

**NIHIL DURAT IN AETERNUM. ON THE
ECOSYSTEM OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION
IN THE PROCESS OF DYNAMIC CHANGES,
MAIN TRENDS AND RESULTING THREATS**

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ABSTRACT

Political communication observers and researchers recognise that the field is undergoing deep and multidimensional transformations. Numerous recent works presented and analysed the characteristics of the changes taking place and refer to the media, political actors or citizens. However, attempts at a multidimensional analysis of changes in the political communication ecosystem are much less frequent. This article aims to identify trends in contemporary political communication. A trend is a sequence of changes forming a certain regularity, showing strength and continuity over time, and the direction of development existing at a given moment. The research in this article identifies and analyses these trends, which should be understood as an interpretation of reality requiring an interdisciplinary and open heuristic approach. This approach will provide a broader view of the processes and changes taking place in the political communication ecosystem, allowing for further analyses and the formulation of hypotheses about the consequences and possible directions of the changes taking place, particularly those relating to trust in the media and politicians.

Keywords: political communication, trend, ecosystem, viewers, media, political actors

ABSTRAKT

***Nihil durat in aeternum.* Rzecz o ekosystemie komunikowania politycznego w procesie dynamicznych przemian, głównych trendach i wynikających zagrożeniach**

Obserwatorzy i badacze procesów komunikowania politycznego nie mają wątpliwości, że obszar ich zainteresowań ulega głębokim, wielowymiarowym przeobrażeniom. Liczne prace powstające w ostatnich latach stawiają sobie za cel prezentację i analizę charakterystyki zachodzących zmian. Na ogół odnoszą się one do mediów, aktorów politycznych lub obywateli. Zdecydowanie rzadziej pojawiają się próby wielowymiarowej diagnozy zmian, jakie dokonują się we wszystkich głównych elementach ekosystemu komunikowania politycznego. Celem artykułu jest identyfikacja trendów współczesnego komunikowania politycznego. Istotę samego trendu stanowi sekwencja zmian układających się w pewną prawidłowość, wykazujących siłę i ciągłość w czasie, istniejący w danym momencie kierunek rozwoju. Artykuł proponuje zarówno identyfikację, jak i analizę trendów, co rozumieć należy jako interpretację rzeczywistości wymagającą interdyscyplinarnego i otwartego heurystycznego podejścia. Dzięki jego zastosowaniu możliwe staje się szersze spojrzenie na procesy i zmiany zachodzące w ekosystemie komunikowania politycznego, pozwalające na prowadzenie dalszych analiz oraz formułowanie hipotez dotyczących konsekwencji i możliwych kierunków zachodzących zmian, w szczególności odnoszących się do zaufania do mediów i polityków.

Słowa kluczowe: komunikowanie polityczne, trend, ekosystem, widzowie, media, aktorzy polityczni

Introduction

Media and policy researchers often formulate diagnoses about the changes taking place within the political communication ecosystem and, on these bases, make conclusions or predictions regarding the interplay between media, political actors, and citizens. Many changes are often related to the impact of the internet and related technologies on culture, social relations, social movements, politics, and the media (Esser, Pfetsch 2020). The literature emphasises that the main institutions of the democratic state, such as traditional political parties and traditional news media, are losing ground to new players operating under different rules. While newer players within political communication processes such as Facebook and Twitter are contributing to greater diversity, they are also fostering the disintegration of what has constituted the essence of the public sphere. The increasing fragmentation of the media system has led to a complex landscape of partly networked, partly isolated micro-publics, which fosters the radicalisation and polarisation of political discourse. The information that is disseminated in such a climate is not always rational or legitimate, and sometimes even becomes deliberately manipulated, with the result that citizens' trust in the media and political information as a whole can be undermined.

