements of a political product. Whether in commerce or politics, the primary goal of marketing is to indi-

¹ Viral marketing seems to be nothing more than transferring teaser techniques online and taking advantage of people's eternal inclination to gossip. Storytelling is the outcome of narrative marketing that has always been a part of politics, where imposing one's own discourse is instrumental in resolving problems and achieving goals. Also remarketing campaigns were carried out before, employing traditional mail and simplified databases about (potential) clients. What is beyond doubt, however, is that the scale of these activities and the channel of communication has changed dramatically.

vidualize the offer appropriately (adjusting it to consumer needs) and deliver it to social media users on the basis of consumer profiles, generated by means of an automated analysis of the information they have left on the web (Borudsiak, Pierański, Romanowski, Strykowski, 2015, pp. 36–43). In political marketing it is about political preferences and an election offer that matches those preferences.

The ‘revolution’ pertains not only to the phenomenon as such, but also its scale. It has to be noted that for a long time huge amounts of data have been useful when developing diagnoses and trying to improve their forecasting potential, for instance with reference to bank-



Donald J. Trump

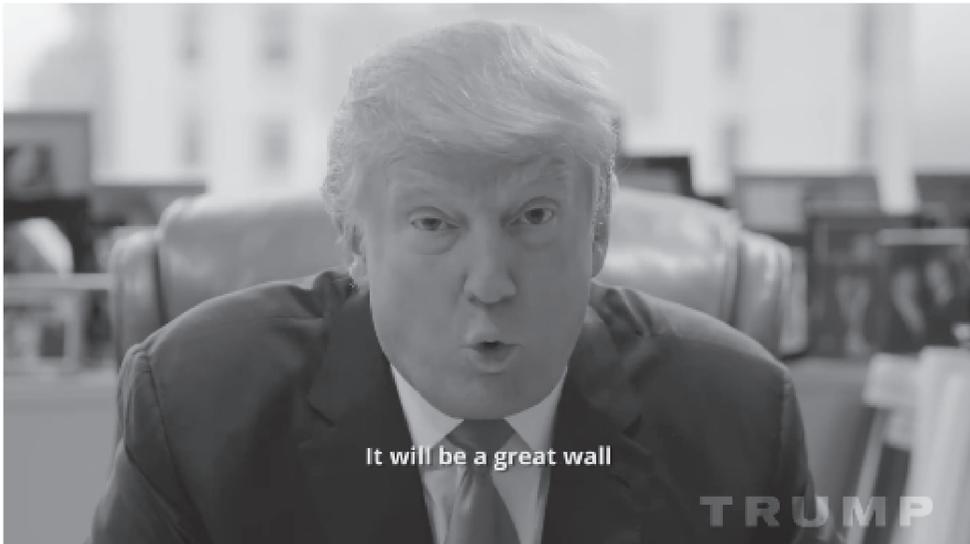
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👍 Like Page

Donate by 10pm TODAY and you could WIN the following:

- (1) Dinner with me
- (2) Flights for 2 people
- (3) Accommodations for 2 people

Donate today to be automatically entered to WIN!



What would you ask me at dinner?

Enter now!

DONALDJTRUMP.COM/DONATE

Donate Now

Not affiliated with Facebook

Figure 2. One variant of Donald Trump’s advertisements on Facebook

Source: Facebook, May 23, 2017.

ing data (Filip, 2015). The segmentation paradigm, which has been dominant in political marketing for decades, is a perfect example here. Once again it can be said that no dramatic breakthrough has occurred. Nevertheless, the nature of the data web users voluntarily generate in natural, everyday conditions, and their amount, make it possible to talk about a qualitative change of a kind. The level of detail obtained thereby, when profiling target groups, approaches the 'single consumer, single offer' level, where the offer is as individualized as possible, given the technological and analytical possibilities. It is worth mentioning that just during the third televised presidential debate in the US, Donald Trump's team tested 175,000 different variants of an advertising post in Facebook; they differed in terms of details that were determined by the preferences of Facebook users (Grassegger, Krogerus, 2017).