The dynamics of the changes taking place in political communication processes tend to be so profound that one might refer to it as a new era, in which the relationship between media and politics has become more complex and multidimensional

(Blumler 2016). Features such as relative homogeneity, consistency and simplicity have replaced complexity, multiplicity, and diversity. The dynamics across multiple levels of political communication, such as the structures, the ways in which political and media actors are involved, the logics of the media, the processes of production and distribution of news content, and the ways and patterns of consumption of political content available in the media are increasingly explained by the concept of hybridisation (Chadwick, Dennis, Smith 2016; Mattoni, Ceccobelli 2018). In this new era of political communication, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of this process because citizens can consume to a wide range of content, not only from traditional media, but also between each other through email and social media. On the other hand, however, if media consumers are not strongly involved in receiving and actively interpreting messages, they can easily succumb to manipulation or biased messages, especially from those in power. At the same time, the rise of online channels, opportunities for activism, and the formulation of media campaigns in favour of specific political solutions, have meant that the voices of those in power are no longer necessarily dominant. The rise of populist parties that despise the political establishment, while exploiting the possibilities of new media, makes the existing polyphony of political media even stronger.

The outlined dynamics of changes in the political communication ecosystem means that, despite the existence of many theories, concepts, proposals or models, there is an increasingly strong feeling and emphasis on the notion that the existing schemes for explaining reality or relations between specific communication subjects are losing relevance, becoming inadequate or even outdated, or acquiring a new, previously unexplored context. The aim of this article is to identify and analyse the main trends occurring in the political communication ecosystem. For the purposes of this study, a trend is defined as a sequence of changes arranged in a certain regularity, showing strength and continuity over time. Capturing and analysing a trend should be understood as an interpretation of reality requiring an interdisciplinary and open heuristic approach (Pacewicz 2018). Winfried Schulz points out that the complex relationships between the constantly transforming actors of political communication complicate the theoretical modelling of the dynamics of this process. Due to the feedbacks and reciprocity of interactions, there is often no clear distinction between independent and dependent variables, and their precise definition would require a standard social research design. This, according to Schulz, explains why trend and tendency research is often used to effectively characterise changes in individual elements of the political communication ecosystem. In particular, the essence of trend research becomes the identification and characterisation of the direction of the captured trend, without precisely defining its detailed parameters, such as the onset of occurrence, rate, causal forces, or other developmental characteristics (Schulz 2014).

The media consumer: between a fledgling citizen and a regular in his own information bubble

Citizens are often considered the weakest element in the political communication ecosystem, as organisational, technical, and financial capacities, as well as high dispersion, put them at a distinct disadvantage compared to political actors and the media (Dobek-Ostrowska 2007; Dum Dum, Bankston 2022). The multiplicity of sources of political information and the opportunities provided by the Internet and social media are conducive to democratising participation in political processes, speaking up, presenting one's own position, and actively using the potential offered by democratic procedures and modern communication tools. However, democratising tendencies are undermined by declining civic participation, political apathy, cynicism, and a lack of belief in the sense and need for political activity, resulting both from a rational calculation of the power of a single vote and a lack of motivation to take a stand on community issues (Blumler, Gurevitch 1995; Hutchens, Hmielowski, Pinkleton, Beam 2016). Countervailing trends are also present as a result of political engagement, in the form of the fragmentation and polarisation of society.

Researchers note a strong contradiction between the potential of new in creating a communication community between broad communities and the lack of efforts in this direction on the part of civic-minded consumers and social, economic or political leaders. Instead, the countertrend towards increasingly personalised, individual-centred communication remains pronounced, resulting in greater fragmentation of interests, social realities, and political impulses (Bennett, Entman 2001; Song, Zúñiga, Boomgaarden 2020). Strong social fragmentation is not conducive to the ideals of democracy, and the professionalisation of politics, manifested by the conduct of polls and the targeting of political offerings to specific segments of the political market, fosters the pitting of specific groups and audiences against each other (Gandy Jr. 2001; Snower, Bosworth 2021). Divided audiences, according to many researchers, tend to be steadfast in their views and seek out opinions and media content that will confirm and sustain existing beliefs, views, and attitudes. New media foster the polarisation of political media audiences and additionally, citizens also make their choice of media channels among traditional media based on views that locate them on either political side of the political spectrum (Idzik, Klepka 2019).