When concentrating marketing techniques on political persuasion, there emerges a model of operation which can raise concerns in terms of dilemmas related to democracy, manipulation and free choice. The range of information web users provide is unlimited, as is the potential of adapting them for marketing purposes; therefore, the level of intimacy of the data used can translate into an equally personal and emotional profile of the election offer. Knowing that you have lost your job, we will promise you a new one while encouraging you to vote. You've just had children? An advertisement will offer a reduced VAT rate on child products. A close member of your family has recently passed away? A proposal to increase funeral benefits may work. The mechanism of making empty promises is not a surprising novelty, either, though (Ekman, 2003). What is new, however, is the level of detail and the individualization of this promise. This type of activity may turn out more effective than earlier political efforts because it combines advertising techniques with personal, or even intimate elements of voter behavior. Political actors have acquired the ability to hypothetically fulfill the most intimate needs. No other tool of political marketing has ensured such possibilities before, as they only offered a more or less standardized message in the form of leaflets, posters, TV commercials and online banners.

The scale of this phenomenon is driven by web users' inclination to publicize a vast amount of personal data, or their ignorance about how to use the web safely. What 'brings dividends' is also the lack of awareness that all the information voters post on the web in the public mode is useful for marketing. Media content has been assessed as excessive at every stage of media development. At present, however, with the multitude of the senders of messages and the network structure of the media, this excessive content is becoming incomparable not only to the media revolution of the 20th century, but even to the reality of the previous decade. Suffice it to say that ca. 7,500 tweets are published every second on Twitter (as on May 2017), which is so popular among politicians and journalists, yielding over 600 million tweets a day (*Internet live stats*). This 'curse of abundance' of research material is a valuable record of social reality on the one hand and, on the other, of a surfeit that has probably gone beyond the imagination of media researchers who addressed this topic not very long ago (Kopecka-Piech, 2013).

It has to be admitted that the above-described model is applicable only to quite a limited extent. There is practically no software for collecting and analyzing data, dedicated to the needs of political communication experts. In the case of Brexit and the 2016 presidential elections in the US, the instrument that played the greatest role was provided by an algorithm that makes use of psychographic, micro-targeting marketing, designed by Michał Kosiński and implemented by the Cambridge Analytical agency. It should be

pointed out that this tool was assumed to improve the targeting process in online sales of commercial goods, but it proved effective also in political campaigns.

These solutions are far from perfect, frequently forcing experts in political communication to apply marketing tools that are typically intended to support sales, protect a brand's good name and monitor one's own and competitive brands. Although such solutions can be adapted for the purpose of examining political actors, they are neither ideal nor satisfactory. Yet their use is frequently necessary, as there are no alternatives available. On the other hand, these solutions have the advantage of generating the above-mentioned surfeit, which in this case applies to the tools available.

What may raise doubts is the quality of research material for the surveys of opinion polls, social sentiments and expectations, support for ideas and political actors and many other issues that are crucial from the point of view of marketing activities. It has to be admitted that for decades such surveys have been conducted by means of the tools and techniques of social sciences (structured interviews, telephone polls, direct interviews, focus groups and so on). A certain qualitative change is worth emphasizing here which may result in a changed paradigm in the field of those surveys, although it is somewhat neglected also by Polish researchers of political communication and political sciences in general. The content we are dealing with at present, including text, pictures, films and all kinds of compiled forms of expression, is (typically) generated in the natural environment of voters (citizens), which was not a standard in the surveys conducted before the 'revolution.' Thanks to the secondary analysis of the generated content, including opinions, accounts, comments and emotions, it is possible to eliminate direct and even indirect contact with the interviewer, which has long been considered to have a potential influence on the final answers obtained from respondents (Sztabiński, 1995, pp. 81–99). The following issues can be listed as problematic during direct interviews and telephone polls on political topics:

- political correctness of respondents;
- being embarrassed about supporting political actors and ideas considered to be extremist or not favored by mainstream media;
- desire to favor the groups that enjoy the highest support and are likely to win the next election;
- the influence the survey institutions (public vs. private) have on the answers;
- problems with achieving a geographically proper quota, taking into account the popularity of mobile tools through which the interviews are carried out;
- specific demographic and psychological profile of respondents who agree to be surveyed (for instance lower level of assertiveness).