The trend of fragmentation and polarisation within some groups of politically active citizens is accompanied by a trend relating to the rest of society, which shows political stagnation and low levels of civic engagement. In order to actively participate in political life, it is necessary to have the skills and resources necessary to develop informed values, attitudes, and opinions, combine them with each other, and translate them into effective action (Delli Carpini 2004; van Deth 2018). Among the extremely frequently addressed aspects of the decline in citizens' political engagement by researchers is the problem of their knowledge of political processes (Brzoza-Kolorz, Głuszek-Szafraniec, Szostok-Nowacka 2019). A thorough analysis of the research addressing this issue makes it possible to cite numerous examples

of findings that researchers present to illustrate the scale and significance of the existing trend. Perloff writes about the ignorance of U.S. citizens and points out that only just over a quarter of the population can name all three segments of government according to Montesquieu, while two-thirds could name the judges from the TV entertainment programme *American Idol*. Less than half of Americans can accurately define terms crucial to democratic politics, such as liberal and conservative, or know how presidential candidates are selected. Only 35 per cent can name the two senators from their state. Three-quarters of all Americans do not understand the difference between a legislator and a judge, but more than half could easily name two members of the Simpson family (Perloff 2017). Godlewski expresses very similar reflections about Poles, emphasising that a well-informed active citizen, with mature thoughtful opinions relating to the surrounding reality, evokes the model of the matchless gentleman from an earlier era (Godlewski 2008).

The trend of growing political apathy can be found both in mature democracies and in countries that only embarked on the path of democratisation in the final decades of the 20th century. One of the strongest evidences of this trend, apart from the assessment of the level of civic knowledge, is the radical decline in the viewing and reading of media content on politics. It is noteworthy that this trend is not a consequence of the development of social media and the Internet, but remains a relatively independent trend, shown by the fact that between 1980 and 1990, the three largest television news programmes in the U.S. lost more than 10 million of their 52 million viewers, and by 2000 their viewership had fallen by a further 8 million viewers (Thussu 2007). A similar trend can be seen in Poland with the example of the evening news programme *Wiadomości*, which has been broadcast continuously since 1989, with an audience of around 15-16 million in the early 1990s, only 7 million in 1998, only 4 million viewers in 2006 and only 3 million viewers in 2015 (Mielczarek 2007; Klepka 2018).

Political actors: de-ideologized celebrities?

Political actors are not a static element of the political communication ecosystem either, and their actions are subject to dynamic changes of a transformative and adaptive nature. The first trend that has been drawing the attention of researchers for several decades is the de-ideologization of politics. This process involves the gradual decline of the importance of the mass party, ideologically identified and rooted in distinct social groups, and its replacement by the model of the universal party, also referred to as the electoral-professional party. Such a party does not remain oriented primarily towards the representation of a specific group or ideology, but towards gaining a share of the electoral market (Hallin, Mancini 2004). Political scientists agree that the stable ties that once existed between parties and citizens have been significantly weakened, with declining party membership, levels of party loyalty as measured by identification with political parties and consistency in voting behaviour. Catch-all parties, as some scholars point out, set themselves

the task of attracting public opinion and, in order to do so, they adopt whatever slogan, message or image that polls indicate will be desired by the potential electorate, moving away from authentic and deeply held ideological beliefs (Norris 2001; De Sio 2018).

The move away from ideology linking the electorate to the political organisations vying for power has become a factor in determining further changes in the functioning of political parties and the strategy of individual politicians, particularly, towards a focus on how they can communicate more effectively with the public and voters, convey their message, and persuade and mobilise voters. In an environment where party loyalty is losing ground, the need arises for the party to hire communication and marketing experts, consultants, and public relations and campaign organisation specialists to help political parties find their way into the minds of potential voters (Negrine, Papathanassopoulos 2011). This trend is sometimes referred to as the professionalisation of politics, and among the many aspects of this process, the active pursuit by politicians to acquire professional communication skills that they can use during the election campaign, particularly through media appearances, is considered particularly important (Negrine, Lilleker 2002; Dommett K., Kefford G., Power S. 2021). Importantly, politicians and political candidates acquire such skills through training and consultation offered by professional experts and advisors, as opposed to prior self-education and broadening of the politician's experience, or through advice from staff or close colleagues in their own party.

The new trends in the operation of political parties are not local or incidental, but are part of wider social changes, identified with modernisation and Americanisation (Papathanassopoulos, Negrine, Mancini, Holtz-Bacha 2007). The latter term describes the process by which the entire western world is being transformed, with the United States as a model, and this transformation also applies to the style of politics and the use of the media in electoral communication. It should be noted here that one of the distinct trends relating to the communication efforts of political parties is that political campaigns no longer take place only before elections, but are permanent in nature, which means that the time between elections is filled with communication activities aimed at re-election (Garlicki 2010; Joathan, Lilleker 2023).

Changes in the *modus operandi* of political actors, who under the new conditions see the main purpose of their action as the constant gaining of interest and support of the electorate, favour building the attention of audiences not on political problems, issues or topics, but on the personality of the politician, most often the leader. This trend of the personalisation of politics involves the increasing role of individuals in politics while reducing the importance of parties, institutions, collective identities, and political issues. It signifies an increase in the role of attributes of the politician's persona not directly related to politics, but to the politician himself, while reducing the importance of political attributes, crucial for playing this social role (Mazur 2014). A slightly more far-reaching trend is the emergence and popularity of a new personally identifiable and media-oriented type of politician, which can be described as the MediaEgo (Walecka-Rynduch 2019). They

appear in politics as a figure previously unrecognised by society as a whole, and therefore establishes many communication relations with the environment, employs strategies of linguistic manipulation, and is characterised by an apparent sincerity and openness to dialogue with the environment, while using the similarity effect of fitting in with the audience. In addition, the new type of political actor is strongly focused on media presence by using multiple media channels simultaneously, reinforcing his or her image in the media space with the help of dramaturgical actions, the demonstration of conciliation in dealing with the environment, and being uncompromising towards enemies.

Among the trends characterising contemporary political actors is the increasing scale of populism in politics. This trend can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, it can be interpreted as an increase in the number of populist political groupings both emerging on the political scene and, consequently, participating in the exercise of power as a winning party or coalition partner. On the other hand, however, one can also point to a trend towards the use of populist rhetoric and the use of such a way of constructing electoral appeal by all political parties, including those not described as populist. It is the latter that constitutes a specific trend in the activity of contemporary political actors. Consequently, researchers now signal that it is no longer useful to divide political parties into populist and other parties, but rather more fruitful to recognise that all political actors, more or less frequently, use populist tools (de Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann, Stanyer 2018). This trend is treated by researchers as a consequence of the transformation of all actors in the political communication ecosystem, both media and citizens, with the use of populist communication particularly facilitated by the large-scale use of social media (Papathanassopoulos, Negrine 2019).

The dynamic changes in the activities of politicians, political parties and their leaders are not conducive to trust in politicians. Survey research captures a clear trend of declining trust in politicians and in politics itself. In Poland, trust levels in most political institutions, politics, and most politicians are declining. In the case of almost every politician recognised by the respondents, the percentage of those who do not trust them is higher than the percentage of respondents declaring trust in them („CBOS Research Communiqué 37/2022: Social trust”, „CBOS Research Communiqué 43/2020: Social trust”).

Media news: fun, entertainment, and non-politics

One of the key trends observed in the media landscape, which is at the centre of the political communication ecosystem, is the dramatic increase in the number of available channels for political information. Couldry calls this phenomenon a wave of media saturation, driven by the shift from a limited number of terrestrial TV channels to hundreds of cable and satellite channels, the introduction of ever faster Internet connections and continuous web access, access to content from mobile phones, the growth of radio and print on the internet through the digitalisation of generated

content, the rapid growth of online content both in terms of top-down distribution and horizontal exchange of photos, videos, television and music, the emergence of social networks, such as Facebook, providing a new interface for connecting at many different levels, the emergence of numerous multi-user tools for continuous broadcasting across time and space, such as Twitter, and the development of multimedia applications for smartphones and other mobile devices (Couldry 2012). Perloff concludes that this trend means that political communication has become a multimedia game. It is not just news displayed 24/7 on a TV screen, but updates and posts on smartphone screens that are published every second, on social media platforms such as Snapchat, Twitter, and Facebook. In turn, digital technologies have become the fifth power alongside the fourth, that of old, traditional media (Perloff 2017).