Another challenge when analyzing big data online is imperfect algorithms. Although designed by human beings, they continue to apply relatively simple categorization filters. They frequently analyze reality by means of simplified procedures, fail to take exceptions into account and cannot interpret the context of communication events. In other words, they remain machines capable of 'understanding' content in terms of cognitively simplified patterns. They form a kind of artificial intelligence, but they are nowhere near the full 'comprehension' of such communication gambits as irony or humor.

This does not change the fact that the potential of marketing analytical tools in the field of politics at the current stage of web development is so great that their role in such events as Brexit or the 2016 presidential elections in the US cannot be denied. Given

their alleged efficiency it seems that they will continue to be improved and become a permanent element of electoral and referendum campaigns. This in turn makes it possible to conclude that the change in strategic approach is so significant that it marks the beginning of a new trend, or even a new stage in political marketing.

Conclusion

The initial hypothesis that it is necessary to make an academic distinction of a new paradigm in studies on political marketing follows from the analysis of election and referendum practices in 2016. It is unfeasible to determine if/when the new approach will become universal to the point of being commonly applied also in Poland. Previous experience indicates that new solutions enter our region several years later than in the West, and their implementation depends on the properties of local political cultures, as well as the political, social and technological reality. On the one hand, we are aware that candidates and political parties have generally started to use advertising tools based on the analysis of behavioral data obtained from social media users. This can be exemplified by targeted political messages on Facebook, as illustrated in Figure 3.

.N Nowoczesna Polub stronę

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Zmień kraj. Drobną kwotą, wielką sprawą.

http://bit.ly/_wspieraj_Nowoczesna_

MASZ DOŚĆ DOBREJ ZMIANY?
KAMILA GASIUK-PIHOWICZ

wpląć 10 zł

Wspieraj
Kliknij i przekaż wybraną kwotę.

WSPIERAJ.NOWOCZESNA.ORG Więcej informacji

Figure 3. Online advertisement of the Nowoczesna [Modern] party

Source: Facebook, May 23, 2017.

On the other hand, our contacts with practitioners of political marketing drive us toward the conclusion that they are increasingly aware of the potential of big data, although in Poland it has not been used in a systemic manner in political campaigns. It transpires that big data may be implemented in the next elections.

It should also be stressed that the implementation of this model on a wider scale, or its potential universalization, will have a strong impact on both the reality of political communication and the political system itself. The metaphor of a 'pork barrel' comes to mind, meaning unsophisticated methods used to gratify voters for their votes. It is worth considering how the system of motivation to cast a vote might change if everybody is served a dish that perfectly matches their culinary preferences (in the form of a personalized empty promise). Without an efficient monitoring system allowing voters to identify implausible information, and given the low level of their awareness, it seems that such efforts may turn out to be efficient, also in Polish conditions.

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Marketing polityczny w czasach *big data*

Streszczenie

Rozważania naukowe dotyczące marketingu politycznego bardzo często sprowadzają się do dyskusji na temat politycznej historii XX i XXI wieku z pominięciem istotnych zmian w zakresie narzędzi wykorzystywanych do realizacji strategii wyborczej. Tymczasem analiza naukowa dotycząca marketingu politycznego, jako subdyscypliny stosowanej, uwzględniać winna mechanizmy realizacji określonych zadań. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest więc uzupełnienie tej “luki” i próba zastanowienia się nad wpływem narzędzi opartych o *Big data* na szerszy obraz tego, co nazywamy zabiegami marketingowymi w obszarze polityki. Pragniemy też poddać pod osąd czytelnika hipotezę, iż daleko idące zmiany w tym obszarze, w szczególności widoczne w kampaniach wyborczych i referendalnych w 2016 r., mogą stanowić przesłankę wyodrębnienia nowego paradygmatu w dyskusji na temat wykorzystania strategii marketingowych w komunikowaniu politycznym. Jest on wynikiem połączenia funkcji kanału komunikacji (internet) z jednoczesnym wykorzystaniem go jako źródła zdobywania danych o wyborcach. Te są zaś wykorzystywane w celach marketingowych. Podkreślić należy, iż mechanizm ten, od niemal dekady stosowany w obszarze działań komercyjnych, na gruncie polityki rodzi zupełnie nowe, potencjalnie niebezpieczne dla obywatela konsekwencje.

Słowa kluczowe: marketing polityczny, big data, komunikowanie polityczne, kampania wyborcza