Researchers widely recognise both the potential benefits and risks associated with the development of new media. They favour levelling the playing field for individual citizens who wish to participate in the democratic process. Communication between political actors and voters is no longer exclusively one-way. The democratising impact that the Internet has brought has undoubtedly been to enable every citizen to broadcast their political messages online. In addition, the new technologies have given almost unlimited access to information, with social media making it possible to create networks of support and opinion exchanges, which should foster an increase in civic participation. However, the positive phenomena are also accompanied by threats, such as information overload (Klepka 2020), polarisation resulting from self-seeking information confirming one's own views and closing oneself in the world of digital friends and groups with similar views and attitudes. The trend analysed has also led to a significant fragmentation of the media and its audience. Researchers have argued that the free choice of communication channels and access to them at different times leads not only to the fragmentation of the mass audience, but also to the emergence of distinct groups of viewers who want to be addressed only on their own terms with regard to issues that are important to them. By way of exemplification, viewers of music or sports channels may not want to receive messages about crises in the global economy or the causes of international tensions, thereby excluding themselves from contact with issues they find unattractive or disturbing (Gurevitch, Coleman, Blumler 2009).

Another trend identified by researchers remains the commercialisation of the media, understood as the subordination of the way they function to the pursuit of economic objectives. The fundamental drive of media institutions is to minimise costs and maximise profit and to subordinate content creation activities to this goal (Fortunato 2015). An example of cost minimisation is the abandonment of the maintenance of a network of foreign correspondents in favour of the use of agency dispatches, while the pursuit of profit maximisation implies the creation of content that will respond to the logic of the market, that is, to the preferences of the audience and the expectations of advertisers. Commercialisation of the media has numerous consequences for the presentation of political information. Content of political messages is intended to be interesting for the viewer and to deal with

popular, friendly, and interest-generating issues at the expense of difficult issues that are complex and require the viewer's knowledge and involvement. The pace and spectacularity of the message, 'live' footage, large pictures, attractive editing or atmosphere-building and pace-setting sounds play a greater role than the content of the material itself. The simplification of the message becomes so apparent that many issues that are complex, multidimensional and require the presentation of a broader background are presented in a way that does not even explain the political reality in the slightest (McNair 2012; Esser *et al.* 2017). The decline in the quality of political material is also accompanied by a decline in its quantity, because potential media audiences do not regard politics highly in interest rankings. This results in shorter, less detailed, and less analytical material in the press, which serves more as a general presentation of the issue. Also, 24-hour TV news channels, which potentially have the airtime to analyse political issues in depth, in practice repeat the same or slightly developed content repeatedly in a way that does not require the viewer's deeper activity and attention, focusing on the main most popular topics of the day (Aelst *et al.* 2017).

The low popularity of political topics in the media, especially when presented in the form of analyses of complex political processes, as well as the audience's high interest in entertainment, is considered to be the reason for the following trends: entertaining, tabloidization, infotainment and politainment, as well as the dramatization of coverage and the rise of soft news. Each of the trends identified has specific characteristics of its own, but they are all united by the desire of message makers to depoliticise messages about politics and make them more about entertaining, popular issues and thus, more likely to be chosen by media audiences. Political argumentation has become simpler, shorter, and increasingly filled with emotional discourse also made available through electronic media. Swanson explains the saturation of political content with entertainment by pointing out that journalists are trying to increase their audience, including those who are not interested in public affairs and current events, but may be attracted to stories that are entertaining themselves (Swanson 2004).

Although researchers have argued that as a result of the commercialisation of the media, politics is taking up less space in the media, it seems that the trend of combining politics and entertainment in such a way that many messages are strongly hybrid in nature remains more significant. Politics served in a light-hearted, entertaining, or purely fictional manner becomes the subject of series, cabarets, satirical programmes, and other typically entertaining media forms. Politainment is an example of the use of political topics for entertainment formats and genres (Durántez-Stolle, Martínez-Sanz 2019). Infotainment, on the other hand, consists of the transformation of news programmes or the creation of genres and formats that aim to present political content in a witty, extremely simplified and entertaining way, generally using artefacts, such as fonts, sounds, studio design, which were usually used by news services or journalistic programmes. Classic news programmes are being depoliticised with a reduction in news coverage of significant political events, referred to as hard news, in favour of material not directly related

to politics, i.e., soft news. This category of material broadcast in news programmes includes both light news about politicians, concerning their holidays, musical tastes or other non-political aspects of their activities, and news relating to trivial topics, such as the catching of a large specimen of fish or the occurrence of an interesting astronomical phenomenon (Klepka 2017).

Reflections relating to the entertainment of politics, the emergence of hybrid media genres combining information and entertainment, are inextricably linked to the notion of tabloidization. From the perspective of media changes in the presentation of politics, the most salient features of this process are the reduction in the media's attention to politics, the economy and society, in favour of entertainment such as sports, scandals and popular entertainment, and the personal and private lives of both celebrities and ordinary people (Sparks 2000; Davis *et al.* 2020). Esser considers tabloidization at the micro level as a media phenomenon involving the evolution of traditional newspapers and other media under the influence of reader preferences and commercial demands, and at the macro level as a social phenomenon that both provokes and illustrates major changes in the structure of society, such as, attaching less importance to education and more to marketing forms of political influence, resulting in increased political alienation (Esser 1999).

Among the trends of contemporary media related to their commercialisation, researchers also mention negativism and the development of interpretive journalism. Negativism in the presentation of politics means emphasising struggle rather than compromise in media coverage, exposing divisions rather than unity and opportunities for agreement, presenting individuals and their motives rather than problems and causes, power rather than ideals, party strategies and tactics rather than public decision-making. The media tend to focus on ethical dilemmas more than on the interpretation of laws, resort to sentiments more often than substantive arguments, and choose dramatic and pessimistic events and contexts for presentation, i.e., costs, failures, setbacks, dangers, crises, rather than routine and positive ones such as benefits, triumphs, success stories, opportunities or solutions (de Beus 2011). The media trend relating to the increasing role of interpretive journalism refers to the emergence and increase in the percentage of media messages whose content goes beyond the presentation of facts about a specific event or topic, through a broad analysis of context, circumstances, and possible consequences. Such material arises because audiences expect the media, when dealing with an issue, to look for the motives of explanatory factors and to signal to the audience who made a mistake or what led to a certain outcome (Houston 2008; Cushion 2015).

The development of new media represents a trend linked to the phenomenon of the algorithmization of reality. Researchers emphasise, that a new digital context of media reception is taking place, which has a highly non-transparent context that is not easy to study and evaluate (Zarouali, Helberger, Dr Vreese 2021). The recipient of a particular social media message, who is prompted by Facebook or Twitter to make a particular post, cannot be sure who is essentially the sender, whether it is the decision of the party, the medium or the recipient himself, who has created the algorithm by his own decisions about what he has read, liked or shared. This

trend in new media development, which is difficult to grasp and understand, is another potential reason for the decline in trust in the media.

Conclusion

The presentation of trends in the development of individual elements of the political communication ecosystem makes it possible to put many media and political phenomena into a broader context and to consider the complexity of the transformation of media, political actors, and media audiences. Unlike analyses of one element of the ecosystem, through trend analysis it becomes possible to grasp changes characterised by relative permanence, which makes it possible to separate them from momentary fashions and to understand the inevitable volatility in the long term and, moreover, the overlapping of different directional processes or the simultaneous emergence of countertrends (Sternicka-Kowalska 2018). Reflecting on trends also makes it possible to better understand and assess the growing gap between two policy spheres: on the one hand, the 'politics for show' (*show-politics*) that politicians want or need to offer as celebrities, playing on stage to entertain volatile audiences, and on the other hand, the real 'decision-making-politics' (*decision-making-politics*) played out behind the scenes, largely invisible to the public, often operating under the influence of the dubious reputation of lobbyists and technocrats who are accountable to no one (Davis 2019).

It should be stressed that the indicated trends interact with each other, which sometimes makes it extremely difficult to single out individual trends and identify their causes or possible consequences. Media trends are undoubtedly conducive to a steady increase in the role of the media in the lives of citizens through the provision of content that is increasingly attractive to audiences. Political actors are dynamically learning how to use media to achieve their goals and to adapt their own strategies of action to the requirements of media reality. Citizens, despite the possibilities and opportunities afforded by access to the media, remain situated as the weakest link in the political communication process. Awareness of existing trends alone does not contribute to an increase in the level of trust, credibility, or quality in political communication, but it does allow for further analysis and the formulation of hypotheses on the consequences and possible directions of the changes taking place.

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